GOOD FOR THE HEART AND SOUL, GOOD FOR BUSINESS

THE CULTURAL POLITICS OF DOCUMENTARY AT THE HOT DOCS FILM FESTIVAL

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GOOD FOR THE HEART AND SOUL, GOOD FOR BUSINESS: THE CULTURAL POLITICS OF DOCUMENTARY AT THE HOT DOCS FILM FESTIVAL

By

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Abstract

This dissertation looks at the ways in which the Toronto-based Hot Docs documentary film festival is undergoing a process of transforming documentary cinema and culture from the margins to the mainstream through a process of the commercialization of documentary. In particular three interlocking forces are examined, including populism, consumerism and liberalism. By privileging commercial interests and strategies over local community, advocacy and political activist considerations, Hot Docs is developing into a very successful and vital cultural institution and event, both nationally and globally. This thesis investigates the consequences of the festival's commercial strategy with two aspects in mind—the mode of its consumption, and the management of contestation and dissent—and argues that radical perspectives, local advocacy and political participation are being eroded for the sake of a large, accessible and attractive festival image and performance.

Acknowledgements

They say it takes a village, but that adage is rarely applied to single-authored texts. Regardless, the last six years have shown me that short of a village, a community of supportive, irreplaceable, generous and at-the-ready friends and colleagues goes a long way. As such I am gratefully indebted first to Ira Wagman, my supervisor and one of the best sources for pedagogical advice and inspiration I'm sure I'll ever encounter. As I have a habit of "putting the cart before the horse" I require someone to constantly remind me that "we're not quite there yet," and Ira has been a tremendous, and patient, guide in that regard. I once told Ira of my fabled attempt to buy a sailboat with a friend, with the audacious plan to learn how to sail afterward. The scheme ended in a botched journey out of Granville Island harbour, Vancouver and a frantic call to the Coast Guard. Thankfully, for this latest adventure, I was fortunate enough to have the Coast Guard ahead of time, and I hope Ira agrees, I didn't quite wreck the ship.

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INTRODUCTION: HOT DOCS AND THE CULTURAL POLITICS OF A DOCUMENTARY FILM FESTIVAL

> The ways in which festival titles are selected, presented to the public, and talked about says as much about the status and purpose of a specific event as it does the individual films chosen to make up that event's screening schedule.
> (Stringer 2003, 137)

Keeping Stringer's observation in mind, I begin this investigation into Toronto's Hot Docs festival with a description of a programming skirmish that occurred after the festival selected a particular title for its April 2013 edition, a choice that reveals remarkable aspects of the status and purpose of the institution, as seen through the prism of cultural politics. The festival had selected a film by Magnus Isacsson, a Montreal-based filmmaker and activist whose works had only been shown at the festival twice in his thirty-year documentary career. Hot Docs programmed Isacsson's *The Choir Boys* (1999; 2013*),[1] a film about poverty-stricken Montreal men who sing in a choir, according to the program, "In honour of the late Magnus Isacsson and his tireless social justice work…" (Hot Docs Program 2013, 173). On the surface, this may have appeared as an appropriate way to honour an institutionally marginalized and socially committed Canadian filmmaker who had passed away only seven months earlier. Yet the festival's choice to show an earlier film and not the one Isacsson had just completed before passing away—*Ma Vie Réelle* (2012)—the commemoration took on an air of superficial acknowledgement, especially for Canadian filmmakers and others familiar with Isacsson

[1] Throughout this document, film production years will be indicated, when relevant, and when applicable will be followed by the year the film screened at Hot Docs, denoted with an asterisk. All other relevant film information will be found in the filmography at the end of this document.

and his documentary oeuvre.[2] Having rejected the submission of his new film,[3] festival management offered no real explanation to the letters and emails from Canadian documentary filmmakers protesting the decision and imploring a change of course. Incensed by the festival's decision and lack of reaction, Mark Achbar, co-director of *The Corporation* (2004; 2010*) and executive producer of 11 feature documentaries (and consultant on many more) released in the last ten years (some of which premiered at Hot Docs) comments: "It's not only incomprehensible that they didn't show Magnus' new film, but it shows a total disregard for his community of peers, *their* supposed community [the festival's] that they responded to my intervention with a very managerial rejoinder that the film was simply not selected."[4] Despite such attempts, Hot Docs showed no interest in dialogue and kept their programming decision firmly in place.[5] Achbar points out that "…it's important to note that Hot Docs even overrode the wishes of Magnus' widow."[6] This conflict, despite having gone mostly unnoticed by the majority of festival attendees, exemplifies the tension found in the cultural politics at play, between the politics of documentary programming, the culture of documentary peers (and support publics), and the commercial imperatives of large, mainstream festivals.

The Hot Docs Canadian International Film Festival, or "Hot Docs," was also commemorating its own twenty-year anniversary in 2013. It was an occasion marked by

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[2] Isacsson was very well known in the documentary community, and had lasting relationships with hundreds of individuals working in documentary, including with his subjects and with advocacy organizations like the Documentary Organization of Canada.

[3] The screening would have been a world premiere – the kind of event Hot Docs cultivates annually.

[4] Mark Achbar, interviewed by author, Toronto, ON, August, 2013.

[5] Their total silence led to suspicion, so far unsubstantiated, that they did not want to create a high-profile event for a filmmaker, deceased or not, who had two years earlier signed a letter of protest against the festival. More here: http://www.pacbi.org/etemplate.php?id=1576 (Accessed 2013-09-05).

[6] Mark Achbar, email interview with author, December 2013.

conventional tribute events including a sidebar program of films from 1994, the year of the festival's inception, as well as other works of historical significance. The festival showcased 205 documentaries from 43 countries, mostly feature-length and mostly premieres: 44 world, 51 international, 31 North American, 46 Canadian, and 14 Toronto premieres. The festival received 2,386 film submissions, held 418 screenings, 157 of which "went rush,"[7] on 16 screens across Toronto, and saw an estimated record-breaking 180,000 audience members attend the festival, along with 180 guest filmmakers, 55 guest film subjects and over one thousand festival delegates.[8]

Upon reviewing statistics like the ones above, it becomes clear that in twenty years this niche non-fiction cinema event has grown and expanded at a rate incomparable with many other festivals, and has done so in spite of ongoing crises in documentary funding and distribution, impressively doubling its audience and budget almost every three to four years for the last decade. In addition to screenings, Hot Docs also functions as a marketplace for new documentary, invites documentary guests (filmmakers, industry people, broadcasters, funders, etc.) from all over the world to conference ideas, and operates an industry forum where filmmakers pitch projects to editors, sales agents, distributors and funders. In this respect, Hot Docs resembles many other international film festivals: a congregation of culture, a consortium of business, and an exciting and condensed moment where cinephilia and community takes shape. Yet beneath the surface of this high profile, six million dollar event, elements of the festival's cultural politics, or, "the domain in which meanings are constructed and negotiated, where relations of

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[7] Meaning they were sold out, save for reserved seats for festival pass holders, which when undeclared, are given to audiences at the last minute waiting in rush lineups.

[8] "Hot Docs by Numbers: Quick Facts on the 2013 Festival," http://www.hotdocs.ca/media/press_releases/hot_docs_by_numbers_quick_facts_on_the_2013_festival (Accessed 2013-10-10).

dominance and subordination are defined and contested" (Jackson 1990, 202), reveal a different story to the official discourse and celebratory press, thus exposing the various competing concerns and objectives that inform and challenge the very nature of the festival.

With regards to Stringers' status and purpose, Hot Docs' standing, as one of the two most important documentary events in the world (second to IDFA – The Amsterdam International Documentary Film Festival), is seldom contested, and the festival is known for excercising that cachet by way of inaction when it comes to rapprochement.[9] Its purpose, however, is less certain, but institutional discourse contained in the festival's programs can provide insight: in the 2013 program Executive Director Chris McDonald and Managing Director Brett Hendrie write: "Whether you're from here or abroad, please help us grow and cultivate this community: it's the Canadian thing to do" (Hot Docs Program 2013, 13). Despite its own described purpose as a national and local community builder, this 'official' discourse belies the course of events that played out when members of the documentary community in Canada tried to grow and cultivate that same community in a manner that conflicted with Hot Docs' objectives. These are the cultural politics often hidden to festival participants, but known or felt by community members aware of the festival's relationship to larger societal forces, those that contribute to a structure of feeling that valorizes community only in the abstract. These are the cultural politics that this thesis seeks to analyze and evaluate as part of the intersection of documentary culture and commercial festival logic at Hot Docs.

[9] I too have had letters regarding support for political filmmakers unanswered by the festival.

Structure of Feeling and Cultural Politics

If there are two concepts that inform, more than any others, the theoretical terrain in the following pages, it is *cultural politics* and *structure of feeling*. The latter, developed by Raymond Williams (1966) as a way to account for the lived experience of 'ideology,' combined the idea of feeling with structure, concepts which are typically opposed to each other. We do not usually think of our emotions or sensibilities as being related to a structure from the outside and Williams' concept allows us to do just that. While structure of feeling is "notoriously difficult to define" (Woodward 2009, 11), its adaptability is useful for investigations into some abstract relations of societal forces, institutions, culture and the affective space of festivals. I apply it to my investigation both as Williams initially positioned the concept and through other scholars' (like Woodward's) interpretations. As a way to understand the relations that structure a historical moment as it is experienced by individuals, structure of feeling in this thesis implies the larger constellation of social, political, cultural and economic forces that interface with the material and discursive elements of Hot Docs.

"Structure of feeling," writes Woodward, "insists on the vital interpretation of social structures and subjectivity, one mediated by forms of culture" (Ibid). Woodward acknowledges that the term's malleable nature allows for a multiplicity of perspectives, as she herself interprets the concept for her project in three distinct ways. For my own purpose, structure of feeling is deployed similarly to Woodward's third iteration: "…it offers an understanding of experience as simultaneously cultural, discursive, and embodied, with feeling a site for insight into social control" (Ibid, 12). The ways in which Hot Docs structures its programming, its discourse, and its social spaces, reflects an

internal organizational logic while also responding to and interfacing with a larger, more diffuse, set of forces historically expressed through culture and lived experience. This mix of internal festival logic and external historical phenomena structures not only the social experience of the documentary community, but documentary's role in culture at large. With this in mind, this thesis seeks to analyze the ways in which documentary and dissent are disassociated at Hot Docs as the political imaginary of the festival space comes to be organized around popular accessibility and consensus – through programming, the social spaces of the festival, and the outward articulation of the festival's ordering logic.[10]

Cultural politics is a concept that helps me orient social forces not usually associated with festivals, that of liberalism and populism. These concepts in turn allow critical inroads into the analysis of the ways in which culture and politics intersect at the site of an event, an institution, a community and a text. Populism as a programming and organizational tactic, and liberalism as a larger ideological framework that makes sense of populist impulses and articulations, combine to create the twin political forces at play within the discursive and social spaces of Hot Docs. As Michael Parenti, in his chapter entitled "The Politics of Culture" writes:

> In fact, we get our culture through a social structure…from formally chartered institutions such as schools, media, government agencies, courts, corporations, churches and the military. Linked by purchase and persuasion to dominant ruling interests, such social institutions are regularly misrepresented as being politically neutral, especially by those who occupy command positions within them or who are otherwise advantaged by them. (2006, 15-16)

It is my argument that Hot Docs is increasingly becoming one of the social structures in a network of social relations that Parenti describes above, whereby a commercial

[10] Which includes official discourse, program notes, public relations, marketing, speeches, and more.

managerial style, dissociated from (activist) filmmakers and (political) participants, is increasingly presented as occupying politically neutral space, a condition, according to Chantal Mouffe, associated with expressions of liberalism (Mouffe 2005, 18).

This disconnect between culture and politics at Hot Docs (including the festival's own self-conception), fits into a framework of cultural populism and liberalism, where the festival has become bigger and more successful by following a trajectory that foregrounds mainstream/dominant culture and increasingly manages radical/marginal politics first into the proverbial corner, then out of the room. Parenti rightly argues that this kind of liberal expression functions and flourishes through culture, through the social institutions that give culture shape and meaning, and Hot Docs has become one such institution, channelling a larger process of de-politicization in the culture of documentary.

An Unchartered Path

This dissertation represents the first, to my knowledge, substantial investigation of Hot Docs.[11] Where there is mention of Hot Docs in the scholarship, those who offer critical assessment tend to uncritically mirror supportive popular media coverage of the festival, such as with this conclusion: "Our research has lead us to believe that the current success of Hot Docs is not coincidental but rather the result of eighteen years worth of strategic management, carefully coordinated efforts, and passion for the cinematic form

[11] There is one academic project that has devoted attention to Hot Docs in a meaningful way. The Local Film Cultures research project (designed to "understand and account for Toronto's unique film cultures" by the Cinema Studies Institute at Innis College, for its part, valorizes the trends and conventions at Hot Docs that I seek to critically assess, offering somewhat of a snapshot of the festival's activities and culture without showing any interest in questioning or critically engaging in especially the tension between the logic of capital and the culture of documentary. Source: http://www.localfilmcultures.ca/?page_id=51 (Accessed 2013-03-12).

of documentary" (Barr, Goeldner and Heller 2013).[12] This project offers a different, critical analysis and perspective to those like the one referenced above, and thus charts a new path to evaluate Hot Docs from an unprecedented, critical perspective.

There is increasing recognition in the academy that the festival has become, especially in the last five years, a key institution for the production and circulation of documentary cinema in Canada.[13] As traditional distribution (broadcasting and exhibition) opportunities for documentary in Canada remain limited, with no central policy mechanism to support the genre in place, the prominent and firmly established Hot Docs is each year expanding and deepening its involvement with documentary production, distribution and exhibition in Canada. The rise of Hot Docs is part of a critically overlooked shift in the transition from public to private institutions that serve the role of tastemakers, gatekeepers, and disseminators of documentary. Evidence of this shift can be observed in the decreasing importance of documentary in the once very influential National Film Board,[14] and the increasing importance of Hot Docs as a showcase for documentary culture and industry, a market for documentary,[15] and more recently, a producer in the field.[16] On the one hand, the success of Hot Docs can be

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[12] "Hot Docs," http://www.localfilmcultures.ca/?page_id=2537 (Accessed 2013-03-12).

[13] The last five years coincides with the start of the international financial crisis (2008), which corresponds with domestic funding cutbacks, broadcasting window shuttering and global configurations of coproduction and festival collaborations around documentary. This thesis focuses on this period of Hot Docs.

[14] The last Federal Budget, in 2012, slashed the NFB's overall budget by 10% - the largest single cut to the institution in its 70-year history. The NFB, once influential in television and theatrical documentary in Canada, has adapted and become a leader in new media iterations of documentary and animation, a shift that has coincided with federal cuts across the arts and culture sectors. More on this aspect of NFB innovation here: http://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/film/how-tom-perlmutter-turned-the-nfb-into-a-global-new-media-player/article11992885/?page=all (Accessed 2013-10-30).

[15] Hot Docs has facilitated the creation of documentary projects and the dissemination of documentaries, as well as international co-production and festival-to-festival collaborations.

[16] The festival has launched its own funds to support the creation of documentaries, such as the Shaw Media-Hot Docs Funds and the Hot Docs-Blue Ice Group Documentary Fund. More info here:

viewed as part of a broader cultural recognition of documentary.[17] On the other hand, an event-focused, city-configured institution like Hot Docs can be viewed as an insufficient driving force for politically engaged documentary in Canada. As Stringer argues, "one of the peculiarities of the whole film festival phenomenon is that just because a festival in a particular city is internationally established and growing more successful by the season, it does not necessarily follow that this will lead to growth in the film industry of the respective nation that city belongs to" (2003, 110). He then cites Manthia Diawara's analysis, which highlights the disparity between the success of African film festivals and African films. Looking at Hot Docs' success in relation to the overall vitality of documentary in Canada one finds similar gaps – important advocacy group the Documentary Organization of Canada's (DOC) most recent report on the industry summarizes that "there is little good news in this report for the Canadian documentary production industry" (Getting Real/DOC 2013, 9) citing the consolidation of the Canadian broadcasting sector and decreased television programming as factors that have lead to the loss, since 2008/09 of $100 million and almost 4,000 jobs (Ibid). The report acknowledges the success of festivals like Hot Docs but says, "these accomplishments should not overshadow the challenges the documentary industry faces, which cannot be overstated" (Ibid). In order to "not be left behind" by rival festivals, Stringer argues, commercial festivals strive for and advertise themselves as "Bigger Than Ever, Better Than Ever…etc." (2003, 109). This is a case in point with Hot Docs, and one that points

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http://www.hotdocs.ca/funds/productionfunds (Accessed 2013-10-20).

[17] The foregrounding of documentary's popularity remains the current dominant discursive framing of the relationship between the festival and the genre/industry, succinctly captured in this headline: "Funding cools but docs still hot." Source: http://rabble.ca/columnists/2012/04/funding-cools-docs-still-hot (Accessed 2013-10-12).

to the underlying problems concealed in festival discourse that claim the institution's success proves documentary is "good for business" (Hot Docs Program 2013, 13). The success of Hot Docs thus reflects two enduring problems for documentary: the high visibility of the success of the festival creates a false impression of the vitality in the documentary industry and culture of Canada,[18] while also obscuring the compromises and consequences germane to commercial festivals and explored in the following chapters. With this in mind, this study differs from other film festival analyses of particular festivals in that the vast bulk of literature required to shape a cohesive argument does not, at any juncture, engage with the particular object of study (Hot Docs), as opposed to the case when looking at large LGBT festivals (Zielinski 2008) or Cannes (De Valck 2007) and other research sites where one finds ample literature on not only the general topic (film festivals) but each particular festival itself.

A Documentary Thing

Hot Docs has grown and excelled in an anaemic market for documentary,[19] where production is down (Getting Real/DOC 2013, 9), funding is scarce, distribution opportunities scarcer, and popularity at an all-time high (Aufderheide 2007, 15; Corner 2013, 112). By capitalizing on the genre's rise in popularity and the bulky supply of global productions, Hot Docs has transformed from a niche, marginal festival to a commercial mainstream festival. This thesis looks at the ways in which the festival has

[18] Lisa Fitzgibbons, Executive Director of DOC, says that there is a "huge disconnect between what people think and the reality" regarding documentary's vitality. In relation to Hot Docs' 2012 edition starting on the heels of announcements to massive documentary institution cuts (to the NFB, CBC and Telefilm), Fitzgibbons likened the festival to a wake for a genre on the verge of extinction. Source: "Funding cools, but docs still hot," http://rabble.ca/columnists/2012/04/funding-cools-docs-still-hot (Accessed 2013-10-12).

[19] Fitzgibbons says 1500 jobs have been lost in the last seven years alone. Source: Ibid. (Accessed 2013-10-12).

transitioned from a locally-responsive, advocacy-oriented and artist-run festival to an internationally-responsive,[20] market-oriented, commercial festival. In particular, I examine this process through three overlapping lenses: populism, commodification and liberal politics. As socially-constituted processes and forces embedded in larger economic and cultural arenas, and as phenomena intricately linked to one another, these articulations of commercialization reveal the logic of capital as it impacts, intermingles with and influences the *culture of documentary* (a reference to all the associated documentary industries, publics, audiences, cultural managers and related practices, modes and values [Corner 2013, 113]). This thesis explores the ways in which these exterior forces have real felt and observable effects at Hot Docs. Whether it is the rise of the *liberal consensus documentary* in programming, the championing of the *docbuster*, the embrace of celebrity culture, or the concerted effort to create commercial spaces that bracket out politics and activism, the mainstreaming of documentary culture at Hot Docs has material, symbolic and ideological consequences. And while they are mostly ignored by scholarly and popular literature, I believe those who are interested in documentary's potential to not only entertain, but also to educate, engage and inspire action should address these effects on documentary at Hot Docs. As Alanis Obomsawin says,

> Documentary film is the one place that our people can speak for themselves. I feel that the documentaries that I've been working on have been very valuable for the people, for our people to look at ourselves, at the situations, really facing it, and through that being able to make changes that really count for the future of our children to come. (In Mihesuah 2003, 153)[21]

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[20] The festival is "globalized, not "global" as filmmaker Ali Kazimi, who resigned from the Hot Docs founding organization over the direction the festival took under new management in 1999, says. (Ali Kazimi, interviewed by author, Toronto, ON, September, 2013).

[21] Obomsawin is a First Nations documentary filmmaker who, in her seventies, continues to work in the field and is the last remaining filmmaker-in-residence at the NFB.

By leveraging the concepts and work of theorists not commonly associated with documentary, I have set out to construct a unique perspective on a massively under-studied area of documentary media. Documentary is routinely left out of anthologies celebrating and analyzing alternative media (See Howley 2010), and is likewise absent from most books and articles on film festivals. This has resulted in a lacuna in documentary and festival scholarship, as well as in alternative media research. While writers regularly associate documentary with the qualities of alternative media, non-fiction film remains largely parceled off as a distinct area of study[22] with little crossover to film festival scholarship. Yet documentaries have been screening in mixed-genre festivals for decades, with the last twenty years witnessing the influx of hundreds of festivals solely dedicated to documentary.

This dissertation will determine whether documentary's rise—at Hot Docs—to the mainstream comes at a cost, and what that cost is. As Hot Docs has become an increasingly central node[23] (Castells 2000, 698) for the larger mainstream documentary culture, that cost has to be calculated in relation to the larger structure of feeling of the current moment: one that celebrates the new artist-entrepreneur and valorizes capitalism as the structuring framework for the symbolic organization, presentation and circulation of socially-conscious documentary. The pages that follow position documentary as an alternative media form that has "often been made by individuals on the edges of mainstream media…[offering] slightly off-kilter from status quo understandings of

[22] Several new "Documentary Studies" programs that have surfaced in the last half-decade point to the distinction of documentary as a focus in the academic field.

[23] A node, according to Castells (2000), is an organizational point where "space of flows" – information, culture, technology, people—passes through in larger global networks.

reality" (Aufderheide 2007, 6) and that is, through Hot Docs and other avenues, increasingly moving toward the mainstream, thus becoming dissasociated from its politically disruptive roots.

A Canadian Thing

Documentary, like some other alternative cinema in Canada (video art, experimental), is a strange animal – hundreds of works are made, yet very few earn a living from making them, anywhere (Fraser 2012, 20), and many of those that are made are difficult to access.[24] Scores of top-quality documentaries are produced, yet there is theatrical space, in a country ranked 11th in the world for cinemagoing,[25] for no more than three to five exceptional works per year, based on Telefilm statistics.[26] Canadian filmmakers, in order to secure funding from state and private institutions, need to have broadcasters on board from the outset, yet broadcasting windows for the airing of documentaries are closing as traditional channels on CBC and elsewhere opt for drama and reality television. While filmmakers are attempting to develop models for online distribution, it is uncertain if this will become either a popular method for viewing or a viable revenue generator. That said, the National Film Board excels in this area, with millions of documentaries streamed from www.nfb.ca.[27] An annual raft of 30 or so

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[24] DOC reports that documentary production has steadily declined over the last four years (in dollars and number of projects) with 123 documentary projects listed in the 2013 industry report, a decline of 23% from 2012. These numbers only reflect documentaries listed through funding agencies, and do not reflect the total number, which would include independent projects as well. Source: http://www.omdc.on.ca/Assets/Research/Research+Reports/Getting+Real+5/Getting+Real+5.pdf (Accessed: 2013-10-16).

[25] Source: http://www.nationmaster.com/graph/med_cin_att-media-cinema-attendance (Accessed 2013-11-02).

[26] Telefilm, "Daring to Change: Delivering, 2011-2012 Annual Report at a Glance," http://www.telefilm.ca/rapport-annuel/2011-2012/index-en.html (Accessed 2013-09-31).

[27] NFB Blog, "One year after putting NFB films online – Here are the stats," http://blog.nfb.ca/blog/2010/

Canadian documentaries is shown (alongside approximately 150 international) at Hot Docs each year to audiences that continue to grow.[28] Filmmakers who attend festivals in Toronto, Vancouver, Montreal and other Canadian locales comment on how enthusiastic audiences are for documentary viewing in Canada.[29] However, despite substantial projects and audience enthusiasm, the outlook is bleak. Federal cutbacks have resulted in dwindling production money. Art house and rep cinemas, where documentaries once found at least minimal public exposure, have for the most part closed down across the country. The export value of Canadian documentaries is at an all time low (Getting Real/DOC 2013, 31). Television's emphasis on reality programming spells "poorer times ahead" for documentary filmmakers in Canada.[30] Video stores have all but gone extinct and online distribution, such as Netflix, remain the ancillary option rather than a principal source of revenue.[31]

In this context of abundant product, audience demand and diminishing circulation opportunities, Hot Docs has risen to prominence with few critics voicing concern publicly, including periodic interventions by the author of this dissertation.[32] It is not surprising that criticism in the documentary community is tempered, because as one

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01/21/online-video-stats/ (Accessed 2013-09-29).

[28] Audience figures for Hot Docs are now at almost 300,000.

[29] As this account, "Cultivating audiences, one city at a time," by Jessica Wong (CBC News), attests: http://www.cbc.ca/arts/features/cdncinema/ (Accessed 2013-01-05).

[30] Steve Laduarantaye and Simon Houpt, "The dark side of docs: Are poorer times ahead for Canadian documentary producers?," *The Globe and Mail*, http://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/film/the-dark-side-of-docs-are-poorer-times-ahead-for-canadian-documentary-producers/article11557598/ (Accessed 2013-10-02).

[31] See Tom Roston, "Netflix Streaming Deals for Documentary Filmmakers – Some Numbers," POV/PBS: http://www.pbs.org/pov/blog/docsoup/2013/06/netflix-streaming-deals-for-documentary-filmmakers-some-numbers/#.UmrHj5FmHoM (Accessed 2013-10-20).

[32] Most of this author's commentary on the festival can be found in *POV Magazine* and at: http://www.artthreat.net. (Accessed 2013-11-02).

filmmaker has told me, there aren't a lot of options left: "It's a small scene here, and they take less and less Canadian docs, and no one, including me, wants to be in their bad books for publicly criticizing them."[33] Hot Docs is becoming, as they say, the "only game in town," and as such the festival plays an important role as arbiter, disseminator and promoter of documentary in Canada, which is why Hot Docs' absence from both documentary and festival literature is surprising.

CHAPTER BREAKDOWN

This thesis is divided into four substantive sections where chapters one through four address aspects of the cultural politics of documentary at Hot Docs as it relates to the overarching process of commercialization. In analyzing the mobilization of the festival's symbolic, discursive and material efforts to transition documentary from a marginal media to the mainstream, I have kept three conceptual concerns in mind: community, consumption and contestation (or dissent).

Community, consumption and contestation ground the theoretical underpinnings of this investigation in communication theory and cultural studies, and the extra-textual aspects concerning the social implications of film texts as they move through social and discursive spaces and institutions. While there is clearly some interest to film studies scholars in the following arguments and observations, it is likely as a crossover to a cultural studies infused analysis of non-fiction film, not as a study grounded in the 'classic' or foundational ideas and sensibilities most commonly associated with the work of that field (such as psychoanalysis, aesthetic theory, formalism, etc.). That said, the

[33] "Y," interviewed by author, Montreal, QC, January, 2011.

following analysis does offer, in three of the substantive chapters, focused ideological critiques of documentary film texts. Lastly, this interrogation is shaped by alternative media literature and research, and a tangential objective of what follows is an attempt to help firm up documentary's position as an alternative medium in its own right, while exposing conflicting alternative and mainstream impulses within the genre itself.

Chapter One

Chapter One provides a snapshot of the scholarly and theoretical terrain in which this study is situated. In particular it looks at literature that engages with film festivals, then with documentaries, and crucially, attempts to address each field's relative oversight and bring the two areas into conversation with each other. As well, I provide theoretical context to some key concepts used throughout the thesis, that orient the reader to both the lineage of literature the underpin the terms as well as the investigative context in the pages of this dissertation.

Chapter Two

This chapter offers a historical overview of Hot Docs, and as such it is informed by theory that interrogates the intersection of documentary and institutions, as well as research work that has investigated the social histories of other festivals. As Calhoun et al. write, "The concept of the 'institution' is one of the most enduring concepts in sociology. Unfortunately, it is also one of the most poorly defined" (2002, 133). The editors of *Contemporary Sociology Theory* then go on to provide at least one attempt at defining this complex concept, via Talcott Parsons: as "a set of regulatory norms that give rise to the social structure or organization" (Ibid). As a starting point, this definition

points to the functioning of institutions as collective entities guided by sets of codes, rules, regulations and conventions. Institutional analysis makes clear certain starting points for analyzing institutions, including but not limited to their historicity (they emerge and develop at a particular time and place), their contextual connectivity (they do not start and grow in a vacuum, but are part of larger societal forces and systems), and finally, that they conform to norms and conventions both internally (organizational logic) and externally (with other institutions). These theoretical outlines help set the stage for a historical analysis of Hot Docs in Chapter One, where I focus on the social aspects of the festival, and how some of the above mentioned characteristics have brought the festival into being, including the ways in which it has evolved and changed over the years.

Throughout, this thesis has attempted to avoid various pitfalls of so many festival histories, where reductive accounts are told from insulated (and often privileged) perspectives (i.e. the 'insider's account') or that have merely functioned as a checklist of festival developments (such as year-by-year descriptive accounts). While the historical account contained in Chapter Two does contain personal interpretations from organizers and a tracking of key developments, these aspects are always contextualized by the larger social scope of the festival, amounting to a history of the cultural politics of the institution (rather than say, a history of its political economy).

Lastly, and with regards to looking at documentary through an institutional lens, this chapter argues that Hot Docs, as an increasingly important documentary institution both in Canada and globally, has tremendous power over the documentary genre, its forms, its audiences, and its markets. Nichols reminds us that "[a]n institutional framework also imposes an institutional way of seeing and speaking, which functions as a

set of limits, or conventions, for the filmmaker and audience alike" (2001, 23). This project is in direct conversation with theorists who approach media from an institutional consideration, and in the case of documentary, it has to my knowledge not been conducted at the site of the film festival in any substantive manner. Lastly, Chapter Two offers an introduction to Hot Docs as well as an overview of the festival's twenty-year history, highlighting points of transition to the mainstream along the way.

Chapter Three

This chapter begins with an ideological critique of the documentary *Babies*, and relates that analysis with relevant aspects of Hot Docs. Chapter Three takes a close look at the role of populism as it is strategically deployed through Hot Docs programming, rhetoric and ephemera. Documentary has historically occupied the double-station of a marginal and non-elitist genre, as compared with commercial fiction (popular cinema) and art house cinema (high-brow cinema). As such it occupies a liminal space between conceptions of populist and elitist media. As Fraser posits: "They [documentary] inhabit, creatively, a nowhereness, always somewhere between other things" which, as he points out, "turns out to be a very good place from which to observe the contradictions of our times" (2012, 21). Not quite mainstream and not quite underground, documentaries and their interstitial status have found vitality in the public realm. Generally speaking, one would be hard-pressed to justifiably present the case that documentary is a *popular* form of cinema, marginalized as it has been and continues to be, within the film industry and as part of audience market share (See: Fraser 2012; Waugh, Baker and Winton 2010; Winston 2013). That said, the form is infused with populist impulses, expressed and

embodied in its texts and the institutions responsible for its dissemination – both of which are visible at contemporary Hot Docs editions, as is discussed in Chapter Three.

Indeed, there are tendencies within the genre that lean toward accessible, mass-appeal filmmaking *(March of the Penguins, Bowling for Columbine, Supersize Me*) and those that narrow the appreciation and pleasurable factors with challenging form or marginalized and/or disturbing subject matter (*Breaking the Frame*, *Goodbye, How Are You? Tears of Gaza, Maximum Tolerated Dose, The Act of Killing*). So what exactly is meant when the term "populist" is applied to documentary, and more specifically documentary at the site of an international film festival?

Populism in culture, just as in politics, signifies mass-accessibility and mass-appeal. Regarding documentary, this translates into straightforward storytelling and an aesthetic presentation that is designed to leave audiences feeling good because the film conveys a positive or joyful message, or because the film acts as a reassurance that they have done something positive by watching — they have participated in culture and/or politics by watching without demanding further substantial effort. Populist programming at documentary festivals is, like other media counterparts, often pitted against "serious" programming as in this comment on IDFA:[34]

> No doubt, with more than 3,000 submissions a year, one can see the festival's potential to not merely distance itself from the general populist media market, but to develop into a serious forum for documentary film on a metalevel of discussion and communication, with a focus on interventions not only with regard to content but also with regard to film form and characteristics inherent in the applied media. (Blassnigg 2006, 500).

[34] The only documentary festival more important or as important as Hot Docs is the Amsterdam International Film Festival (IDFA), which occurs each November.

The inference is that the general media market, that is the commercial mainstream media market, offers little in the way of critical engagement or serious discourse, while a festival like IDFA has the opportunity to counter that. Others have compared festivals themselves to other populist gatherings: "They may well be comparable to such traditional populist gatherings as circuses, carnivals, court-rooms, and even sporting events" (Rich 1999, 82). Quinn explores the notion that arts festivals can be elitist, many unashamedly so, but that through differentiation (namely diversification of what is available to consume at festivals) festivals can equally be construed as populist, a term Quinn employs as synonymous with 'accessible':

> …the inclusive image of the [Galway] festival belied a more complex agenda underpinning the construction of the festival. In this case, high art forms like classical music and more traditional forms of theatre involving the Irish language, and their devotees, were marginalized in favour of the more popular music, film and street theatre events that have become the festival's hallmarks. Similarly, the reproduction of difference, irrespective of the power dynamics at play, will in all likelihood encounter strategies of opposition or resistence [sic] (however passive) from those groupings who feel themselves to be excluded from the key decision-making processes (Quinn 2005, 21-22).

In this passage Quinn explores the complex relationship between media and populism as it intersects at the festival site, where less accessible media might be subjugated (or, in programming terms – 'ghettoized') in favour of more accessible, 'crowd-pleasing' media. Rare is the theoretical terrain that combines the two in discussions of texts, yet that is precisely where many documentaries find themselves, balancing precariously between intellectual or educative expression and mass appeal. Of note, this is precisely how De Valck (2007) frames Michael Moore's *Bowling For Columbine*: a serious film that was hugely popular and commercially successful, a rare confluence that the festival scholar sums up as "critical-populist" (85).

In Chapter Three populism is deployed as a concept to discuss populist documentaries, programming and other functions of the Hot Docs festival, as the way they fit into the conceptual framework of 'cultural populism,' where "Any form of culture that appeals to ordinary people could reasonably…be called 'populist culture' with no necessarily evaluative judgement implied, although this is rarely so in prevailing cultural discourses" (McGuigan, 1992, 2). While directing his claims against cultural studies practitioners who have embraced what is popular at the expense of critique, McGuigan's notion of cultural populism can be equally applied to the structure of the film festival itself. This gives rise to an imagined community of populist festivalgoers who share similarities in judgement and taste.

Chapter Four

Chapter Four engages with the concept of consumerism and its functionary form, commodification by connecting the documentary *POM Wonderful* with aspects of the Hot Docs festival. When discussing the commodification of culture it is difficult to avoid Adorno, whose analysis of the lowly populist elements of jazz music of the 1950s were part of his critique of what he and Horkheimer referred to as the "cultural industry," itself a theory of the effects of industrialization on culture in the capitalist context (Cook 1996). It is standard to see the onset of commercial interests as a corruption of the "authenticity" of various cultural or artistic forms, that is, as an oppressive and enveloping force that stamps out creativity, diversity and radical impulses through mainstream consumer-driven industrial capitalist hegemony, appropriation, and subjugation. This position is taken as the central thread in Cottrell's MA thesis—on the commodification of the Sundance Film Festival—when he writes:

> We should be concerned about the ability to turn unique cultural projects such as art and film into commodities because it makes the possibility of formulating long-term projects of differentiation, resistance, and sustainable alternatives problematic. If cultural production is always subject to market appropriation that is controlled by highly centralized means of production then the possibility for artistic diversity and differentiation is in crises. (Cottrell 2009, 4)

Claims of crisis in diversity and creativity are further exasperated by the notion that "the culture can't be jammed" (Heath and Potter 2004), an observation that capital will always find a way to adapt to culture, even if that culture is anti-capitalist. These above perspectives, one from the "left" and the other from the "right," mark out a well-worn terrain of analyzing the culture-capital dialectic (Hassan 2009, 4).

Neither of these positions attends to the details of how the commodification of culture might play out as a socially constituted process at a site of exhibition and reception, as opposed to a site of production. Hassan discusses the culture-capital dialectic as a historic point where symbolic resources to make meaning underwent massive upheaval with the onset of the industrial revolution and the concomitant logic of capital, which slowly seeped into the conventions of a culture, which hitherto had been seeped in tradition. So while attending to the processes of commodification which impact both the subjective constitutions of the filmmakers and the audience (without reducing them to the masses), and to the change in modes of production attendant to the rise of the 'docbuster,' Chapter Four attempts to balance these twin poles of culture and capital and shows that while the enduring dialectic of a commercial centre and a marginal periphery is at play, there might also be something in the historical lineage of the documentary form that is worth fighting for as a site of resistance to this all too familiar process.

Chapter Five

Chapter Five looks at the ways in which liberal rights discourse and activism is the political expression or iteration of the commercializing process I am seeking to describe at Hot Docs, where a certain kind of cultural populism is expressed through liberal rights discourse and activism. As with other chapters a critique of an opening night film is leveraged as an ideological bridge between the films and the festival, in this case *Ai Weiwei: Never Sorry* services a larger critique of Hot Docs. Liberalism is another term borrowed from political theory, and has come to mean different things to different groups in different parts of the world. Expressions of liberalism, including liberal rights discourse, is leveraged in this chapters as emanating from the classic philosophical and economic sense, to describe a set of values, goals and guidelines that at the base argue for individualized freedom, equality, and liberty for all members of society, so long as harm is not brought to others. This philosophical foundation, one that respects the rule of law, property rights, freedom of religion, and government regulation, has become the mainstream cultural, political, and economic regime in the West.

The contemporary liberal tenets of rights discourse and action that are referenced in this dissertation are positioned as part of a larger discourse of representative and deliberative democracy, one that retains the primacy of individualism over collectivism. The politics of this formation orient toward a large middle ground, to consensus-build (often vis-à-vis hegemonic processes, turning consensus into coercion), to reform, and to champion cultural and political reform over upheaval and revolution. Liberalism, articulated in culture, favours gay rights, sexual expression, and racial equality provided it fits with a Western, Anglo and Euro-defined norm that still maintains rigid boundaries

around state, private enterprise, the public sphere and the home. In Canada, despite the recent majority-win of the federal Conservatives, liberalism has become the dominant cultural and political form, often given "official" expression in multicultural policy and directives.

Lastly, liberalism's most contemporary and extreme form of expression is the economic philosophy, system, movement and set of policies known as "neoliberalism." As an interpretation of liberalism taken to the extreme right in economics as well as the political structures that support those economics, neoliberalism has dominated global politics since the early 1980s, and continues to gather strength marshalling developing nations' support in what many refer to as a form of neo-colonialism. At its core is a fundamental belief in open and free markets, the unrestricted movement of capital and the individuated profit incentive as a protective measure against social upheaval and dictatorial political regimes. Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu offers this take on the ideology:

> Is the economic world really, as the dominant discourse would have us believe, a pure and perfect order, implacably unfolding the logic of its predictable consequences and promptly repressing all deviations from its rules through the sanctions it inflicts, either automatically or, more exceptionally, through its armed agent, the IMF or the OECD and the drastic policies they impose - reduced labour costs, cuts in public spending and a more 'flexible labour market? What if it were, in reality, only the implementation of a utopia, neoliberalism, thus converted into a political programme, but a utopia which, with the aid of economic theory to which it subscribes, manages to see itself as the scientific description of reality? (1998, 94)

Neoliberalism is, as the quote above illustrates, more often than not perceived solely along economic and political lines, yet culture cannot be excised from the equation. Policies that favour a few while oppressing the rest need more than coalescing governments, they need a complex web of cultural support that operates in conjunction

with the "political programme" and also maintains cultural institutions that see themselves as the arbiters of the "description of reality."

A NOTE ON METHODOLOGY

This thesis embodies and reflects my experience and subjectivity—as well as my passions—as a committed programmer of political documentaries for the past ten years. As the co-founder and programming director of Cinema Politica I do not pretend that my analysis of Hot Docs does not echo that subjectivity, nor claim a distance or objective stance concerning my topic. Moreover, my subject-positioning has been inspired by feminist studies, queer theory, postcolonial studies, disability studies, etc., and I do not believe that impartiality and detachment is necessarily a *sine qua non* of all dependable possible methodologies in the field of communication studies. In fact many of the scholarly advances of these disciplinary fields that emerged in the late twentieth century built on the mindfully situated first-person voice of the researcher, embodied his or her voice, personal experience and affective presence. Even the work of the Marxist film scholar Jane Gaines, for example—not often thought of as an exemplar of autobiographical approaches—consistently deploys her personal "I" in her work on documentary (See: Gaines 1996; 1999; 2007). Accordingly I caution the reader that the following thesis embodies my own deeply felt experience of nearly ten years as a participant in Hot Docs in particular and in general as a programmer, activist, spectator and docuphile (that is, a lover of documentary).

Having attended several Hot Docs editions, I have participated in screenings, parties, organized talks, Country-delegate events, and draw on my own observations,

situating myself in the terrain and keeping in line with the above rich tapestry of studies. This self-positioning from which I describe and evaluate the Hot Docs site is what SooJeong Ahn calls "critical self-positioning" (2012, 4). Indeed, as a participant and now initiative partner with Hot Docs (Cinema Politica has a monthly series at Hot Docs' new year-round cinema, The Bloor Hot Docs Cinema), I have been close to the action and have been involved in letter-writing campaigns (against Coke), individual contestations, protests (against arts cuts), debates with management and more. It is my hope that my critical role as an active participant in the festival and documentary circles—as an audience member, film critic, outside programmer, partner, DOC member, and colleague of at least two Hot Docs organizers—brings added perspective to my analysis and evaluation of the festival and its relationship with the larger documentary culture.

This thesis has come to fruition over the course of nearly five years of research and analysis. During this process, I have relied on five main methodological strategies to come to my conclusions: (1) discourse analysis; (2) textual analysis; (3) on-site observation; (4) interviews; and (5) a literature review. With the first I have performed close readings of Hot Docs materials and CIFC documents (the founding organization), while also looking at the "discursive terrain" (Hall 1996) connected with the festival's programming, films themselves, and secondary commentary from bloggers, audiences, and the media. My discursive analysis, which looms large, follows Carpentier and De Cleen's evaluation of linking discursive readings with media, by revealing the ways in which hegemony is articulated in discourse, as reflections and embodiment of larger influences and process (2007, 269). Lastly, I have relied on a discursive reading of the 2000 or so film synopses contained in the twenty programs of Hot Docs. As time would

not allow me to watch 2000 films and properly conduct a textual analysis, I have analyzed program synopses for all the titles, and used this methodology not to make detailed arguments about the films themselves, but to identify and analyze trends, conventions and thematics that run through the programming. As short descriptions written by the festival, these synopses help me gain insight into the content programmed over two decades, as well as the ways in which the festival articulates that programming for a wider public and participants.

I am aware that the films I have been able to see do not characterize the whole of Hot Docs programming, but rather function as works "indicative of specific questions [that] exemplify important approaches to certain issues" (Nichols 2001, xv); that is, they allow me to extrapolate and highlight structuring conventions and larger processes. As such, I have seized upon opening night films from the latest editions of the festival to exemplify the specific aspects of Hot Docs that I discuss in each chapter. These readings can be considered "political readings" as opposed to "aesthetic readings," where the former foregrounds the ideological underpinnings of the form, content and context of the film, the latter foregrounds its visual and formal construction - although I recognize the ongoing debate over the separation of these two, I nevertheless leverage the aesthetic as a way to approach the ideological.

With regards to film readings and criticism: I have selected opening night films for close analysis for a few reasons. The first is due to the prestige and cultural capital of opening night films, as indicated by marketing strategies that typically centre on films that open the festival. The second is that much of my discussion of the problems of commercialization at Hot Docs revolve around strategies of mass-appeal and crowd-

pleasing exemplified by opening night decisions. Rather, they tend to be 'film festival films' that hedge risk through novelty, buzz, and accessibility. Opening night films at Hot Docs set the tone for the festival, or as organizers say, "start conversations." That is, they establish a structure of feeling that seeps into the rest of the festival regardless of claims that they are simply publicity grabs.[35] For all these reasons I am highlighting opening night films as indicators of wider tendencies, trends, processes, and conventions at Hot Docs.

Regarding my reading of films and the subsequent interpolation of those readings as maps on to the more diffuse elements of Hot Docs, I consider representation. In keeping with the central concern around the cultural politics of documentary genre and culture, I use ideas around the *politics of representation* to look at the way representation functions at the festival, with the caveat that of the three areas, it is mainly programming and the festival's other discursive modes of expression (such as program rhetoric, marketing language) that offer the clearest articulation of such politics of representation.

Stuart Hall, in his seminal essay on the politics of representation, sought to decouple fixed meanings and constructed identities from their mediated contexts, challenging racist discursive elements in culture and exposing new ways to 'read' cultural expression. For Hall, representation as a concept stood for external mediations, or "how one images a reality that exists 'outside' the means by which things are represented" (1996, 443) as well as a "radical displacement of that unproblematic notion of the concept of representation" (Ibid). In other words, representation is both reflexive and constitutive. Or, in Hall's words, "This gives the questions of culture and ideology, and

[35] Sean Farnel, email interview with author, September 2012.

the scenarios of representation – subjectivity, identity, politics – a formative, not merely an expressive, place in the constitution of social and political life" (Ibid).

Hall's theory of the ways in which these scenarios of representation are structured, expressed, contested, and more, greatly infuse my own understanding of the ordering system, or structure of feeling, of culture at the site of Hot Docs. In particular, I find the following analysis from Hall to be relevant to my own study: "My own view is that events, relations, structures do have conditions of existence and real effects, outside the sphere of the discursive; but that it is only within the discursive, and subject to its specific conditions, limits and modalities, do they have or can they be constructed with meaning" (Ibid). I have therefore considered both the discursive and material aspects of Hot Docs in exploring the cultural politics of the festival, but when focusing on politics of representation, have shifted my focus more readily to the discursive realm, following Hall's invocation.

As indicated, close readings are based on my own attendance at Hot Docs screenings and as a participant of the last six years, I have seen on average 40 films per festival. As well as attending screenings and previewing works in the Doc Shop (a space where sales agents, distributors and programmers can access hundreds of Hot Docs titles on computers in their secure preview system), I have attended dozens of workshops, talks, roundtables, informal and formal meetings, brunches, cocktail gatherings, awards ceremonies and everything between. Throughout I have kept a notebook and have made observational impressions and notes, usually on aspects of the social space of the festival, when possible. I am limited in one regard: I have never attended the market (Toronto Documentary Forum), not for lack of interest, but for lack of time and money. I therefore

have left this aspect out of my analysis of the festival, and hope to one day explore this aspect of Hot Docs further.

Over the last three years I have also interviewed several filmmakers and organizers of Hot Docs. Their insights have often reinforced commonly held assumptions about the history of the festival and the nature of its evolution. Interviews with organizers usually reflected a 'party line' whereby success is not gauged critically, but in outcomes of audience attendance and publicity. That said, some interviewees proved more insightful and less predictable than others, such as the founders of the festival, as well as filmmakers whose films have been rejected. Still, I recognize that every interview is loaded with various agendas and as empirical sources, they are best deployed as interpretive material that reinforce or illustrate other evidence for larger arguments. Lastly, I have conducted an extensive literature review, which is detailed in the next section.

Thus taking into account my methodology with my theoretical framework the following chapters will be structured around particular films that exemplify particular trends at play in Hot Docs over the last few years. It is the contention of this thesis that these trends are part of an emerging constellation re-organizing the role and potential of documentary in society. In particular, given how this thesis's theoretical framework rests on the interplay between capital and culture, through theories of populism, commodification, liberal rights discourse and associated concepts, this thesis will emphasize the ways in which Hot Docs is responding to and shaping the cultural politics of documentary at large. To initiate this analysis, I have introduced the cultural studies concern for representation, and worked out ways in which representation as a problematic

comes to bear on the above theoretical framework and analysis. Representation is but one aspect of cultural politics, and other chapters in this dissertation consider it in relation to the guiding concepts of community, consumption and contestation (or resistance). The resulting document then combines multiple theories, some of which are in conversation around documentary and festivals for the first time, and drawing on the work of cultural, film and communication studies scholars, argues for a theoretical analysis of the documentary film festival that could possibly be called a *critical festival study,* and that considers, in particular, ideas and practices of consumption and contestation at the Hot Docs film festival.

CHAPTER ONE – MAPPING THE CONTEXTUAL TERRAIN

This dissertation is predominantly concerned with two areas of scholarly and popular work that seldom come together - literature on documentary (formal, cultural, and political) and literature on film festivals. And while each is blind to the other, film festivals in general are a relatively nascent field of inquiry and thus remain comparatively understudied: the are "seldom… the topic of academic research" (De Valck 2007, 14). While film festival scholars are united by their frequently articulated observation that their subject remains an enduring lacuna in film and media fields (Falicov 2010, 14), documentary is rarely, if ever, mentioned in relation to festivals. Even then mention is only in relation to 'niche' or secondary, non-mainstream film festivals, where it is lumped together with a motley crew of marginal iterations of the festival phenomenon. Despite the meteoric rise in film festivals featuring or focusing on documentaries, the very mention of the non-fiction cinematic genre is rare throughout the film festival literature.

As such, there is limited academic literature on the Hot Docs festival. What does exist tends to refrain from critical analysis that focuses on the intersection of culture and politics, reflecting an enduring and unfortunate dearth of critical engagement with the festival beyond its films. There exists a fair share of pride about Toronto and its cultural successes like TIFF and Hot Docs, with Burgess' dissertation (2008) even arguing that festivals like TIFF are "undervalued showcases" for the city that provide a counterweight to Hollywood fare (23). Toronto Cinema Spaces, a project from the University of Toronto, is unabashedly supportive of Hot Docs' success, even noting the incredible fortitude it has taken to achieve the kinds of sponsorship the festival has made with

corporations. All that is to say, if the topic of film festivals has received limited research, the subject of documentary film festivals is practically non-existent, and the object of this study—Hot Docs—has not attracted any sustained academic attention to date.

The Festival Context

Yet, film festivals are an indelible component of the cultural industries[1] (De Valck 2007), serving as media institution, creative workspace, cultural event, and finally, producer, distributor, exhibitor and interpreter of media arts - cinema in particular. A pronounced tension between commerce and culture tends to manifest in the existing literature in one of two ways: either as *external-global*, where the film festival circuit is situated in contrast to and as an alternative to Hollywood (Zielinski 2008), or as *internal-network,* where the negotiations, tensions and compromises between finance and art are assumed to be part of the inner workings of every major international film festival, and Hollywood is seen as but one piece of the puzzle (Stringer 2003). Many studies fall somewhere between, such as De Valck (2007), Wong (2011), and the investigation that follows.

Discourse framing the internal conflict between the values, conventions and sensibilities of commerce and those of art at the site of the film festival is prevalent in the literature and often presented as insurmountable fact (Koehler 2009). This perspective seems to be the corollary to the discourse that perceives the proliferation of the "business festival" (in distinction to the endangered "audience festival") (Peranson 2009, 27), the rise in cultural and economic power of commercial agents (Quintín 2009), and the

[1] Culture industries are also known as the "creative industries" (Hesmondhalgh 2008).

explosion of festival-programmed, commercially friendly cinema.[2] There also exists an effort to interrogate the complex relationship between national and regional cinemas, such as those in Europe, and the role of Hollywood in "border exchanges" at A-list film festivals (Evans 2007). Lastly, there is a distinct thread in festival literature theorizing these events and cultural institutions as they relate to urban planning, policy and politics. Much of this scholarship, that is work on festivals and cities, highlights the ways in which cities function as markers, or as cultural and economic beacons for urban renewal, touristic competiveness, and cultural differentiation (Hannigan 2003; Richards and Wilson 2004). The multidisciplinary Canadian journal *Public* recently (2012) devoted an entire issue to the role of organized art and culture in city space, offering a sobering critical perspective on the relationship between festivals and urban space through an analysis of the model of Nuit Blanche. While this thesis focuses more on the relationship between capital and culture than issues of nation or urbanism, *Public,* like the analysis that follows, demonstrates a concern for the ways in which top-down approaches to circulating art to the public can become problematic. Their introduction to Nuit Blanche could, in many ways, be applied to Hot Docs in its role as signifier for Toronto's development as the "city of festivals:"[3]

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[2] This is in distinction to the slow death of what is sometimes referred to as "exploding cinema," that is, difficult, complex, non-formulaic, non-linear, experimental, niche, and art house cinema, and the cinephilia that is said to accompany such screen content (Koehler 2009).

[3] In 1998 Toronto City Council put forward a plan for year-round festival activities highlighting this signature aspect of Canada's largest urban centre. The following is from Council minutes: "The plan will detail the division's strategy to develop a year-round 'city of festivals'. A series of city-produced signature events will anchor Toronto's event calendar in each season, capitalizing on tourist trends and providing optimum event experiences for residents. Events include Toronto Winterfest (winter), Celebrate Toronto Street Festival (summer), Toronto Swing Music Festival (fall) and Cavalcade of Lights (holiday season). The plan will also articulate the commitment to bring innovative signature events to the regions, specifically through the Toronto Swing Music Festival. This "city of festivals" vision will powerfully promote the city to residents and visitors while supporting the vital tourism industry in the city" (City of Toronto, 1998). The Council articulates the seemingly win-win situation festival celebrations pose for both

> Rather than instantiating a singular or deterministic ideological message…[Nuit Blanche] emerges from a mix of funding sources and cultural agents: municipal governments, corporate sponsors, independent art organizations, and community groups, not to mention scores of artists, many of whom may be commissioned or otherwise. Such an entanglement of motives is evidenced in conflicting agendas, divergent institutional mandates, and an expansive array of aesthetic intentions. (Drobnick and Fisher 2012, 6)

The authors, and others in the issue, go on to disentangle some of those motives and agendas by critically assessing the official city and organizers' assessment of "success," while questioning aspects of public space, civic participation and the neoliberal ideology enacted through city planning, tourism and 'the numbers game.' While this analysis and conclusion is similar to the one that follows, as well as Quinn's (2005) and Gibson and Stevenson's (2004), this thesis focuses less on public urban spaces than on documentary spaces, politics and culture.

Less interested in particular events, there also exists a critical literature that analyzes film festivals as part of a global network that includes economic systems, media conglomerates, and government agencies. Such work often positions the film festival circuit as an alternative distribution and exhibition system against the more globally dominant Hollywood system (Iordanova and Cheung 2010; De Valck 2007 [p.85]; Porton 2009; Elsaesser 2005; Stringer 2003), where marginalized films and smaller, often independent films are given the space and structure to not only find an audience, but find buyers and distributors. In relation to Hot Docs, this scholarship is useful only insofar as it helps initially frame the complicated relationship between business and art. Yet as

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capital and community in the urban space in the next paragraph: "Developing the Celebrate Toronto Street Festival as an annual signature event will capitalize on the tremendous momentum and excitement created in 1998. Retailers, hotels and associated businesses will be positively affected by the increase in their trades as this event flourishes. Likewise, residents will enjoy the sense of community that develops when they come together to celebrate their city" (Ibid).

documentary has been typically excluded from the Hollywood system, the discussion that follows focuses rather on how documentary transitions from an alternative to a mainstream cinema by way of the Hot Docs Festival.

Looking at this dichotomy in isolation can, however, create the impression that this is a Manichean case of American business against marginalized art. Mark Peranson, in a widely referenced essay, argues against such characterization:

> There's a false dichotomy that exists between the multiplex and the film festival world, where one is business, the other art. If anything, one can say that in their local contexts, international film festivals are *too* successful, as the real spectre haunting the film world is declining attendance at so-called art house theatres year round, especially in screening facilities that are being built and run by film festivals. (2009, 24)

As this quote illustrates, the relationship between film festivals and "mainstream media" and Hollywood is far from a simple David and Goliath affair, despite claims to the contrary. Cottrell's analysis (2009), for instance, pits Hollywood against the Sundance Film Festival, when in fact it was Hollywood that in many ways created the Utah-based festival. Film festivals, and their steadily expanding global network, have indeed become quite powerful cultural and economic players in their own right, a point Mazdon makes about Cannes (2006), pointing out that "despite this it has to date been given very little serious academic attention" (Ibid, 19). And while academics focus on Sundance and its sell-out status, or the commercialization of other A-list festivals like Cannes, there is little to no attention paid to documentary festivals in this regard. As secondary, or niche festivals catering to a comparatively marginalized cinema, documentary festivals like Hot Docs are seldom analyzed with regards to the interplay of commerce and culture.

Yet Hot Docs, like other key festivals, is a major player in the cultural industry alongside television channels, newspapers, new media companies, video games, film studios and more. As such, the festival embodies the multi-layered and often oblique relationship between industry and culture. This thesis tends to agree with Peranson's assessment - too often film festivals are made to be champions of under-funded and under-appreciated art in a world dominated by blockbusters and overpriced popcorn. Peranson's analysis of this much-discussed dichotomy reminds festival researchers and critics that festivals, at least the mainstream commercial events that are most written about, are in the *business* of cinema *as well as* the culture of cinema. While always present, this relationship need not be over determining. Such is the excellent study on lesbian and gay film festivals by Zielinski (2008), who differentiates between mainstream commercial festivals and "community-oriented" festivals that operate with a different set of guiding logics and objectives – this work is in direct conversation with this thesis' evaluation of Hot Docs' approach to documentary cinema and community.

As for Peranson, he points out that film festivals, as large culture industry *events*, enjoy much larger promotion and marketing budgets than independent or art house movie theatres, which is certainly the case with Hot Docs' six million dollar budget. He also makes the observation that audiences show a stronger willingness to "take a chance" on a film festival film (especially at the more reputable, large, established festivals like TIFF or Hot Docs) than at an independent theatre showcasing similar content in yearlong programmes. Film festivals, far from being the underdog heroes operating against all odds in Hollywood's market, can also be seen as influential players in an often contradictory mix of business and art, situated in a tangled web of markets, budgets,

tastes, values, art, culture and business. Festivals may offer the chance to see a handful of some of the "fifty outstanding films [made] per year" (Peranson 2009, 25)—films largely out-flanked and/or block-booked out of the program by Hollywood product in the theatres—but they may also be using up the finite resources of specialty audiences in local markets (Drobnick and Fisher 2012, 33), making it more difficult for year-round purveyors of independent, niche and world cinema to survive in an already independent-unfriendly environment. This argument relays with the rise of Hot Docs amid an otherwise dismal documentary context in Canada, pointing to two issues: are successful commercial festivals, including Hot Docs, doing more for themselves than the culture and genre as a whole, and what are the (community and political) costs of the festival's success?

De Valck, who has written one of the most widely cited volumes on film festivals (2007), argues that the perceived film festival/Hollywood dichotomy is a product of the European origins of the film festival phenomenon, where European cinema has itself historically been seen as a cinema in contrast and confrontation with Hollywood (2007, 32), including at the level of content. However, she cautions against simplifying the relationship between the film festival circuit and Hollywood, as it has always been an international project, with American players involved from the beginning (2007, 15). Echoing Elsaesser (2005), De Valck troubles the art versus commerce binary and puts forward the idea of the international film festival as an aggregate of globalization forces that includes Hollywood alongside independent film festival auteurs. In short, "This cinema network operates both with and against the hegemony of Hollywood" (2007, 15). This emphasis is also found in the work of Evans (2007), Mazdon (2006), and Diawara

(1994), who along with Falicov (2010) interrogate the forces of globalization and currents of transnationalism in relation to North-South disparities.

Still, there is little to be found on documentary festivals in this literature. Perhaps this is due to the fact that documentary is largely produced outside of the Hollywood system, although even this is changing. Nevertheless documentary festivals like Hot Docs are very much part of the festival circuit, and documentary films play at Cannes, Tribeca, and other festivals. Therefore, discussions around Hollywood and festivals, while occluding documentary cinema, serve to help understand the constantly evolving relation between margins and mainstream.

Throughout the festival literature are works that focus on single festivals, and as an analysis principally focused on Hot Docs, this dissertation is very much in conversation with such literature. That said, the ubiquitous monographs extolling the insider's account of festivals have not been useful for the purposes herein (with most of them obsessively focused on Cannes,[4] such as Craig 2013). The insider's account often provides lascivious tales of drug use, sexual escapades, petty politics, and DIY bravado, such as can be found in Brian D. Johnson's racy book on TIFF, *Brave Films, Wild Nights* (2000). Needless to say, scandal, glamour, and mostly uncritical thick description abounds in non-academic insider's literature (See: Bart 1997; Beauchamp and Béhar 1992). This literature—with its emphasis on the practicalities of getting films into festivals, working the festival circuit, and 'surviving' the festival experience—has little critical relevance to this dissertation, yet is significant in accounting for the construction of social space at the festival,

[4] To illustrate the breadth of this burgeoning sub-field in the festival book market, the Guardian highlights a list of favourite "top 10 books about the Cannes film festival" to mark the 2009 edition of the annual event here: http://www.theguardian.com/film/filmblog/2009/may/11/cannes-film-festival-books (Accessed 2013-10-10).

especially with its emphasis on a culture inflected with commercial concerns such as market success.

Some single festival-oriented works provide historical accounts, but this literature is commonly shorter, in the form of articles and short book chapters, such as Fernandez's history of the Desh Pardesh Festival (2006), or found in MA and PhD theses, such as Webber's history of the Syndey Film Festival (2005) and the tumultuous histories of the Toronto, New York and Montreal LGBT festivals found in Zielinski's PhD dissertation (2008).[5] This thesis's history of Hot Docs is situated in the lineage of these works, although in contrast to scholarship on other festivals, this author has faced a virtually non-existent body of previous research on the particular site at hand.

Less common is literature that takes a sustained critical approach to the film festival by way of an examination of multiple festivals, but two oft-cited works do just that. De Valck divides her *Film Festivals* (2007) investigation into four aspects ("spatial reconfigurations," "alternative cinema networks," the "value-adding process," and "the age of programmers"), and assigns a specific film festival to each section. Likewise, Stringer's *On Film Festivals* (2003) relies on case studies to highlight his own arguments concerning film festivals, notably as an interrogation of festival rhetoric and the ways in which today's film festival "constitutes one of the key institutions through which contemporary world cinema is circulated and understood" (Stringer 2003, 283). Both books, like the vast majority of literature on film festivals, nearly completely overlook documentaries and documentary film festivals and their contribution to the festival circuit

[5] Once again, Cannes tends to dominate the single-festival focused literature, with volumes dedicated to its history (Beauchamp 1992; Bart 1997; Toubiana 2011), its relationship to Hollywood (Beauchamp 1992) or the personalities behind the famous institutions, as in Jacob's *Citizen Cannes: The Man Behind the Cannes Film Festival*, 2011 (which contributes to the balls and bravado mythic individuals subset, ignoring the massive collaborative and collective efforts that go into festival organization).

as well as to the discourse around it. The less-referenced *Furtive Steady Glances* by Zielinski (2008) also illustrates larger theoretical concerns and arguments by way of specific film festival examples.[6] This thesis is closely aligned with the direction and perspective found in Zielinski's work, where the process of mainstreaming the margins is critically analyzed with a concern and focus for what Zielinski calls "imagined counterpublics" (2008). In the case of Hot Docs, the loss of these imagined counterpublics is theorized as having occurred under the rise of the liberal consensus framework.

Like De Valck (2007), this thesis looks at the *space of media* and the ways in which media texts, cultures, communities and economies circulate and are constituted at certain physical locations. This kind of analysis is linked to the concept of "space of flows" - a framework developed by Manuel Castells (1989) that refers to the ways in which new spatial configurations are developed through transformations in technology and culture, whereby space and time are reoriented and increasingly interlinked aspects of social life change the experience of, especially, information dissemination and consumption. This "space of flows" of information, communication, people, culture and business converges at the site of Hot Docs, and reveals a contemporary structure of feeling in both the documentary cinema world, and in the wider historical moment as a whole. Like De Valck, this thesis is less interested in textual and authorial analyses of film festivals, and for the purposes of this investigation, follows her lead in undertaking the "spatial turn"

[6] Zielinski's work leverages histories of certain LGBT festivals in order to explore the differences between community-oriented and commercial festivals, niche and mainstream, and the sexual politics that these kinds of events and institutions embody and reflect.

(2007, 18) that film festivals, as affective, spatially-oriented objects of investigation, demand of the researcher.

Like De Valck, this thesis seeks to fold larger meta-systems into her analysis of film festivals. Forces such as globalization, deterritorialization, mobilization, fragmentation, and digitization all manifest at the film festival event: in the texts, actors and the circuit itself. With increased mobility—of film texts, people, capital, knowledge, and technology—the film festival can scarcely be seen as an isolated fortress of media dissemination and consumption. In this regard, De Valck's work is relevant to this study, with one key difference - I am interested in acknowledging the larger capital-culture web of which film festivals are but one part. In this way, what follows builds from studies of particular festivals as well as meta-studies like De Valck's and Stringer's, which theorize the larger constellation of forces impacting festivals.

The interrogation of film festivals that serve a marginalized or non-dominant group, that is, individuals and institutions self-identified as belonging to a specific subaltern group or community (as in Zielinski's "counterpublics") is important to my work. The types of film festivals where these particular identity politics play out are called niche festivals (De Valck 2007, 129) - queer, ethnic, diasporic, Jewish, Black, eco-justice, anarchist, etc.[7] The relationship between identity and politics at these festivals is explicitly articulated, and as Castells reminds us, "the search for new connectedness around shared, reconstructed identity" (2000, 23) plays out through institutions like festivals, in an increasingly networked society. As mentioned earlier, Zielinski (2008)

[7] Other 'niche festivals' play less on identity politics but still nevertheless cater to subaltern groups constituted around niche interests in cinema, such as silent films, war films, Italian neo-realism, etc.

provides a comprehensive assessment of the relatively abundant stock of this particular literature, and many LGTB or sexuality and gender-focused journals have featured content on queer festivals, including *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies'* special forum on "queer film and video festivals" (2005).[8] By situating documentary as alternative media and leveraging literature that discusses niche, subaltern, festivals, this dissertation is in direct dialogue with those few scholars who choose to explore non-mainstream festivals.

Film festival identity and politics is drawn out in the literature with regards to film festivals and the relationship to the nation-state and nationalism (De Valck 2007, 47-55; Stringer 2003, 53-103). Czach's short but insightful article on this aspect looks at the way festival programming contributes to nation building (2004) and Chan's *Screen* article (2011) on linking international film festivals and national cinemas, "offers some initial thoughts on how the structures, conditions and contexts of festivals can impact on the films that emerge from them – films which may sometimes be seen as representative of a particular national cinema" (253). Any literature that seeks to provide historical context to film festivals cannot avoid entering the territory of nations and national cinemas, as the early stages of the festival network were indeed products of nation-building, international posturing and collaboration, and territorial politics (De Valck 2007, 45-55). For purposes here, this literature has proved informative, but less crucial for the study that follows, which does not focus on the nationalisms that are negotiated at Hot Docs. Framing a

[8] Cinema journals have provided spot focuses as well (on festivals in general however), and *Screen*'s dossier on film festivals is an eclectic gathering of some key film and festival writers (2011). In their introduction, Archibald and Miller write: "Since the pioneering work of Bill Nichols, researchers have come to recognize that film festivals are not just an adjunct to other activities but a phenomenon in their own right" (249).

discussion around, for instance, the decline of Canadian cinema and rise of American cinema at Hot Docs as a national cinemas debate would distract from a central concern of mainstream versus margins *within* the documentary genre and culture.

In both instances identity/politics are conceptualized as key components of the film festival, yet in none of the literature focusing on these aspects does one find, despite its formidable historic entanglement with identity and politics (Renov 2004), mention of documentary. Documentary film festivals are sometimes, though rarely, included in the laundry list of various "niche festivals," but further investigation into the multivalent and complex ways in which documentary texts, authors and the larger community invoke identity and politics remains wholly absent. This is a missed opportunity to connect shared fundamental components of documentary with the film festival, whether it is by virtue of the strong tradition of identity and politics found in the documentary text itself (Renov 2004) or the historical context of documentary as a political communication and art force in society (Waugh 2011; Zimmermann 2000).

Lastly, a focus on political/social activism is one area that could potentially bring together documentary and festival scholarship. Excluding the above-mentioned work on queer festivals, there has been a reluctance to explore this link between festivals and activism until recently. At the moment only one volume is devoted to the issue: Iordanova and Torchin's 2012 *Festival Yearbook 4* (*Film Festivals and Activism*) .[9] Yet this volume narrowly focuses on human rights festivals, thus serving to reinforce a larger Western liberal rights framework replete at mainstream commercial documentary

[9] There are two volumes scheduled to be published in 2014-2015, in which the author will have two chapters, based on this dissertation, that each look at the intersection of documentary and film festivals: *Documentary Film Festivals* and *Film Festivals and Activism*, respectively.

festivals like Hot Docs. When their volume doesn't focus on human rights, as with Iordanova's chapter (13), the focus shifts to online iterations of film and activism, new forms of dissemination for activist filmmakers, and highlights well-known activists (such as Chomsky and the Yes Men) and their interface with film and film festivals. While acknowledging the "intense moment" in which the book was written (including a mention of the Occupy movement), Iordanova excludes non-institutional, non-mainstream forms of activism at film festivals, and concludes with the sticky statement: "Yet isn't it also true that each and every festival is an act of activism in its own way?" (Ibid, 23). This thesis, written in a similarly intense historical moment of social upheaval, austerity measures and mass social movements, seeks to address activism that occurs outside of dominant liberal rights discourses, a kind rather associated with dissent[10] and documentary publics, and their often strained relationship to film festivals like Hot Docs.

The Documentary Context

The scholarship on documentary is much deeper and wider, making it more of a challenge to mount in the service of one project. From entire books on a single film[11] to whole volumes devoted to ethics (Rosenthal and Corner, 2005), regional filmographies (Burton 1990), books and chapters on faux-documentaries or mockumentaries (Juhasz and Lerner 2006; Druick 2010, 2012), institutions (Waugh, Baker and Winton 2010; Waugh and Winton 2013), volumes dedicated to taking stock of the whole genre (Winston 2013), and finally to a whole raft of introductory texts (Barnouw 1993;

[10] Or what I would like to call "dissensus," as the antipodal term to consensus, a term that looms large in this thesis. Dissensus, however, is as unwieldy a neologism as "glocal" and will therefore be relegated to one mention, here in the marginalia of the thesis.

[11] Varga's 2013 book on *Passage*, by John Walker—who sits on the Board of Hot Docs—comes to mind.

Aufderheide 2007; Nichols 2001, 2010), documentary literature is impressively robust. The literature is mainly split between film studies and media/communication studies along the social science/humanities schism found in studies of cinema (Miller 2007), though there is also a nascent field of documentary studies currently in development. Despite all this, it is next to impossible to find documentary scholarship that focuses on film festivals, a lacuna this dissertation seeks to address.

This project engages with documentary literature and theory in three distinct ways. Firstly, there is a focus on documentary film texts themselves, as political artefacts, and as such the thesis draws from Nichols (1994; 2001), Chanan (2007), Zimmermann (2000), Waugh (1984; 2011), and Gaines (1996). I also have been inspired by others who describe, analyze, and critique specific documentary film texts and situate them in larger socio-political, cultural, historical and economic contexts. In particular Gaines, Renov and Waugh offer a political reading by way of an ideological critique, as a way to connect with and evaluate larger socio-political concerns at Hot Docs. While it is true that much of the scholarly work on documentary, like film studies in general, utilizes film texts as entries on to larger theoretical and critical-analytic concerns,[12] it is a diminished selection that expands on the textual qualities of documentary texts to relate them to larger structures linked to them, including surrounding cultural politics. In this regard, Zimmermann (2010), Waugh (1984; 2011), the journal *Jump Cut* and the *Visible Evidence* book series have all been indispensible to this project.

[12] As the newly published 2013 volume on documentary, edited by one of the field's foremost names, Brian Winston, attests.

Secondly, the documentary literature is utilized in this thesis to better understand and theorize the contextual aspects of documentary culture (a term meant to include considerations beyond industry, such as audiences, publics, policy, institutions, etc.), in particular, the cultural politics of documentary. Analyzing the cultural politics of documentary can help us understand how documentaries can serve as a catalyst for politics (Chanan 2007),[13] their processes of representation (Gaines and Renov 1999),[14] and lastly how they can disrupt and reconfigure information and cultural regimes (Zimmermann 2000), where the symbolic and informational power of documentary is used to influence public opinion, policy and more. These qualities of documentary, as seen around the playing out of cultural politics at festivals, and as they have been theorized by the above-writers, inform the following study of the culture and genre at Hot Docs.

Lastly, the documentary literature is leveraged toward an interrogation of larger programming patterns that I have set within a political filmmaking spectrum, with radical committed documentaries on one end and liberal consensus films on the other. This approach is informed by alternative media scholarship, where documentary can be theorized as an alternative media form to mainstream commercial cinema (Downing, 2001). This scholarship is utilized in a unique and novel way, arguing that an alternative form has itself split, with a mainstream iteration emerging at Hot Docs. At the heart of this theoretical intervention is a particular conception of 'political' and the variations and differentiations thereof. To make sense of this and develop a worthy model, this thesis

[13] Where films can provoke and inspire action on everything from AIDS treatment to racial equality to fair labour practices.

[14] Such analysis includes the historicizing of struggle, and the interpretation of social movements.

relies on some of the above documentary theorists as well as film scholars who have developed ideological critiques of cinema, such as Hall (1981), Klinger (1984), and Splantinga (in Allen and Smith 1997).

Informing these three approaches to theorizing documentary as it intersects with the film festival site are various literatures that make up a multidisciplinary framework for (a) conceiving of documentary as alternative media; (b) conceiving of documentary film festivals as spaces of contestation and dissent, where the cultural politics of radical, progressive political documentaries are given space to spill over into the festival space; and (c) conceiving of the structural framework of globalized capitalism and related ideological manifestations like consumerism and liberalism as envelopes of the first two.

A NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY

Throughout this dissertation several terms and phrases are deployed in the service of my arguments and ascribed to my evaluation. For the sake of clarity of language and argumentation, the following key terms, which are not otherwise explained in the document, are foregrounded and explained before proceeding. Some of these terms have already appeared, but it is after this point that an understanding of the contextual definitions will be necessary for the larger arguments in which the terms are embedded.

Documentary

> They're among the least valued, and most interesting, cultural forms of our time. (Nick Fraser on *Why Documentaries Matter*, 2012, 9)

The term documentary is used throughout this thesis keeping in mind Grierson's

often-cited definition, the "creative treatment of actuality." Yet these aspects of the form are not static elements of practice, they are constitutive of the relationship with audience: "'Actuality' in the Griersonian sense, as Robert Fairthorne pointed out some eighty years ago, 'is not a fundamental property, but a relation between film and audience of precisely the same order as slow motion which demands previous knowledge of natural motion to give it its peculiar effect'" (Winston 2013, 10). Documentary refers to film and video works that either strictly adhere to non-fiction parameters of storytelling, involving any combination of observational style, subject interviews, narration, ethnographic sensibilities, use of animation and graphics or the deployment of archival materials. I also use the term to encompass works that fall outside of traditionally demarcated boundaries of non-fiction cinema, as defined by scholars, critics and filmmakers themselves. These works often mix fiction elements with non-fiction, including but not limited to: the use of re-enactment or dramatization, choreographed and scripted sequences and editing and sound practices that play with time and space. Throughout, I align my deployment of "documentary" as a term that is defined by associations more than anything else. That is to say, *documentary* implies a certain relationship with veracity, authenticity, or truth. Nichols writes that documentaries "address the world in which we live rather than a world imagined by the filmmaker" (2001, xi) and as such they have a special relationship with truthful representations of that world in which we live. They are differentiated from other genres because of this characteristic, and as such "They are made with different assumptions about purpose, they involve a different quality of relationship between filmmaker and subject, and they prompt different sorts of expectations from audiences" (Ibid). All of these associative qualities are what make documentaries *documentaries*.

Following Nichols, a text can also become a "documentary" once defined by its makers, or relevant to this investigation, by an authoritative institution (Ibid, 21). Since Hot Docs is "North America's largest documentary festival, conference and market" and each year the festival "presents a selection of more than 180 cutting-edge documentaries from Canada and around the globe," the texts that are screened at Hot Docs are assumed to be, then, *documentaries*.

Like all singular terms describing complex social and cultural phenomena, *documentary* is a leaky container whose contents are in a perpetual state of seeping out and whose absorbent walls consistently take in new materials, mixing and intermingling with the contents held within. Always in flux, the boundaries around documentary—as practice, experience, theory and text—are fluid and permeable. For the purposes here, *documentary* is really just a convenient term that allows us to talk about certain kinds of media. It is the degree to which filmic manipulations represent actuality that place, on a spectrum, a work more in the fiction or non-fiction realm. Documentaries make claims on the real, or on actuality, yet admit to a degree of creative manipulation. As communication artefacts indelibly linked to notions of "truth," documentaries provide indexes to what audiences believe as "real," to bear witness to what is recorded, and to relate to the representation of reality as it unfolds.

As such, documentaries are ideal vehicles for intimating aspects of social reality we do not inhabit, where we can be moved—politically and emotionally—by the creative treatment of actuality, where we can grow more sensitive and cognizant to that which may be foreign, abject or grotesque, and where we can take part in a kind of public participation through education, political-emotional investment, engagement and post-

screening action(s). These works go by various names: Fraser and Farnel call them "campaign or advocacy films" (2012 and 2013, respectively), Zimmermann labels them "interventions" (2000), Torchin refers to "testimonial" and "human rights" films (In Iordanova and Torchin 2012, 2), shows that a litany of scholars refer to them as "activist documentaries," and Waugh calls them "committed" films (1984). This thesis differentiates between the *call-for-awareness* and the *call-to-action* political documentaries with an emphasis on the latter, as these are the socio-political films that have various call-outs for action, based on the topics and issues explored in the films, and as change agents are often radical and marginalized films (while recognizing that many documentaries both seek to raise awareness and call to action). Torchin, who conjures Zimmermann when she describes such documentaries as "representational interventions" (In Iordanova and Torchin 2012, 3) writes that "…the human rights film, or more broadly speaking, the activist film, functions as a truthful narration of a situation, presented with the intention of bringing about beneficial change" (Ibid, 2). With political, activist, take-action documentaries, there is often an association with social change that has been difficult to tangibly link together through empirical research. It is not the place of this thesis to wade into this debate, nor to prove wrong Fraser when he writes: "On occasions, perhaps they [documentaries] can and do have such effects; but no evidence exists to suggest that film on its own is specially good at social mobilization" (2012, 18). This thesis foregrounds certain kinds of documentaries over others throughout this project, not to claim documentary's singular utility as a change agent, but to highlight the beleaguered fringes and under-appreciated (in the mainstream festival world) margins of an alternative media form, because, as Kozolanka, Mazepa and Skinner argue: "In the

face of escalating commercialization and concentration of ownership worldwide, the breadth and diversity of media practices, and the roles and purposes played by various media in the development and circulation of public communication, need to be better understood" (2012, 21). One such media is documentary, a form that "will upturn expectations, shine light on the crimes of the powerful, and portray resistance struggles against their dominance" (Downing, unpublished[15]). Documentary is part of democratic and social justice equation, and while its historical middle (the documentary canon) is well-understood and researched, its edges remain under-represented in the scholarship, as well as at cultural events like Hot Docs.

Lastly, this thesis privileges socio-political documentaries, and in particular "take-action" documentaries that have screened at or been rejected by Hot Docs. This thesis does not make claims on this kind of documentary's higher importance over other documentary expressions, such as personal shorts, wildlife, or scenes of actuality (such as the first films by the Lumière brothers – those of trains leaving stations and workers leaving a factory). The author recognizes that the history of documentary has been populated by non-political works (at least with overt political agendas) such as *Nanook of the North* and educational reels by institutions like the NFB. Nevertheless, what follows is a discussion of a certain kind of documentary expression, where politics are overtly played out in the works, and as such there is a narrow focus on this form within the larger documentary field. Further, documentary modes are understood to be particular documentary conventions realized in works (such as Nichols' six modes, mentioned elsewhere in this text), and documentary form and genre are used in similarly-constituted

[15] The Downing quote is taken from the Introduction to a forthcoming book, to be published by Cinema Politica in 2014. Author has copy.

ways, in keeping with the literature where some authors describe non-fiction cinema as a genre, and some as a form of cinema. In the end, the author recognizes the importance of documentary's various modes of address (from expository to observational), its standing as a form of cinematic expression, its categorization as a genre, and its specific iteration in the socio-political, take-action documentary expression. Turning now to one formally distinct expression of documentary, the Point-of-View documentary, the discussion continues.

POV: The Documentary Voice

> The voice of documentary can make a case or present an argument as well as convey a point of view. Documentaries seek to persuade or convince us: by the strength of their argument or point of view and the appeal, or power, of their voice. The voice of documentary is the specific way in which an argument or perspective is expressed. (Nichols 2001, 43)

Documentary has historically been associated with televisual, journalistic sensibilities and form, but this hegemony over the genre has been challenged, including by way of a festival devoted to creating a space for long-form, POV documentaries, as was the original mandate of Hot Docs. Renov acknowledges the shifting context for documentary as such: "What we think we know about documentary has been strenuously conditioned by televisual practices, a circumstance that is now being undone by documentary's new theatrical vitality, a lively festival circuit and the new museum as well as gallery options that are bringing documentary forms (often via multi-channel installations) to new audiences" (2007, 17). In challenging the status quo at the time (in 1994 that was television documentary) Hot Docs organizers sought to free the documentary *voice* from the confines of television and the control of commissioning

editors by focusing the festival on POV documentaries. Marc Glassman, the editor of the Documentary Organization of Canada's (DOC) national magazine *POV*, responds to the question "What is a POV documentary" when he writes: "As American independent iconic director Sam Fuller put it in Godard's *Pierrot le fou*: 'film is like a battleground.' It's where true documentarians reside: fighting the good fight to make issues crystal clear and tell us who we should fight and who we should love in this war to save the planet. It's only films with points-of-view that are worth fighting for--or viewing seriously."[16] In this thesis' theoretical approach to discussing documentary as it intersects with the Hot Docs film festival, POV documentaries are periodically referenced, as this iteration of the documentary form remains closely associated with strong political currents and persuasion, therefore making up one component of take-action documentaries that Hot Docs programs from year to year.

Lastly, In order to clarify the effects of commercialization within the genre, two strains of socio-political, take-action documentary are explored: *Radical committed documentaries* and *liberal consensus documentaries*.

Political Docs: Radical Committed Documentary and Liberal Consensus Documentary

> To paraphrase Marx, a committed filmmaker is not content only to interpret the world but is also engaged in changing it. (Waugh 1984, xiv)

Bill Nichols developed the six modes of documentary in his 2001 volume *Introduction to Documentary*, each one referring to the ways in which filmmakers construct and shape their films with distinct strategies and objectives in mind (poetic,

[16] Marc Glassman, email interview with author, September 2013.

expository, observational, participatory, reflexive, performative). He writes: "Modes come into prominence at a given time and place, but they persist and become more pervasive than movements. Each mode may arise partly as a response to perceived limitations in previous modes, partly as a response to technological possibilities, and partly as a response to a changing social context" (2001, 34). It is similar conditions that set the stage for a documentary's political nature, and like those that shape modes, the conditions are not static, but as Nichols says, fluid and intermingling (Ibid). Just as Nichols' modes have given scores of documentary scholars the language to discuss differentiation in the genre, and in particular in traditions and conventions, the political can be isolated and given its own territorial corner of the "fuzzy concept" (Ibid, 21) we call documentary.

Nichols also early on in the same text writes that "Every film is a documentary" (1) but "documentaries of wish-fulfilment" (Ibid) are what we commonly refer to as works of fiction and "documentary of social representation" (Ibid) are what we commonly refer to as documentaries. It is my contention that political documentaries combine these two impulses in filmmaking, and that "the political" is as much about imagination as it is about representing actuality. Political filmmaking often entails an interrogation of a social problem, and seeks to accurately represent that social problem through the interrogation using images and sounds (*An Inconvenient Truth*, *Gasland*). Yet political documentary also expresses wish-fulfilment for a better world, a world that has solved or is trying to solve said problem. The imagination of subjects and of the filmmaker then comes into play in constructing a response to the problem represented. Of course not every political film puts forward a solution to a particular social problem, but

every political film leverages the imagination of emancipation and liberation toward the objectives of the film, which are to educate, advocate, expose, inspire and/or agitate.

The combination of an imagination of emancipation and social representation does not always mean a political film will be progressive, or will constructively serve the interests of its subjects, as political film purports to do. Winston has levied a biting critique of documentary journalism in the UK in the 1930s, and has pointed out that despite the pro-labour stance of *Housing Problems* (1935), the workers were rendered largely impotent through the romanticization of labour and because the anonymous worker-subjects were constructed as victims seeking charity (Nichols 2001, 140). Longfellow similarly critiques the disconnect between the progressive political objectives of the NFB's Challenge for Change program and the outcome of one of the initiative's films, *The Things I Cannot Change* (1967) where filmmakers attempted to depict the deplorable poverty of a Montreal family in order to highlight a serious societal problem, only to see the family humiliated (and forced to move from their neighbourhood) after the television broadcast (In Waugh, Baker and Winton 2010, 149). More recently the viral advocacy campaign documentary *Kony 2012* (over 98 million YouTube views at time of writing) raised massive criticism from African critics who, as *NY Times* writer Robert Mackey summarizes, describe the film as a "White Man's Burden for the Facebook Generation."[17] Ultimately in these films the well-meaning practice of representing social reality and hoisting the political imaginary broke down between the subjects filmed (and/or associated stakeholder communities) and the artist(s) filming, where agenda-

[17] Robert Mackey, "African Critics of Kony Campaign See a 'White Man's Burden' for the Facebook Generation, The Lede/New York Times Blog, http://thelede.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/03/09/african-critics-of-kony-campaign-hear-echoes-of-the-white-mans-burden/?_r=1 (Accessed 2013-09-12).

setting (and representational power) shifted entirely to those behind the cameras. Winston, again critiquing the 1930 television news documentaries in the UK, says this kind of political filmmaking will surely not help in efforts to achieve social change:

> There was nothing, though, in this ambition to be the propagandists for a better or more just society (shared by the entire documentary movement) that would inevitably lead to the constant, repetitive, and ultimately pointless exposure of the same set of societal problems on the televisions in the West night after night…Benchmarks were thereby established for all subsequent work both in film and television for the entire English-speaking world and beyond. (Quoted in Nichols 2001, 140-141)

In this passage Winston, one of the leading experts of documentary, not only lays out the limitations for social transformation set because of the above-mentioned disconnect in representing workers and their related problems, but reminds us that these social documentary iterations can have a larger impact on the genre, setting an agenda for future filmmaking. This connects precisely to my concerns around the rise of the liberal consensus documentary and apolitical works at Hot Docs, a festival with considerable authority regarding taste making and gatekeeping in the documentary world. If political documentary is a catchall akin to the social documentary, or socially engaged documentary, and can therefore include films that do not advance a politically radical, socially progressive, community-supported socio-political agenda, what are the qualities of political films that do?

In the introduction to their new book (2013) on the work of John Greyson, Longfellow, MacKenzie and Waugh explore the ways in which the Toronto-based filmmaker's HIV-AIDS related work has challenged "three key foils" or dominant paradigms (8) including moral panics, liberalism, and conservatism. As such, they argue "Greyson's work might be seen as a model for political cinema, as it effortlessly

intertwines political issues with a consistent investigation and experimentation with new modes of aesthetic strategy" (Ibid, 8). In another chapter of the same volume Ramsay situates Greyson's work as building from the legacy of Godard while "documenting social realities, and in speaking to and for communities and their issues" (183) before arguing: "Greyson's work, like Godard's, is rife with sharp analysis that undermines our belief in the singular truths of the status quo while borrowing the forms and conventions of popular culture and Hollywood (in Greyson's case, most typically, the musical) to deconstruct normative forms of signification and their meanings, and to amuse" (Ibid, 183-184). The author then proceeds to describe some areas where the two filmmakers differ, but the Greyson commentary and analysis is drawn on here because Greyson, as theorized by these scholars, represents an exemplary political documentary filmmaker, at least in the sense of the categorization for this thesis. That is, the radical committed filmmaker.

Radical committed documentary is a concept that draws together two lineages of documentary discourse and practice. The term radical connects with the theoretical terrain of radical media, itself an iteration of what is more commonly referred to as "alternative media" (Kozolanka, Mazepa and Skinner 2012) or "community media" (Howley 2010). I follow John Downing's insistence in one of the most referenced texts on radical and alternative media, *Radical Media: Rebellious Communication and Social Movements* (2001), that, "To some extent, the extra designation *radical* helps to firm up the definition of alternative media" (2001, ix; emphasis author) because as he points out, everything is at some point alternative to something else. Downing urges that "context and consequences must be our primary guides to what are or not definable as radical

alternative media" (Ibid, x) because, as he and so many others point with all social and cultural concepts, the "edges are blurred" (Ibid). Still, Downing lays out a framework for evaluating and describing media within the conceptual space of "radical alternative," with variances around access, participation, smallness, solidarity, democratic, status quo and rule breaking, and others. For my purpose, in situating radical committed documentaries into the conceptual framework of radical alternative media, I borrow Downing's ninth way in which he conceives of radical alternative media:

> [R]adical alternative media generally serve two overriding purposes: (a) to express opposition vertically from subordinate quarters directly at the power structure and against its behaviour; (b) to build support, solidarity, and networking laterally against policies or even against the very survival of the power structure. In any given instance, both vertical and lateral purposes may be involved. (Ibid, xi)

This designated trait of radical alternative media, when applied to documentary, positions some films as fundamentally in opposition to dominant power structures (conjuring Williams' structures of feeling), while others may seek alternatives to such power structures, either through the creation of alternatives or reform. In this regard, *Heart of Sky, Heart of Earth* (2012), a film about Mayan resistance to global capital in the guise of Monsanto and Canadian mining companies and a reject of the 2012 Hot Docs program selection process, challenges both vertically and laterally the power structures impinging on indigenous independence and well-being (local and vertical) as well as the larger structuring containment of local culture by global capital (global and lateral). With regards to the latter, the film's makers have used the film as an advocacy and campaign tool with various related interventions and insist that indigenous speakers be present at

screenings no matter where the film is shown in the world.[18] It is interesting to note that Downing's volume is one of the very few that include a chapter that relates radical alternative media to cinema, and while there have been articles connecting "videography and social action" (Wong 2000) or framing indie film as an "authentic autonomous alternative" (Newman 2009), documentary, and cinema in general, is often left out of studies on radical and alternative media. I believe this occurs for three reasons: the first is the underlying assumption that documentary is a grassroots, publicly-oriented educative media, and that it therefore has no formal mainstream corollary for which to compare it to (a position I argue against in the pages that follow); the second that "media" is more often than not, at least in discussions around alternative media, focused narrowly on the media of news and journalism; and finally, there exists an institutional predilection in film studies to engage with mainstream, commercial fiction, art house and European cinema, and 'world' or 'global' cinema with close readings of texts. That is changing, with recent turns toward sociocultural, contextual analysis of 'other' cinemas, such as can be found in the work of Chapman (2003), Podalsky (2011), Kapur and Wagner (2011), works that are building from earlier media and cultural studies work championed by Downing (1987) and others.

All this is to say that positioning documentary as an alternative media form has both obvious and equivocal connotations – it is near common sense that documentary is some kind of 'alternative' to some other mainstream media (Hollywood, corporate news media, etc.), yet it is rare that much scholarly attention is given to this status. Further yet, within the delineation of documentary as an alternative media, this thesis argues that

[18] Eric Black, email interview by author, August 2013.

some documentary works share more alternative qualities than others (radical committed documentaries as opposed to liberal consensus documentaries). And like Nichols (2001, xv) I leverage particular films as examples not to create the impression that there exists an 'alternative documentary canon' but that some works are "indicative of specific questions or exemplify important approaches to certain issues" and "although illustrative they do not amount to a history of the genre" (Ibid), or in this particular case, a sub-genre.

The films championed as radical committed documentaries in this thesis also connect back to Waugh's early and influential theorization of the "committed documentary" (1984). As such, they are all documentaries that "…attempt to act, to intervene—whether as gut-level calls to immediate, localized action, or as more cerebral essays in long-term, global analysis. They are all works of art, but they are not merely works of art (although some have been reduced to this role); they must be seen also as films by activists speaking to specific publics to bring about specific political goals" (xii). Waugh's assertion that, "if films are to be instrumental in the process of change, they must be made not only <u>about</u> people directly implicated in change, but <u>with</u> and <u>for</u> those people as well (Ibid; underscoring by author), is in line with the central arguments of this document. Waugh then situates many of the filmmakers he discusses in his work as committed to larger social movements and struggles that vary widely, arguing that all share a progressive political impulse, much like the filmmakers whose works I situate as radical committed documentaries. Lastly, Waugh narrows his meaning of "committed" to a two-pronged definition whereby filmmakers are committed to a "specific ideological undertaking, a declaration of solidarity with the goal of radical socio-political transformation" as well as a commitment to "specific political positioning: activism, or

intervention in the process itself" (xiv). Picking up some years later, Lyell Davies argues "the committed documentary has for nearly a century served as a tool of activism, political organizing, consciousness raising, or revolutionary agitation, proving that the idea of commitment to social causes still has currency among documentary theorists" (Davies 2009, 2).

This thesis is interested in, and concerned for the support of, documentary filmmakers who meet Waugh and Davies' criteria: artists who express oppositional ideological impulses in solidarity with on-the-ground struggles for progressive, social transformation. Alternet writer Andrew Garib defines contemporary progressivism as non-ideological, pragmatic system concerned with fairness and democratic values.[19] Progressive, then is a term used or inferred with politics expressed in and through documentary cinema - a pragmatic politics of inclusion, fairness, equity, and emancipation that is underpinned by the ideological aspects of the documentary in question. For instance, Amy Miller's film *The Carbon Rush* (2012; rejected by Hot Docs the same year) expresses and shows a commitment to the progressive politics of indigenous solidarity and independence, environmentalism, anti-poverty and human rights, while at the same time this political vein is folded into the larger ideological underpinnings of the film, rooted in anarcho-syndicalism, participatory economics, socialism and anti-corporatism.

Lastly, with regards to defining radical committed documentary, this thesis acknowledges the often overlooked structuring mechanisms and forces that influence who makes which films and what political expression those films end up championing. In

[19] Andrew Garib, "What is Progressive?," Alternet, http://www.alternet.org/story/23706/what_is_progressive (Accessed 2013-07-07).

Canada, independent documentaries are still mainly produced in a system that is characterized by government funding envelopes that can only be secured if the film has a broadcaster 'on board.' This is the first limiting mechanism in an increasingly commercial industrial system that favours dramatic affect, crowd-pleasing, and global platform mobility (Getting Real/DOC 2013; Kapur and Wagner 2011). Festivals play a key role in this system, as they work closely with other cultural institutions such as Telefilm, SODEC and corporations like CBC, CTV, Rogers and Bell Media. In their relatively recent role as producers of cinema (Falicov 2010) film festivals have become power brokers in the decision-making process of which films get made by whom by their sheer reliable presence in an industry constantly in flux (where space is created for artists to pitch projects to funders and commissioning editors, for instance) as well as their newfound role as arbiters of funds, such as the Hot Docs-Blue Ice Group Documentary Fund, a grant program "providing financial support to African documentary filmmakers for development and production."[20] Like TIFF, Cannes, the Berlinale and Sundance, Hot Docs is leveraging its pull in the film world to gather together resources and distribute those through a process of selection that takes into consideration future programming opportunities for the festival (Falicov 2010). In other words and as Falicov's article argues convincingly, festivals are more apt to fund films that they can then turn around and program upon the film's completion, meeting objectives of novelty (and 'discovery') as well as closing a positive PR circle that includes philanthropy, international collaboration and a commitment to underdeveloped artists. This configuration reveals that it is not just artists, government funders, commissioning editors and programmers

[20] Source: http://www.hotdocs.ca/funds/hot_docs_blue_ice_group_documentary_fund/ (Accessed 2013-09-24).

determining which films are brought to the forefront of Canadians' attention, but the festival institution through new production and co-production funding (and also distribution) envelopes. This is yet one of many possible structural obstructions to the possibility of a radical committed documentary reaching fruition and finding an audience.

Two Ends of a Spectrum

Among documentaries concerned with socio-political issues and subjects, some tend toward a more populist, liberal and feel-good variety, such as *Babies* or *An Inconvenient Truth*, while others tend to be more radical (in form and argument), and challenge, implicate and confront, such as *Kanehsatake: 270 Years of Resistance*. Such docs are *radical committed documentaries*. Nearby on the political spectrum, are films that conform to perceived consensus without upsetting the liberal mainstream/status quo and seek to provide audiences first and foremost with pleasure. These works I call *liberal consensus documentaries*, films that I leverage for my arguments throughout this thesis.

Radical committed documentaries are works that dually activate and intervene in said dominant social orders and accompanying ideological frameworks. They are films that are made by activists and/or about activists and/or can be easily deployed by activists (organizationally or in campaigns). Unlike liberal consensus documentaries, they resist consumer regimes; that is to say they are not positioned as entertainment products to be consumed – they are tools to be used for social change, artefacts to satisfy both epistephilia[21] *and* the desire to act or participate. They articulate a strong POV, and are

[21] Nichols uses this term to mean "a desire to know" when discussing documentary. More on this here: http://www.filmreference.com/encyclopedia/Criticism-Ideology/Documentary.html (Accessed 2013-12-10).

deployed to radically change our social order and underlying socio-economic structure.

Radical committed documentaries tend to be marginalized at Hot Docs, while in contrast, the more commercial-friendly, crowd-pleasing, popular festival and liberal consensus documentaries, increase their significance. Neither of these distinctions are meant to be taken as solidified, cleanly demarcated sub-genres or documentary categories, rather they are tendencies or likelihoods in a vast spectrum of documentary cinema that includes a vast grey area where the more political, radical and niche documentary tendencies co-mingle with those of the more commercial, liberal and gratification-oriented documentaries.

CHAPTER 2 - ADVOCACY, COMMUNITY AND PLEASURE: A HISTORY OF THE HOT DOCS FILM FESTIVAL

> The process we call "media" is the historic result of countless local battles over who has the power to represent the reality of others. Once such battles are won, they generally cease being remembered as battles. (Couldry and Curran 2003, 6)

> After all is said and done, the search for pleasure, however fleeting or futile, is at the heart of the festival experience. (Porton 2009, 8)

INTRODUCTION

Documenting and interpreting any film festival's history is a challenging task, including determining how various "local battles" took shape, who had the power to determine the structure of the organization when, the relationships among the various actors, and, following Couldry and Curran above, how the power to represent the reality of others has operated. On this last note, Hot Docs isn't just a film festival, but an institution that specializes in documentary and therefore has a deep and lasting relationship with the associated qualities of documentary, including the representation of others. If documentary has "gravitated toward a limited number of broad functions—identified by Michael Renov as preservation, analysis, persuasion, and expression" (1993, 21) the same gravitational pull is true of Hot Docs, a festival whose 'official' function is, according to its managers, "showing what documentary can do."[1] This perfunctory *raison d'être* belies other broad and lasting functions that surface when one peers into a festival's past. That is to say, documentary apparently cannot "do" activism (at Hot Docs).

In approaching the history of the festival I have kept the underlying cultural politics and social relations at the forefront. Such an emphasis contributes to "an ongoing

[1] Farnel, interview, 2012.

tradition of research into the nature and effects of large-scale structures and long-term process of change" (Skocpol 1984, 359). I have attempted to identify both an institutional logic and structure of feeling associated with the festival, particularly as they have changed over its two-decade existence. Thornton and Ocasio maintain that institutional logic refers to "the socially constructed, historical patterns of material practices, assumptions, values, beliefs [that] reproduce their material subsistence, organize time and space, and provide meaning to their reality" (2008, 101). Teasing out these patterns at Hot Docs has proven to be a challenge, given the dearth of material on the festival's history, and the lackluster nature of the historical accounts that do exist. That said, there are moments in Hot Docs' history where an organizational logic and structure of feeling emerge quite clearly and bring to the fore the stakes of the cultural politics of documentary.

As a non-filmmaker who is very much connected to the documentary community in Canada through my own activities as a programmer/organizer at Cinema Politica, I have had the privilege of attending several Hot Docs editions and have had the good fortune to discuss the festival with organizers, managers, industry insiders and filmmakers throughout. While I have not had the opportunity to see the festival 'from the inside' as those who start, manage, organize and work at the festival might, I consider my position advantageous insofar as it has granted me access to the day-to-day discourse of key players associated with the festival.[2]

[2] This has allowed me, for instance, to approach (then) Managing Director Brett Hendrie at an evening lounge and cocktails gathering and successfully hold his attention for more than one hour, in a discussion about the festival's decision to have Coca-Cola as the environmental film sponsor that year. I can only hypothesize as to Hendrie's reaction if someone he wasn't familiar with had approached him with the same objectives and concerns as me, but needless to say our familiarity facilitated an engaged and sincere

Access to the original founding documentary filmmakers who continue to attend the festival, as well as Board members and current organizers, has been helpful in piecing together the history of Hot Docs, but with these encounters also comes a continued confusion around some of the historical facts. This is largely due to three reasons: (1) the unreliability of personal memory; (2) the political posturing and territorial struggles that continue to take place around Hot Docs' origins and early days; and (3) the sheer lack of historical record, documentation or archival materials. In order to face these challenges I have sought to avoid personal myth making, the narrow chronicling of events, and general politicking. Instead I have made efforts to rely on archival records where they exist, and on oral accounts in order to construct a historical narrative of this institution over the last twenty years. Lastly, I have also relied on institutional discourse found at www.hotdocs.ca and contained in the pages of the twenty festival programs I have gathered for this thesis in order to fill gaps not covered elsewhere.

Creation Myths

The origins of festivals are often tales of larger-than-life men who had "the brains to see it [happen], the guts to try it and the balls to push it" as one gendered account colourfully puts it (Johnson 2000, 18). Johnson begins his rollicking and revelatory book on the Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF) in such fashion, distinguishing the pioneering "Godfathers" who, against all odds, got TIFF off the ground and running. Still, even with his insider's scoop, he admits that with regards to TIFF, "There are various creation myths about how the festival came to be" (Ibid, 14). His book, as with

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discussion and debate for a considerable length of time in the middle of a festival that Hendrie was busy managing.

many popular accounts of film festivals, tries to reveal the inner workings indiscernible to the outsider's gaze, the stuff that only confidents and participants know. In these salacious histories one can find in equal measure run-of-the-mill gossip, celebrity accounting, nuts-and-bolts anecdotes of milestones and mishaps, and blithe commentary on the interplay and/or tension between capital and culture.[3] These accounts tend to be exclusively concerned with mainstream, commercial, fiction-dominated film festivals.

Where the origin stories of commercial fiction and "A-list" festivals is the purview of insiders, film critics and writers working with publishers of popular literature, the history of alternative and niche festivals tends to fall at the feet of academics. This is certainly true of Iordanova and Torchin's volume dedicated to Human Rights Film Festivals (2012), as well as in the work of scholars looking at LGBT/Queer film festivals such as Zielinski (2008) and Loist (2012). Still, the lion's share of historical attention is directed toward mainstream, commercial and fiction-dominated film festivals both in popular literature and in the academy, with some limited space allotted to particular niches in the latter. With this chapter I hope to offer a historical account that contributes to the literature on alternative and niche festivals.

Structure of Feeling and Time

To understand the festival's trajectory and avoid uncritical back patting (see Barr, Goeldner, and Heller 2013), or observational accounting (see Glassman 2012 or Hot Docs 2008-2013), and yet still remain focused on social relations and organizational

[3] The following example of the former in Johnson's TIFF exposé serves to illustrate: "Handling, who climbs in the Himalayas each spring before Cannes, came to personify the festival's balancing act between corporate muscle and artistic integrity." This is followed by the non sequitur: "'Art cinema and commercial cinema,' said Godard, are more segregated from each other than ever" (Ibid, 283).

logics, I keep in mind Williams' concept of structures of feeling. Hot Docs has responded to, embodied, and internally developed "structures of feeling" that have changed over time. External social conditions—including dominant attitudes, ideologies, traditions, trends, and conventions—contribute to the structures of feeling that Hot Docs is indelibly linked to and which the festival reciprocally helps shape and express. Internally, the festival has developed its own logic, shaping a micro-world or subculture that intersects with larger structures of feeling.

Hot Docs joins a disparate community of documentarians and attendant publics, fused by common goals, interests and sensibilities, once a year for just over one week in Toronto. Over time, the structure of feeling that encompasses Hot Docs has morphed from local community oriented (or grassroots) and filmmaker focused to globally oriented and audience focused (or commercial). Williams' concept is useful in understanding this change and also providing some theoretical wiring on which to hang this thesis' observations and arguments; in particular, the claim that the current structure of feeling is one that reflects the festival's more recent orientation toward commercialism.[4] It is a diffuse cultural current that imposes forces of capitalism across cultural terrain. As Mouffe maintains: "Today's capitalism relies increasingly on semiotic techniques in order to create the modes of subjectivation which are necessary for its reproduction" (2009, 38).

I use structure of feeling in much the same way Raymond Williams first developed the concept, as the differential quality of experience at a given time and place, especially

[4] That is to say, it is the process—including strategies deploying populism and liberalism—of migration from the margins to the mainstream through the process of commercialization.

as it relates to the interaction between art, culture and institutions (Williams 1961, 146). As Taylor summarizes: "It [the structure of feeling] suggests a common set of perceptions and values shared by a particular generation, and is most clearly articulated in particular and artistic forms and conventions" (1997, i). Over the twenty years of the festival, this generational change in the structure of feeling has suggested a shift in artistic forms and conventions that favour commercial orientation over community-oriented art, politics and advocacy. Maeve, summarizing Kirk, notes: "Communities are where the relationship between self and other are formed. Structures of feeling suggest the way this relationship comes to be lived."[5] The experience of community at the site of Hot Docs has changed over the years, and the following timeline sets out to illustrate in which ways the experience and orientation, especially with regards to community, has changed.

As Williams notes, the structure of feeling is an effect of a totality that cannot be separated from the constituent parts of experience:

> It is in art, primarily, that the effect of the totality, the dominant structure of feeling, is expressed and embodied. To relate a work of art to any part of that observed totality may, in varying degrees, be useful; but it is a common experience, in analysis, to realize that when one has measured the work against the separable parts, there yet remains some element from which there is no external counterpart. This element, I believe, is what I have named the *structure of feeling* of a period, and it is only realizable through experience of the work of art itself, as a whole. (2001, 33; emphasis Williams)

Through this emphasis on totality, Williams' concept has been extended to include the institution of Hot Docs, which showcases individual works disassociated from the experience as a whole. This experience is guided by convention: "the means of

[5] Source: http://www.researchingpublicart.com/2011/11/raymond-williamss-structures-of-feeling.html (Accessed 2011-03-03).

expression which find tacit consent - are a vital part of this structure of feeling. As the structure changes, new means are perceived and realized, while old means come to appear empty and artificial" (Ibid). Hot Docs, as an expression and embodiment of structures of feeling, has responded to, developed and fortified specific conventions that find tacit consent in both the documentary and film festival communities. These conventions have also undergone massive change in the last twenty years.

POST-EIGHTIES CONTEXT: TORONTO

The year Hot Docs launched, 1993, was much like other years for documentary in Canada, with television providing the dominant platform for dissemination, while commercial exhibition favoured Hollywood fare. In Toronto, TIFF was nearing two decades of activity, a feat that was much celebrated as it increasingly made a name for itself and the city of Toronto. Regarding TIFF's status, Peranson has developed a system for distinguishing film festivals by two models: the business festival and the audience festival (Peranson 2009, 23-27). By the late eighties and early nineties TIFF was established firmly in the business camp. In part a direct response to TIFF's mainstream, commercial orientation, the Images festival started in Toronto in 1986.

One qualification of 'the business festival model' identified by Peranson is that the festival is focused on constant growth, a strategy adopted by TIFF (and later by Hot Docs). This stands in contrast to Images and other "audience festivals" (Ibid). Images has become a celebrated showcase for alternative audiovisual culture,[6] and its development is symptomatic of the flourishing of festivals in Toronto that began in the late eighties and

[6] Source: http://www.localfilmcultures.ca/?page_id=2570 (Accessed 2013-10-10).

continues to this day. TIFF established Toronto as a fertile location for festivals, with its commercial orientation leaving all kinds of space for niche, alternative and other festivals.[7] As is apparent in much of the literature, everything flows from TIFF. In this regard all festivals that have emerged post-TIFF are TIFF's "offspring."[8]

Whereas the late eighties and early nineties saw festivals start up in response to TIFF, the 2000s until today can be seen as a response to the emergence of those alternative festivals.[9] Three streams of festivals developed in that earlier period in partial response to the success and mainstream commercial orientation of TIFF: independent/experimental art festivals (Images), documentary (Hot Docs) and identity-oriented festivals (Inside Out, an LGBT festival that began in 1991, the Toronto Jewish Film Festival -1993). Today, that process of *nicheing* has expanded past those three categories and one can choose between film festivals focused on labour, Brazil, Asia, silent films, trans politics and more.[10]

Intriguingly, TIFF founders were inspired by Women's Film Festival of 1973, which proved that a ten-day film festival could draw enough support in the city. Hot Docs therefore can be said to at least in part have been developed out of the shadow of a large commercial mainstream film festival that achieved success in the shadow of a niche,

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[7] This point is articulated by Images on their About page: "Images began as Toronto's only alternative to the Toronto International Film Festival, integrating film and video from its inception, and later expanding to include installations, performances and new media. From the beginning, Images has been at the forefront in identifying and supporting work that has been marginalized or unrecognized by existing exhibition venues, and was crucial in opening up dialogue in the media arts community around issues of race, culture, gender and sexuality." Source: http://www.imagesfestival.com/about.php Accessed 2013-01-18).

[8] Barry Haertz, "How TIFF made Toronto a festival town," Maclean's, http://www2.macleans.ca/2013/08/31/how-tiff-made-toronto-a-festival-town/ (Accessed 2013-09-12).

[9] This has resulted in (and responds to) the continued fragmentation of audiences and the catering to narrow political and social interests and tastes (such as the imagineNATIVE festival of indigenous cinema, started in 2001, or the Toronto Palestinian Film Festival, started in 2008, where an appreciation of Palestinian cinema is combined with an interest in Palestinian politics).

[10] A complete list can be found at torontofilmfestivals.com (Accessed 2013-10-31).

special interest festival. An offspring institution of the trend-setting TIFF, Hot Docs began around the time other smaller special interest festivals began springing up in Toronto. These were events and showcases offering programming differentiated from that of TIFF and the mainstream in general.

POST-EIGHTIES CONTEXT: THE NINETIES

In 1993 Peter Steven published his book *Brink of Reality: New Canadian Documentary Film and Video* in which he explored a new documentary spirit in Canada, and in particular, productions inflected with an urgent sense of social justice. In his introduction, he writes:

> Since the early 1980s, a distinct group of filmmakers and videomakers has set out to rejuvenate the documentary in Canada. Their films and videos break new ground in subject matter and form, take up social and political themes in a manner that challenges the status quo, and are produced in co-operation with groups that have often been pushed to the sidelines in Canadian society. (Steven 1993, 5)

A few years earlier, Thomas Waugh had conducted a similar 'taking stock' literary project and reported with enthusiasm that the "committed documentary" was on the rise (Waugh 1984). Outlining a commitment to social justice and human rights, a decidedly solidarity stance (with social movements, marginalized and/or injured subjects, etc.) and a predilection for challenging the status quo, Steven, Waugh and others appropriately described the beginnings of an emergent generation of New Left Canadian filmmakers. These were documentarians dedicated to pursuing alternative media production and dissemination in a country whose mediascape had just undergone some upheavals of corporate media convergence, public sector cutbacks and the opening up of trade barriers

for US media (in fact, NAFTA[11] came into force a mere three months ahead of the first Hot Docs edition in 1994).

Yet much like today's documentary enthusiasts, these non-fiction theorists did not delve too deeply into the darker recesses of documentary filmmaking — into the tensions of production and reception, where economics and culture clash. While Steven does note the role of funding agencies in documentary production and the challenge of dissemination beyond television, by the 2000s books like Hogarth's *Documentary Television in Canada: From National Public Service to Global Marketplace* (2002) were paying close attention to the economics and distribution of documentary. Hogarth argued that televisual documentary's marginality (in both scholarly literature and popular culture) is likely to become even more entrenched, due to a combination of political, economic, and cultural reasons stemming from the shift to a globalized media marketplace that was ushered into the Canadian television industry in the early nineties.

Around that time, in July of 1993, a small group of filmmakers (who were also members of the doc-advocacy group) discussed the challenges facing documentarians, which subsequently appeared as descriptive write-ups of the first Hot Docs edition's "Industry Workshops:"

> What are the dangers of losing editorial control? How can we constructively avoid being divided and conquered? Where are the needs and confines of television taking the documentary form? How can independent producers work out questions of editorial and creative control with broadcasters? What criteria should funding agencies use to evaluate and prioritize their investment decisions? (Hot Docs Program1994, 8-9)

[11] NAFTA stands for the North American Free Trade Agreement.

These discussion questions suggest that Hot Docs began on a reflexive, critical as well as mobilizing note, where workshops were organized around themes and concerns of advocacy, authorship, and agency.

Debbie Nightingale, who was brought on as Hot Docs' first festival manager,[12] insists the first edition of the festival was the "purest" because it was a "documentary festival for, by, and about documentary filmmakers" (quoted in Glassman 2012). Her emphasis on authenticity suggests that Hot Docs functioned as an organic extension of the documentary filmmaking community in Canada, at a time when there were few significant outlets and platforms for documentary outside of television and existing state institutions like the NFB or CBC.

Steven's book and the festival's 1994 program notes provide some historical context to that first, purest year, as documentary was rising in popularity, and when new and existing television broadcast windows were beginning to become available—albeit in the context of a shifting and competitive globalizing marketplace—to POV and other forms of documentaries, and when an apprehensive optimism around funding envelopes emerged. Speaking of those early meetings, Barri Cohen—a founding member of the festival as well as a filmmaker, and a longstanding member of the Documentary Organization of Canada—recalls:

> We were concerned with finding ways to support documentary. We had three initiatives planned to do that — a book, a magazine (POV) and a festival (Hot Docs). We wanted platforms for documentarians to get their name out, to get the issues out, and to build audience appreciation, while at the same time hopefully providing some financial support too.[13]

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[12] Nightingale describes herself as having a knack for, and appreciation of, the "business side" of documentary. Source: Interview with author.

[13] Barri Cohen, interviewed by author, Toronto, ON, April, 2011.

Cohen's recollection confirms that the business side of documentary took a back seat to other concerns, even as there was an impetus to support documentary by building audiences and establishing platforms.

Paul Jay, the filmmaker credited with first proposing the idea for the film festival (and who came up with the name "Hot Docs") also recalls that support for independent POV documentary was the principle impetus for the festival: "…there had to be a place for independent point-of-view documentaries…Hot Docs came out of my frustration that nobody would do any fundraising…so, really, the idea for Hot Docs was partly out of this issue of how can we raise the profile of independent documentary filmmaking and then also it was can we raise some funds for the Film Caucus so we could continue our lobbying work…"[14] Jay's account serves as an indication that advocacy and resources for independent POV documentaries[15] were the central concerns in the early nineties, which led to the creation of Hot Docs. Clearly, if one looks at the early festival workshops, "support" entailed cultural considerations for the art and craft of documentary filmmaking, alongside the need to support independent works with audience development and lobbying activities. These early objectives, which would be articulated in the early editions of the festival, reflect a different set of expressed conventions, which in turn reflect a different structure of feeling in the documentary world of the early nineties, whereby local or community concerns took precedence over marketing and branding preoccupations.

Williams argues that conventions are not only concerned with the more passive acquiescence of certain means of expression in the arts, but involve the more active

[14] Paul Jay, telephone interview with author, January, 2013

[15] Especially "non-network documentaries" as he calls films not made for television broadcast (Ibid).

engineering and maintenance of rules, regulations, and ordering mechanisms around modes of expression. He writes:

> Convention, however, implies not only tacit consent but also accepted standard, and it is here, in the flux of the present, that the most serious difficulty arises. For if it is true that the conventions of an art, in any period, correspond, essentially, to the structure of feeling in that period, it is possible to argue that, at any given time, the existing conventions are necessarily right, and that those who criticize them, or seek to change them, are merely kicking against the pricks. (2001, 34)

With the case of Hot Docs in the early nineties the pricks being kicked against were those conventions found on television and in the commercial market. Only a handful of doc-focused festivals existed worldwide at the time (and still fewer dedicated to POV docs), while television and broadcasting management up to that point had generally defined documentary standards.

Hogarth charts the conditions that helped shape such conventions, from docs on Canadian television as a "national project" in the sixties, seventies and eighties, to the "global marketplace" of the nineties, resulting in a resurgence of the documentary television genre. He explores this shift here:

> How then to explain the recent 'phenomenal' success of documentary programming as a worldwide commodity? By 1995 documentaries had come to make up fully 24.4 per cent of international television co-productions, the second highest rate after drama. In Canada documentary production almost tripled in the late 1990s, with most of the programming geared for foreign distribution. By 1998 the genre had become one of Canada's fastest growing cultural exports, according to some observers, with most producers forecasting breakneck growth in the years ahead. Clearly, Canadian documentary television had begun to relocate itself in a global marketplace. (2002, 108-109)

With Canadian documentary's traditional home (for production, distribution, and reception) on television, and with new international markets and opportunities opening up in that medium at the time of Hot Docs' conception, it makes sense that new standards

were challenging older, entrenched standards[16] and that these conventional shifts were reflections of changes in the structure of feeling at the time[17] - a moment when independent POV documentary-makers gathered resources and launched a project that would help establish new conventions, such as feature length runs, character-driven narratives, and strong perspective documentaries. Williams maintains that "A new convention, like that of naturalism, for example, will become established because there are changes in the structure of feeling which demand expression, and which the most creative artists will eventually realize in their work" (Ibid, 34). The demand for expression documentarians were responding to in the early nineties in Canada was a demand split between two options: visibility and conservatism on television or invisibility and less restrictions in exhibition. A festival dedicated to POV films would offer a third option.

With this in mind, it is important to note that the original instigators of Hot Docs, including Jay, were all artists working at a time when documentary (TV) markets were opening up, especially in Europe. Cohen, Jay, Barry Greenwald (on the original committee overseeing Hot Docs) and others were working filmmakers seeking to create, as Jay says, a "place for independent POV documentaries"[18] and also a social space for the culture and community to gather around those works. Their efforts reflected and responded to a structure of feeling in the documentary world that was hitherto shaped by

[16] Conventions and standards that included the talking head, or show-and-tell formats commonly found in documentary television.

[17] The aforementioned globalization and commodification of documentary through television is one aspect of the structure of feeling that documentary makers were responding to.

[18] Paul Jay, telephone interview with author, April, 2013

television management's[19] standards, demands, and objectives, and less by the artists themselves. Or put differently, an industrial model was about to be challenged by an art-and-advocacy model at Hot Docs. Emergent conventions, then, organized around the making and dissemination of independent POV documentaries (which weren't found on television) would form a new, independent artist-run film festival organized *by* filmmakers and *for* filmmakers. The plan, significantly, was launched on the heels of a period of deregulation ushered in by neoliberal governance, and reflected not only a survivalist impulse for documentary, but an alternative in the face of free-market commodification, privatization and unequal economic globalization.

As for the Canadian context, Knowledge Network CEO and veteran commissioning editor Rudy Buttignol, who also served as an early advisor to the Hot Docs festival, writes that the early nineties were tumultuous times, politically *and* culturally: "We were undergoing great cultural change as a response to the worldwide advances of technology, deregulation and globalization. Immigrants were arriving in larger numbers from Asia than they were from Europe or the U.K., and Canadians were trying to sort out what kind of society we were in the process of becoming."[20] And so, in the larger context of globalization, market forces and the dominance of television on the documentary form, documentary makers gathered together in "the city of festivals" to launch an alternative platform to showcase non-fiction POV film and video while emphasizing community and advocacy.

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[19] Who were at that point, principally commissioning editors.

[20] Rudy Buttignol, "Is documentary our personal art?,? POV, http://povmagazine.com/articles/view/is-documentary-our-national-art (Accessed 2013-09-12).

HOT DOCS IS BORN

With a small parcel of cash ($10,000) procured from Kodak for a festival feasibility study (but mainly used to start the festival) the members of the Canadian Independent Film Caucus (later to become the Documentary Organization of Canada) hatched the idea early in 1993, then in February of 1994 launched the first edition of what would become the Hot Docs Canadian International Film Festival.[21] Called "Hot Docs! National Documentary Awards 1994," and spanning only four days (February 24-27) in Toronto, the first event was made up of four component parts, which are displayed on the edition's original program cover: "Screenings, Galas, Industry Conference, and Awards" (Hot Docs Program1994). Designed as a platform for filmmakers to show each other (and initially to a lesser extent, audiences) their work, as well as a forum for critical engagement with the art and craft of documentary filmmaking, encounters at the first edition were set up as very intimate, earnest and self-reflexive. This much is evident from the description in the "Program Notes" single sheet insert, placed in the original 1994 program which indicated that the meeting, which was meant to incubate a working group concerned with filmmaker issues like contracts, was only open to "interested filmmaker[s] or videomaker[s]" (Hot Docs 1994a).[22] There is a clear articulation in the above gathering's description: Hot Docs organizers were earnestly seeking to build

[21] Paul Jay, a filmmaker member of the CIFC (and now head of the Real News Network), originally proposed the idea for the festival, and was subsequently voted down by the Board 11-1, but nonetheless went ahead in the search for seed money.

[22] The full text reads: "Talking TV Blues Brunch [line break] Picking up on the lessons gleaned from the Friday's Industry Conference and from informal discussions over the weekend, this meeting will be a working brunch for an ad-hoc working group made up of, and open only to, any interested filmmaker or videomaker. [line break] The purpose of the meeting will be to suggest and develop negotiation strategies, to develop specific suggestions for common concrete contractual language in areas of creative control and any other areas of concern, and to discuss a program of future action so as to create an ongoing forum for common 'conspiracies'." (Hot Docs 1994a)

spaces—reflecting a shifting arts response to the industrial, managerial structure of feeling of the time, thus regrouping independent media artists in documentary and organized around critical engagement with documentary practices.

Exclusively constituted for artists-only, the space of the first Hot Docs events was meant to bring together interested filmmakers rather than industry or spectators. It is precisely this kind of critical workshop and dialogue-oriented social space that no longer exists at Hot Docs, perhaps because these internal, advocacy-oriented and reflexive "informal discussions" in the documentary community have become the purview of DOC. And in 1994, when DOC was still the CIFC, it was precisely that organization's members who were organizing the first Hot Docs events. Barri Cohen, who is listed in the 1995 program as a member of the Hot Docs "Steering Committee" was part of the initial planning and execution of the CIFC's new project. She gives shape to these nascent festival moments here:

> And in 1993, that summer, we [CIFC] were not fully a national organization…we were going broke very quickly. Paul, who was co-chair at the time, came up with an idea to expand revenue…Paul's idea was to put on a festival. And I can tell you from memory and from my saved correspondence, the idea was 'let's put on a festival, three days at most, featuring the best of Canadian independent documentary.' Awards were important - we felt the Geminis were great, but didn't serve independent documentary… And we were all roped in quite happily to create juries, to put a call out for pieces, you know for, for films, and to have perhaps a half a day or a day of town-hall meetings and all this funding discussion, kind of like a mini-market.[23]

As Cohen's account shows, Hot Docs organizers had a tacit economic agenda at the beginning, but it was entirely geared toward supporting and expanding the activities of documentary advocacy, conducted under the auspices of the CIFC, which was started in Toronto in 1983 as a national organization serving the needs and interests of independent

[23] Barri Cohen, telephone interview with author, May, 2011.

documentary filmmakers in Canada.[24] Hot Docs, then, was created by and for documentary makers, enthusiasts and importantly, advocates. Cohen recalls that the initial mandate reflected the work and activities of the CIFC: "The initial mandate was to showcase international work, but primarily to showcase *Canadian* work, that is to say the priority was on Canadian work with an international stream."[25]

Cohen later discussed the emphasis on local film culture (Toronto and Canada) and repeatedly emphasized that the festival was created as an extension of the work of the CIFC, now DOC.[26] Made up of documentary filmmakers the organization is based out of Toronto but has chapters in nearly every province (though none in the territories at the time of writing).[27] The ongoing activities of DOC's advocacy and support for documentary in Canada reflect objectives that have not changed since the organization was created in the early eighties, and Hot Docs and *POV Magazine* are two of the group's most successful extensions of those efforts. DOC has consistently put documentary front and centre in Canada's media arts, film, political and general public spheres.

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[24] The CIFC changed its name to DOC in 2003, and according to the organization's Wikipedia page, DOC continues the original mandate of the CIFC, to serve as the "collective voice of independent documentary filmmakers across Canada" in the pursuit of advocating for that community "nationwide on issues that affect the industry, [while offering] professional development workshops and networking opportunities." Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Documentary_Organization_of_Canada (Accessed 2013-10-19).

[25] Cohen, interview.

[26] DOC has played a vital role in lobbying for and advocating on behalf of documentary filmmakers in Canada for 25 years. Activities include organizing events (usually workshops with filmmakers and screenings), drafting policy, presenting at policy hearings, launching public campaigns, conducting research and publishing information on documentary in Canada – to name a few.

[27] The author of this thesis served as an Executive member on the DOC-Quebec Board for six years (2004-2010).

THE CIFC YEARS (1994-1998)

Hot Docs was a project proposed and developed by members of Canada's only national documentary advocacy group, the CIFC. Proposed by Jay[28] and launched with little money and volunteer labour, Hot Docs indeed had "humble" beginnings (Glassman 2012, 3). At the time the CIFC was broke and members felt the organization could be doing more to support documentary and promote the genre in Canada, and once the first edition proved successful and encouragement came back to organizers from the community, the CIFC set in motion plans for an annual event that while at first focused on filmmakers, would eventually include a wider, ticket-purchasing public. In this way Hot Docs met all three objectives of the CIFC: money would come in from the sales of passes to participating filmmakers and eventually audiences, support would be boosted for documentary by providing a high-profile event and showcase for industry players to meet and mingle, and documentary's profile would be raised with the growing audience development that would occur from an annual documentary festival event.

Community Programming

Establishing a local, alternative media space parallel to mainstream, commercial spaces dominated by American media at the time, the first Hot Docs editions were almost entirely bereft of American content, determining the festival as a decidedly Canadian event focused on local and national cultural expression. The first festival program (1994) contained a total of 18 films, all of which were Canadian. Reinforcing Steven's claim that

[28] While Jay's proposal was out-voted by fellow members (who questioned the feasibility of undergoing such a large project), he still pursued the feasibility study to show it could be done, and eventually was supported by the entire CIFC Executive, that is, once things "got rolling" (Jay, Interview).

a new kind of documentary, the socially-conscious and engaged variety, was on the rise at that particular moment, the first program highlights three filmmakers on page six, all of whom had their socio-political documentaries showcased that year.[29]

At inception, Hot Docs showcased documentary different in both form and politics from both mainstream commercial cinema and what was being shown on television at the time. With an emphasis on socio-political and committed filmmaking as well as on very diverging lengths (from the epic *Manufacturing Consent* to the short *Minoru*) the first program is a collection of films highlighting confrontational politics, radical activists and activism, ethnically-oriented identity, racism and war (*Moving the Mountain*; *Minoru*; *English for Yu*), social movements and political history (*The Black Sheep*), poverty and survival (*In the Gutter and Other Good Places*), marginalization and ability (*Les Fiances de la Tour Eiffel*), the environment (*Battle for the Trees*), and aboriginal culture (*Bowl of Bone*).

While under the CIFC stewardship the festival had several peer juries in place at various cities in Canada.[30] In the festival's literature there is an attempt to acknowledge and address issues of regionalism by highlighting the location of these juries, as well as the diverse geographic significance of both submissions and programmed titles. With this

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[29] Mark Achbar's film, *Manufacturing Consent* (co-directed with Peter Wintonick) profiles anarchist philosopher and writer Noam Chomsky, providing a sympathetic portrait of a controversial figure who constantly challenges the status quo in the areas of corporate media, capitalism and US imperialism. Program liner notes describe Chomsky as an "activist." Nettie Wild's *Blockade* is an observational-styled documentary about a conflict over Native land claims threatened with logging in B.C. The program synopsis reads that "the film follows those enmeshed in the on-going conflict between two histories, and two living cultures," (Hot Docs Program1994) but the film is ultimately sympathetic to the people of the Gitksan reserve, contributing to settler solidarity with aboriginal peoples in Canada at a time when such linkages were rare and fleeting at best. Lastly, Michael Fukushima's *Minoru: Memory of Exile* is a mixed animation and archival footage short about the politics of memory and history, exploring the legacy of Pearl Harbour as it relates to the director's own family history and highlights challenges to official national narratives of multiculturalism.

[30] This was a huge feat for an under-resourced institution that speaks to the commitment of CIFC organizers.

in mind, it is interesting to consider Steven's five "materialist contexts" that he argues frame any discussion of art in Canada (Steven 1993, 53) and see that Hot Docs, in the period before becoming an established and influential Canadian cultural institution, was engaged actively in all five frames.[31] In nearly every program in the nineties Hot Docs' organziers wrote of the diversity of films from across the Canadian context, going at great lengths to overcome regionalism as well as the two solitudes.[32] While, by the late nineties organizers also acknowledged the growing international shape of the festival's program.

Between 1994 and 1998 Hot Docs screened 261 documentaries, 200 of which were Canadian, 11 American, and 50 international titles, mostly from Europe. Using my guidelines to gauge the political nature of a documentary outlined in previous pages, of the 261 films screened over 200 are works that reflect and respond to communities of activists and documentary publics engaged in socio-political activities. In assessing these early films I have relied on a discursive reading of the film synopses, and when necessary (for clarification) I have looked at third-party discourse around the film texts. From queer identities to war to racism to colonialism, the approximately 200 titles from the CIFC era represent a diversity of committed and engaged films by mostly Canadian filmmakers whose works have strong POV voice and that, to varying degrees, intervene in the public sphere, policy and mainstream media arenas to challenge the status quo, validate radical politics and activism, provide tools for education and organizing and serve as alternative media sites.

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[31] The festival also addressed at least one of the overarching contradictions Steven (Ibid) outlines - the always-present tension and disconnect of regionalism — most notably in programming.

[32] But not attending to the third and fourth solitudes with as much zeal: that of aboriginal and immigrant populations.

Before Hot Docs transitioned to new management in the late nineties, the festival's programming was community-organized, as mentioned earlier, by way of complex configurations of filmmaker committees across the country. Great efforts were made to represent local filmmaking culture from across Canada, and films were decided on by committee consensus,[33] not by management or individual decree. Zielinski, in his work on lesbian and gay film festivals, writes: "While the structure and organization of the IFFs [International Film Festivals] changed fundamentally [over the history of the existence of film festivals], the practice of committee-run festivals returns to the new types of community-oriented film festivals in an attempt to be accountable to and represent the festival's imagined counterpublics" (2008, 314-315). Zielinski later states that many of these kinds of festivals "stemmed directly from media practices and initiatives associated with social movements…" (Ibid, 315). Hot Docs was indeed born out of a community response and need to provide an alternative and challenge to dominant cultural traditions, conventions and institutions. It is significant that in their efforts to do this, the early festival organizers turned to community programming as a way of staying connected with the community of filmmakers the festival was meant to serve, who in turn were serving their subjects and (counter)publics, many of whom were undoubtedly involved in various social movements.[34]

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[33] Cohen, interview.

[34] As a programmer for Cinema Politica, I have first-hand experience with "community programming." This occurs when our organization collaborates with civil society and activist groups ('stakeholder groups') who have approached us to hold a screening on a topic or issue a particular group is organizing or campaigning around. Sometimes this involves the group suggesting the film to us, other times we find a film that fits. The collaboration continues through to the screening, where the group is invited to speak or find speakers to speak, to table with information, and to help promote the screening and use the screening as a mobilizing and informational tool and platform.

Social Spaces: Advocacy, Critical Engagement, and Cinephilia

The introductory comments in the 1997 program from Paul Jay ("Founding Chair") and Joanne Smale ("Chair") provide insight into the early social spaces of Hot Docs. Jay and Smale acknowledge the shifting role of the festival in providing a platform and space for the international mingling of culture, especially between Canada and Europe, expressing pride at being "the documentary bridge joining European and North American filmmakers and broadcasters" (Hot Docs Program 1997), an admission that points to the increasing social significance of a festival 'going global.' In the early years there was an emphasis on the mingling of practitioners—the artists and industry folks who make up the field of documentary filmmaking—around workshops and screenings that were often in non-cinema screening locations held in hotels and nearby coffee shops, which by the late nineties had moved into Little Italy's café scene.[35]

Jay provides historical context and insight into the role of the gala during the initial period of Hot Docs editions:

> And so we started Hot Docs and the objective in the beginning in terms of the festival was, it was going to be primarily a filmmakers' festival. And we wanted it to be a place where documentary filmmakers come across the country, could come and everybody would get to see each other often, watch each other's films, talk about work, and one of the main objectives was to create an awards aspect that people would take seriously and would have meaning that if you won a Hot Docs award, it would really mean something.[36]

Jay's account[37] positions Hot Docs as a social space "for filmmakers," much in the same way Nightingale (who worked with Jay on the first editions) characterizes the purity of

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[35] According to Peter Wintonick, early screenings were held in intimate cafés, hotels, halls, and involved DIY-style events coordination. One account tells of "balancing televisions on chairs" as the technical setup for some screenings (Interview with author, Montreal, QC, 2010).

[36] Jay, interview.

[37] Jay continues: "And it took off. I think in the first year we must've had a least 100, maybe 150

the early spaces because they were geared toward filmmakers and managed by filmmakers; where artists and industry, as well as the public, could mingle, thus "raising the profile" of documentary while taking "seriously" the culture and genre, or in other words, exercising critical engagement. These three defining characteristics of the social space of the festival, that is, (i) filmmakers' community; (ii) documentary profile raising; and (iii) critical engagement; remain as aspects of current editions, but often feel overshadowed by new objectives that serve the larger goal of mainstreaming and commercializing the space.[38] This is one way the festival has undergone major changes concerning its social spaces – where personal and critical space was provided as an alternative to other mainstream, commercial media spaces.

Hot Docs, in its original incarnation, resembled an alternative media initiative: community-oriented organization, challenges to the status quo,[39] advocacy-focused, and a concern with critical engagement across multiple borders and barriers, including but not limited to artists and broadcasters, North America and Europe, experimental and narrative documentary and more. Lastly, Hot Docs' early social spaces were populated by practitioners of Steven's "new documentary," that is socially-engaged artists connected to larger social movements, alternative impulses and radical iterations of a shifting structure

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submissions, maybe more, and we raised enough money to organize the screenings, and we had the big gala dinner. The gala dinner was a big deal because it was all about raising the profile of the films and the Hot Docs awards. So the gala dinner was completely sold out, and everybody came, all the main broadcasters came, and industry people came, and lots and lots of filmmakers came. And I guess, along the way the guy delivers the feasibility study and… Anyway, my opening speech, I welcomed everybody, I said for the first time now I'm going to announce the results of the feasibility study. And I opened the envelope and I said it's not feasible!" (Jay, Interview).

[38] This includes the following new goals: (iv) Audience-expansion and development; (v) sponsorship profile-raising; and (vi) festival branding.

[39] Which included challenging the entrenched conventions of documentary television as well as challenging the idea that a documentary film festival wasn't feasible in Toronto in 1994 – the period before Toronto truly developed into an internationally-known cultural-business 'megacity' and just prior to its "cultural renaissance" of the early 2000s (Jenkins 2005).

of feeling, at least partially in response to the culturally and politically repressive eighties. Writing about symbolic power in media, Couldry and Curran argue that: "Symbolic power requires prior organizational and economic resources…It follows that contesting media power is possible only if there exists a well-resourced social site outside media institutions from which a rival narrative authority over the social world can plausibly be enunciated" (2003, 43). Later, the authors provide examples of such concentrations of alternative symbolic power, a list that could include niche festivals such as the early Hot Docs festival.

It is the argument of this thesis that Hot Docs began as an alternative media institution seeking to contest media power.[40] Hot Docs had, from the beginning, accumulated symbolic power to leverage some influence on the documentary industry and culture of the time, but that power rested mostly in human resources - in the labour of the organizers and artists whose works were shown free of charge, and with the symbolic power associated with advocacy. Couldry and Curran write that, "Media institutions depend on a silent division, reproduced across social space, between those who make stories and those who consume them" (Ibid, 42). I would add a second division to those who tell the stories and those who consume the stories: those who exhibit or disseminate, and advocate for, those same stories. In the early days of Hot Docs, these divisions were collapsed, because the festival was organized and programmed laterally, that is, by and for filmmakers. The divisions grew over time as Hot Docs incorporated, gathered its own staff, branded itself, and developed a professional separation between the artists and the cultural managers.

[40] But, as is argued later, is slowly moving from the alternative margins to a mainstream version of its original form.

The Early Institution

In his essay exploring the intricacies of analyzing culture, Williams argues, "Cultural history must be more than the sum of the particular histories, for it is with the relations between them, the particular forms of the whole organization, that it is especially concerned" (1961, 46-47). The early formation of Hot Docs was born out of the relationship with documentary industry (at the time dominated by television) and documentary advocacy (CIFC and filmmaker advocate/activists). The development of a film festival should not simply be seen in isolation but rather as the articulation of a relationship between cultural factions in society at a time of transition. I situate Hot Docs' beginnings in the early nineties with the cultural, economic, political and social relationships that were solidifying into convention or transitioning into "tradition," as Williams defines it (Ibid, 48-49), by the late nineties. Hot Docs organizers were responding to various forces that inevitably helped shape the festival: globalization, neoliberalism, broadcast television,[41] and the general structure of feeling of the conservative eighties.

Evidence as to the inner workings of early Hot Docs comes from CIFC meeting minutes, recollections from interviewed subjects who were active between 1993 and 1999, and Hot Docs discourse contained between the covers of the programs from the period. Like most proto-mainstream film festivals Hot Docs divided its programming into sections reflective of the undercurrents informing the organization of the festival. Therefore, the 1994 programming sections were a diverse lot, displaying a range of

[41] Including commissioning editors who exercised as much or more control over voice than filmmakers.

culturally, politically and socially engaged categories.[42] This multiplying of categorization shows an institutional recognition of the diversity of independent and broadcast documentary produced at the time, and a desire to reflect and represent that diversity.

With the inclusion of cultural, political, social and experimental throughout the categories, the early Hot Docs editions also foregrounded films that could not find a place outside of standard commercial platforms and venues. As Koehler (2009, 90) points out, the categorization of films at festivals provides a window into the 'soul' of the festival.[43] He writes that a major threat to the survival of any film festival[44] is an aversion to cinephilia, which ghettoizes non-conformist and less-popular modes. Of note is Michael Fukushima's comment in the Hot Docs '94 guide, where he expresses enthusiasm for being featured in a documentary festival: "What an honour to finally escape the ghetto of animation filmmaker" (Hot Docs Program 1994, 6). These fluid and shifting categories are often completely overshadowed by standardized sections like "international competition" and "best feature length film." What is notable about the early constitution of Hot Docs' categorization is that there was no main or principal program to which other categories were subjugated. Instead the early programs reveal an effort to promote,

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[42] The categories are: Political, Social Issues, Science/Technology/Environment, Arts/Culture/Biography, Shorts and Social Political in an On-going Series. By 1996 the festival nominees were organized under the following headings in the 51-page program: Arts, Biography/History, Cultural, Feature, Political, Science/Technology/Environment, Short, Social Issue, Broadcaster Arts/Science, Broadcaster Political/Social, and International Program. Two years later, the year before Hot Docs transitioned into new management and became its own organization, the categories were listed as: Biography, Arts, Children's, Cultural, Experimental Short, History, Political, Science/Technology/Environment, Short, Social Issue, Arts/Culture/Biography by a Broadcaster, Political/Social Issue by a Broadcaster, Science/Technology/Environment by a Broadcaster, International Over 60 Minutes, International Under 60 Minutes, Broadcaster Outside of Canada, and a retrospective section (on Germany).

[43] Which is correlated to the festival's ability to "defend cinema" and "promote cinephilia" – two principle objectives of any worthy festival, according to Koehler (2009).

[44] Koehler is almost exclusively focused on fiction and mixed-genre commercial festivals.

reflect, and critically organize the diversity of documentary flows into several sections with relatively equal weight.

Finally, there was no section set aside for Canadian content in the early Hot Docs programs because the festival was responding to and promoting local culture, which meant that programming and critical interpretative activities were already principally Canadian in nature. It was only years later (2001), and under new management, that Hot Docs established the "Canadian Spectrum" section of programming, where all Canadian content now resides, contra the 'mainstream' that makes up International and American documentary fare. In this way, the discursive and organizational efforts to situate the local as a diffuse spectrum of categories has given way to the subjugation and marginalization of the local into its own diminutive section of the festival.

CIFC Period Institutional Chronology

Hot Docs began, in 1994, as a small community gathering space for independent documentary filmmakers to screen their work to each other and audiences and critically engage with various issues facing the industry. As such, the initial edition consisted of screenings at Bloor Street Cinema, Jackman Hall, and hotel venues; an opening night party at The Left Bank and an awards gala at The Palladium. In year two the festival organizers articulated the challenges of putting on the festival while juggling their own production schedules (Hot Docs 1995, 9) reflecting once more the artist-run nature of the institution. Initiating a trend that would continue throughout the CIFC years of the festival, in later editions, Cohen would extend this contextual rendering to remind festivalgoers of the paradoxical corollary to such aforementioned growth, that is, the

challenges faced by independent documentary makers to have their works made and seen. For the 1995 edition, she writes: "Driven by an era of multimedia mergers, new specialty channels and production funds, industrial restructuring, converging technologies and the infamous infobahn, the Caucus has been there at every turn – conducting vital research, lobbying and speaking out to ensure that independent filmmaker will continue to thrive and find audiences in the media environments of tomorrow" (Ibid). The inclusion of Cohen's contextualization not only situates Hot Docs historically, but also shows how the festival discursively situated the connection between the festival event and the advocacy work of the institution (the CIFC).[45]

With the rise of specialty channels and new production funds, Hot Docs began to capitalize on a perceived shift from the bleak outlook for documentary to a more hopeful view, yet one still very much pegged to broadcast television and all the conventions that came with that industrial configuration. Indeed, while 1995 saw the implementation of the Rogers Telefund and Rogers Documentary Fund, Nightingale announced in the 1996 program: "In spite of all odds, 1995 was a bonanza year for documentary production in Canada. It looks as if some of our biggest challenges still lie ahead," (Hot Docs Program 1996, 11) articulating once again the paradoxical space the festival negotiated between cultural abundance and limited infrastructure. The Canadian economy was experiencing a major downturn by the mid-nineties, while the government focused on "public-sector deficits and debt" to balance the books.[46]

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[45] That same year the festival expanded the conference section of the festival, the interpretative and meeting space where film discourse was given precedence as well as opportunities to engage and interact.

[46] CBC News, "Economy tanked in 1990s: report," http://www.cbc.ca/news/business/story/1999/12/23/bank991223.html (Accessed: 2013-08-28).

Hot Docs launched two new initiatives in 1995 - a section on "International films for Canadian audiences" and "The Industry Centre," which later morphed into the Toronto Documentary Market (now the Hot Docs Market). The Centre was "born out of the need to help filmmakers and buyers find each other in an atmosphere conducive to doing business" (Nightingale in Hot Docs 1995, 11). In the 1996 edition, 1995 was designated a "bumper crop" (Hot Docs Program 1996, 9) because of newly available TVO and CBC broadcast windows (with new documentary-focused shows), increased accessibility of new technologies that allowed "arts council dollars" to be stretched further than before (Ibid) and, significantly, because "the festival achieved better outreach to filmmakers across the country" (Ibid).

While the organizers connected the festival to larger possibilities for the documentary community in Canada, they also acknowledged the onset of transnational co-productions, listing various partnering domestic and international broadcasters and thus situating the festival as 'going global,' yet still maintaining strong local roots. This positioning is followed by a paragraph once again extolling the regional diversity of the Canadian films, organizers, judges and delegates.[47] At this stage in the programming Canadian productions had yet to reflect this new spirit of coproduction opportunities, and all 61 titles list "Canada" as sole country of production.

It is also important to note that in the 1997 program Nightingale acknowledged the challenge of expanding the festival "while maintaining it's [sic] basis as a grass-roots Festival [with an] emphasis on films and filmmakers" (In Hot Docs 1997, 11). This statement was bookended by a comment about Hot Docs being a prime destination for

[47] Still, in 1997 "international" or "global" really meant Canadian-European, as the programming figures show: of 97 total films 61 were Canadian, 5 American and 25 were of European origin.

"schmoozing" and doing business and about "dynamic dialogues that have become…an integral part of HOT DOCS!" (Ibid), thus flagging developing tensions in the festival as it attempted to fold in an industry/commerce side while trying to not lose touch with its roots as a community-oriented event and initiative.[48]

The following year, 1998, was the final year CIFC had full stewardship of the festival.[49] In terms of continuing efforts to span the regional diversity and vast cultural, linguistic, and ethnic geography of Canada, the 1998 program is significant in that it is the only year in the festival's entire history where the opening letters were published in both of Canada's official languages. It is also the first time the program notes from organizers focus on numbers with vigour, charting the increase in film submissions, screenings, attendees, and more, over the past five years. At the time of compiling the program it was already understood that Chris McDonald (who wasn't involved with the CIFC) would take over as head of the festival the following year, and the program notes of Jay and Bienstock may have reflected a desire to "take stock" at the end of the tenure of the CIFC's control. They also stated a desire to "expand international associations," focus on co-productions and raise the public profile of the festival in coming years (Hot Docs Program 1998, 5).

It is in this final year of CIFC control, and Jay's leadership, that he and co-chair Bienstock most succinctly articulated the essence of the festival's logic, community and structure of feeling:

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[48] Once again the regional diversity is lauded as a signature organizational and programming characteristic of the festival, and three new international categories are announced, as well as a "Financier's Club" where filmmakers are given the opportunity to have mirco-meetings with various attending commissioning editors.

[49] It also was the final year that the festival served as an extension of the organization's documentary advocacy, professional development schemes and promotional activities.

> The business of documentaries is a big part of HOT DOCS! but its heart and soul are the filmmakers and their films. The festival provides a time to praise and critique, to discuss and debate and to appreciate great work…In the last five years, documentary culture across Canada has matured and developed: there are more documentary windows than ever before. Yet, there is pressure to decrease point of view filmmaking. In this respect, the role of public broadcasters and the National Film Board has never been so crucial. We need documentaries that provoke, advocate and inspire. All documentary forms are important, but the pov documentary, an endangered species, needs to be preserved. (Jay and Bienstock in Hot Docs Program 1998, 5)

The 1998 program note managed to distil many intersecting concerns and objectives that the festival had come to reflect and embody. They are the competing and contributing forces of: (i) business and cultural expression/art; (ii) local and global contexts; (iii) documentary abundance and challenges to documentary; (iv) cultural institutions versus television broadcasters; (v) documentary as social provocation versus information; and lastly, (vi) the need to support an embattled form, POV documentary. The program note expressed the festival's original objectives, born out of the need to service a community of independent filmmakers mostly interested in making and screening POV documentaries.[50] At the end of the CIFC tenure Hot Docs had grown in size (from 500 to 5000 attendees) and in scope (new categories, an expanded conference with more and more workshops and talks, and a new industry space for the festival).[51] Yet at the end of this half-decade, the "heart and soul" of the festival, articulated in organizational discourse by founders, remained the films and filmmakers.[52]

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[50] Nightingale, on the next page spread, reinforces this focus when she writes that, "The films and filmmakers…are the heart of the Festival" (In Hot Docs Program 1998, 7).

[51] The festival had also extended the objectives of Hot Docs, from an artist-run event by and for documentary filmmakers to one that joined and helped facilitate an increasingly transnational documentary cinema while raising the profile of documentary in Canada by shifting more focus on to audience expansion.

[52] And in particular POV documentaries that provoked, advocated and inspired filmmakers and audiences alike.

NEW MANAGEMENT (1999-2013)

By 1998 Paul Jay and other CIFC members had come to the conclusion that a conflict of interest had developed between showcasing and supporting independent documentary at Hot Docs each year and the ongoing advocacy efforts of the organization. Facilitating meetings between government commissioners, funders and filmmakers one day and lobbying the same government the next day were proving difficult and Jay proposed the festival become separately incorporated as a non-profit.[53] The Board agreed and in 1998 Hot Docs incorporated as both a non-profit and charity.[54] By-laws were written that ensured the CIFC would continue to benefit from the efforts of the first five years by mandating half the Hot Docs' Board of Directors (BOD) be made up of CIFC members and that a percentage of festival revenue go back to the organization.[55] As the CIFC members transitioned out of the festival operation and new management came in, a slow shift from an artist-run, community-oriented festival to a management-run, commercial-oriented festival was underway, ultimately reflecting a larger shift that was occurring in other festival communities, such as the LGBTQ festivals (Zielilnski 2008; Loist 2012) as well as the professionalization of the festival culture that began in the nineties (De Valck and Loist 2009, 215).

[53] Jay, interview.

[54] Charities in Canada are prevented from lobbying or advocacy activities.

[55] Jay says that the BOD, because of some particular legal consideration, had to be made up of 49% CIFC members and 51% other, non CIFC members – a composition which holds today (Jay, interview).

Programming

A shift in programming slowly came into effect into the 2000s, culminating with the appointment of a Director of Programming in 2006 and a final break with community-programming practices. This 15-year period saw 1,920 films screened, 594 of which were Canadian, and 421 American, illustrating a shift in programming that increased the presentation of work produced outside of Canada.[56] What emerged in this new management period was a steady decrease in Canadian programming and an increase in American and international programming. In the first year of the new management of the festival, 1999, more American films than ever were selected, yet this number was still a fraction of total programming (6/62 or roughly 10%). International selections made up even more than American, yet this also represented a small fraction (7/62 or 11%) of total programming.

By the halfway mark of this period (2007), the numbers had shifted somewhat, but mostly in favour of non-American international works. That year US production represented 26/129 (20%) of total programmed films, almost equivalent, for the first time in the history of the festival, to that of Canadian, which represented 32/129 (25%). This programming shift shows the incremental ascension of American programming, which nonetheless still occupied only one fifth of total programming space, and the impressive rise of other international programming, which in 2007 represented 71/129 documentaries, or over one half of total programming (55%), most of which was still European. In the first half of the new management period Canadian programming fell from 68% (in 1998) to 25%, American documentaries went from less than 1% to 20%

[56] See Appendix B.

and other international programming, which is to say mainly European, more than doubled its share, from 24% in 1998 to 55% in 2007.

For the second half of the new management period (2008-2013) trends and conventions in programming followed the first half. Looking at the last four years, from the time that *Babies* (2010*) opened the festival onward, one can see a drop in local, domestic programming to 21%, or 158 films[57] and an increase in US programming from 22% to 30%.[58] Comparing Canadian and US programming is not an attempt to buttress a nationalist argument or complain about US dominance, but rather to show a shift from local, community-based programming to a widened interpretation of community, one that includes the US, and increasingly is defined (at least in terms of numbers and prominence of films) by the US.

Institution

The 1999 Hot Docs program took on a decidedly slicker, more colourful and glossy look, and the cover, for the first time, brandished a festival tagline: "Entertain reality." The new look and tone both announced and reflected the behind-the-scenes changes that were taking place with management. This little phrase is significant to tracking the changes afoot in 1999, as the festival came under new management, headed by CIFC outsider Chris McDonald.[59]

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[57] This is down from 25% for the first five years and lower than the 30%, or 594 films, for the whole 'New Management' period.

[58] Where over one third of all US films programmed in the last four years were connected to Sundance (up from less than 10% for the whole period).

[59] McDonald initially served as "CEO," with Nightingale serving as "Festival Director." McDonald had been running the Canadian Film Centre, a training centre for emerging film talent set up by Canadian filmmaker Norman Jewison in 1988, and was approached for the new position heading the festival, after Jay led the charge to separate CIFC and Hot Docs as two separate entities. The use of CEO to describe the head of a cultural event, and not a corporation, was dropped in 2001 (and replaced with "Executive

The beginning of this period was clearly a moment of upheaval and transition, with new looks, titles, categories and venues of the festival being tried out and quickly abandoned. But these changes, however fleeting, provide insight into the directional shift of the festival prior to the new millennium. The introduction of a tagline that trades on documentary's principle stock, "reality," is perhaps unsurprising. But the coupling of "reality" with "entertain" suggests a foreshadowing of changes in the festival's direction in later years, when the relation between capital and culture would be described by McDonald as "complementary."[60] In particular, speaking of the commercial aspect: "You have to stick at the business side to achieve balance [with the cultural side]."[61] This approach of combining the commercial with the cultural in documentary found expression in the relatively new convention[62] of producing entertaining *and* socially engaging documentary, which has gained traction at film festivals, all the while normalizing the commercialization of documentary.[63] Intriguingly, the tagline "entertaining reality" was in fact, a prescient precursor to marketing term "social action entertainment" used by producers of Hot Docs-programmed films in later years.[64]

The notion of documentary entertainment speaks to the evolution of the festival from marginal to mainstream and community to commercial, where a shift to incorporate the idea of entertainment by the 1999 organizers was conspicuously conjoined with the

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Director") along with the tagline *Entertain reality*.

[60] Chris McDonald, interviewed by author, Toronto, ON, March, 2011.

[61] McDonald, interview.

[62] This is a convention championed by Michael Moore, Morgan Spurlock and the Sundance Institute.

[63] This conventional shift to entertain and intervene is captured in presentations such as the 2012 Hot Docs event "How To Entertain Audiences & Change the World: Davis Guggenheim and Ted Hope." Source: http://www.hotdocs.ca/schedule/event/how_to_entertain_audiences_and_change_the_world (Accessed 20013-06-17).

[64] Social action entertainment is discussed in a later chapter.

idea of populism as well.[65] The *entertain-engage formula*, initiated in 1999 and honed over the next fourteen years champions wide-appeal, feel-good films over those that may engage but not aspire to similar qualities. The perceived success of this formula was articulated by McDonald in 2012, when, after announcing the numbers of the 2012 edition (how many submissions, selections, sponsors, etc.) the Executive Director told the opening night crowd: "This is our most populist festival to date!"

New Management Period Institutional Chronology

The year before Hot Docs initiated a major overhaul of its public image and symbolic resources, the CIFC marked its twenty-year anniversary.[66] Taking stock, National Chair Andrea Nemtin wrote that the CIFC began as "a small group of filmmakers [who] began working together to create an environment where indie non-fiction filmmakers could get access to public funding and broadcast support" (Nemtin 2003, 6). She added that at the time independent documentary was facing a major uphill battle to produce and distribute: "Documentaries were shown predominantly in art galleries, schools and church basements. Independent filmmakers worked off their kitchen tables. Documentaries were a cottage industry, hand crafted and difficult to make outside of the structures of the CBC or the NFB" (Ibid).

CIFC and Hot Docs were born out of a perceived need to serve a marginalized art community largely shut out from the industrial commercial machinery of the day. Nemtin

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[65] At least as it is understood to be the widening of the net of *appeal* and *access* to the public at large.

[66] The CIFC underwent its own rebranding efforts, mainly by changing its name to the Documentary Organization of Canada, or DOC and establishing a new logo based on the new name.

provided documentary statistics[67] that showed the growth of documentary production and viewing in Canada between 1983 and 2003. The underlining of impressive growth was, however, punctuated by Nemtin's sober appraisal:

> Rapid growth can bring problems, though. As volume is going up, budgets are going down, and our creative content may be suffering a downgrade as a result of our industrial success. In our attempts to become more 'commercial', we sometimes try to fit big issues into small films…In our success we risk losing those qualities that are the very strength and essence of documentaries: showing important, dangerous, subversive, and intimate private experiences to a public more attuned to reality than ever before. (Ibid)

Nemtin[68] acutely identified many of the problems, issues and challenges that faced the documentary community in Canada around the time Hot Docs underwent rebranding. Nemtin's assessment in many ways dovetails with my analysis of the changes the festival has undergone, especially the diminishing qualities of subversion, "danger," and quality content in the march toward commercial and popular appeal in an industrial framework (or "assembly lines" as Nemtin called them). Yet Nemtin also identified the growing market and audience interest in reality programming. It is in this atmosphere that Hot Docs underwent massive rebranding in 2004, refashioning itself into a festival prepared to capitalize on documentary's supposed ascension, while focusing on industry and commerce.

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[67] This is taken from the 2003 Nordicity Group's comprehensive report on the "Status of Documentary in Canada," commissioned by DOC in 2003, and subsequently commissioned annually thereafter.

[68] Nemtin continues: "McLuhan's prophecy of tribalism in a Global Village is being fulfilled in the broadcast environment. Audiences have access to hundreds of specialized channels, most of which are affiliated with large multinational corporations. This has created an imbalance between demand for distinct programming and the economic means to supply it, in both the global and domestic marketplace. This fact is clearly illustrated by Canadian broadcasters' need for quality programming that routinely exceeds our funding system's available resources. We try every year in vain to solve the problem by re-writing the rules and guidelines for our Canadian public and private funding mechanisms, but it is clear that we have what Thomas Homer-Dixon would refer to as an 'ingenuity gap'." (Ibid)

In 1999 Hot Docs moved from winter to spring, and relocated to cafés in Little Italy, a move that the new and current management likened to "opening up the festival to the public"[69] despite the fact that screenings were open to the public from the beginning, albeit less promoted. The opening up of festival spaces to cafés could be seen as a move to transition the festival from a filmmaker-oriented festival to an audience-oriented festival, as the more intimate settings for screenings were now very much oriented toward the public sphere. In 2000 Hot Docs launched the Toronto Documentary Forum, or TDF,[70] a platform for filmmakers to pitch projects to industry players. That same year marked the first festival-to-festival exchange, as Hot Docs sent a delegation to the Documentary festival in Amsterdam (IDFA), thus reflecting the globalizing forces at play throughout the nineties for the festival circuit, while also setting up relationships for future co-production and festival collaborations and schemes.

In 2001 Hot Docs began ambitious lateral expansion of audience and markets, domestically with Doc Soup, a monthly screening series now held in several Canadian cities (where popular Hot Docs documentaries are selected by the festival for local audiences to experience once a month throughout the year). In 2003 the festival expanded the scope of its audience by offering free daytime screenings to seniors and students, a policy that continues to the present day. In 2004 Hot Docs set up its headquarters on the University of Toronto downtown campus, at the Rogers Industry Centre near Bloor and University avenues, where it is still situated, providing a central location for the festival.[71]

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[69] Source: http://www.hotdocs.ca/festival/hot_docs_20th_anniversary_timeline (Accessed 2013-10-19).

[70] In 2010 the name was changed to the Hot Docs Forum (HDF).

[71] That same year Hot Docs took on the annual contract to run the World Congress of Science Producers conference, an income-generator that allows the festival to keep a larger fulltime staff year-round.

In 2004 the festival underwent rebranding, adapting a new logo with voice bubble (for the "o" in Hot Docs) and initiated the tagline "Outspoken. Outstanding." In 2006 the industry conference launched Doc U and Doc Lab, initiatives to help new filmmakers professionally develop, and the festival also launched Docs For Schools, a program dedicated to showing Hot Docs selections in Toronto-area schools during the festival and throughout the year. A significant programming shift occurred in 2006, when Hot Docs transitioned from institutionally-constituted programming (by management) to individually-constituted programming (one Director) and hired TIFF programmer Sean Farnel in the new role. In 2007 the festival further formalized international relations by launching International Co-production Day and continued accelerating cross-border exchanges. In 2008 Hot Docs launched the Canwest-Hot Docs Documentary Funds (now Shaw Media-Hot Docs Documentary Funds), which offers $4 million over a seven-year period in completion grants and no-interest loans to Canadian documentary filmmakers.[72] In 2009 Hot Docs launched the Hot Docs Collection (select DVD releases from the festival) with Kinosmith.[73] In 2011 the festival announced the creation of another production fund, the Hot Docs-Blue Ice Group Documentary Fund, meant to support African filmmakers and supported by South African pharmaceutical giant Blue Ice Group, which also purchased the Bloor Cinema and now leases it to the festival (the theatre opened in the Spring of 2012).

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[72] One of the first parcels of cash from this fund is given to Kevin McMahon for *Waterlife*, a filmmaker who has had many films programmed at the festival and who runs a company (Primitive Entertainment) that is represented on the Hot Docs Board by BOD Chair and brother to Kevin, Michael McMahon. I point out these connections as they are commonly deployed by filmmakers unhappy with the commercial orientation of the festival's BOD, and the festival itself.

[73] Kinosmith is a documentary distribution company run by Robin Smith, who was hired in 2011 to program the festival's newly acquired theatre, the Bloor Hot Docs Cinema

Responding to so many other crowd-sourcing documentary initiatives, Hot Docs launched its own service called Doc Ignite, in 2012. The festival selects three to four projects per year and uses its contacts and infrastructure to promote the campaign, which asks audience members and others to 'chip in' and help raise $25,000 (per film) for developing projects.[74] That same year the festival partnered with commercial exhibition giant Cineplex Entertainment to launch Hot Docs Live!, simulcasting select Hot Docs films during the festival, with Q&As, to dozens of cinemas across Canada simultaneously.

CONCLUSION

The community-oriented film festival that sought to showcase Canadian POV non-fiction to the documentary community (and later the public), and did so with little money and resources some twenty years ago, has outgrown its roots. Two decades later, Hot Docs is one of the largest and most successful documentary showcase events in the world. Second in size only to IDFA and listed on all industry top ten lists for documentary events and markets, North America's foremost platform and market for documentary is a celebrated and seemingly permanent fixture in Canada's documentary industry, culture and community. It is a twenty-year journey that has seen the festival migrate from the margins to the mainstream and thus from community to commercial and local to global spaces, goals and objectives. Where the nineties were a period of re-ordering for documentary television—its "global moment," according to Hogarth—

[74] Unlike grassroots and activist fundraising schemes, but similar to corporate crowd-funding models like Indiegogo, Hot Docs takes a percentage of money raised in each campaign.

independent artists[75] sought to develop a space and place for a growing, but fringe element of non-fiction cinema, and created a very locally-oriented (Canadian) outlet for that culture, organized by artists and called Hot Docs, ushering in POV independent feature documentary's 'moment.'

Williams argues that there are three levels that should be distinguished when studying culture: "There is the lived culture of a particular time and place, only fully accessible to those living in that time and place. There is the recorded culture, of every kind, from art to the most everyday facts: the culture of a period. There is also, as the factor connecting lived culture and period cultures, the culture of the selective tradition" (1961, 49). Concerning the culture that gathers around Hot Docs, I have provided some history to hopefully connect the lived experience with the past, and in the following sections will draw out its selective traditions as they become conventions of commercialization and mainstream efforts.

The locally-oriented cultural entity created in the early nineties was an expression and embodiment of a shifting structure of feeling that saw new roles and modes for documentary outside of the selective tradition of televisual form and 'newsy' or 'show and tell' content, and as at least a partial response to that tradition and its conventions, it is intriguing to note that in the end, two decades on, Hot Docs has indeed gone "global," with regards to its programming, its social spaces and the organization of the institution itself. As such it has survived, and some would say thrived, by building from the lived

[75] "Independent artists" are understood, in Canada and according to the Canada Council for the Arts, to be those who maintain creative control over their work, who do not make art for industry (including accessing industrial funds like the Canadian Media Fund, Rogers Television Fund, etc.), commercial media companies, or television. This means they make films outside of the commercial broadcast system. I use a softer definition whereby independent means the artist has total control over the production, distribution and exhibition of their work (in contrast to those who work for editing commissioners for broadcast TV, or the rare few who make feature docs for commercial exhibition).

culture, the initial experience of those who created the festival, and developing its own selective tradition, one that is made of a canon of opening films, exemplary selections, spotlight and focuses, award-winners and special guests, as well as an ongoing discourse from within the organization and that is highly structured as the official recorded culture of the festival, charting one predominant narrative, the ascension of the festival: from local upstart to global player, from insular to public, from small to big, from marginal to mainstream, from insignificant to important, and from community-oriented to commercially-focused.

This chapter has charted those changes and pointed to significant features of the transition of Hot Docs in to a large, popular and commercial festival. This historical chapter also provides an introduction to some of the key tensions and negotiations that come into focus more sharply in the chapters that follow, where in each case an ideological critique of a significant Hot Docs film is used as a jumping off point to discuss and analyze some of the contentious aspects of the cultural politics of the festival.

CHAPTER 3 - EVERYONE LOVES BABIES: POPULISM AND DOCBUSTERS AT HOT DOCS

"Everyone loves…Babies!" — Promotional poster for *Babies*

INTRODUCTION

Following the 2010 Hot Docs opening night projection of *Babies*, the French documentary's director, Thomas Balmès, appeared on stage and excitedly revealed to the audience, "I have just been told that *Babies* will be distributed in every country in the world!" A hearty round of applause followed, acknowledging the unprecedented news as Balmès revelled in a moment very few documentary filmmakers have had or will experience in their careers — the exhilarating and status-making privilege of having your film open the second largest international documentary film festival in the world.

Yet despite the celebratory atmosphere in Toronto's Isabel Bader Theatre, scepticism bubbled under the surface, harboured by those associated with the documentary film industry—of which there were many in attendance—who knew all too well that no film has been distributed in every country of the world. Still, Balmès' hyperbolic statement was likely inspired by the real success of *Babies*, a humanist, feel-good, crowd-pleasing documentary that has indeed secured distribution deals in more markets than most commercially successful fiction films could ever hope for. Indeed, *Babies* is one of those rare films that has managed to dominate the festival circuit as a quintessential "festival film," and has also translated its success into commercial revenue outside of the circuit. As such, *Babies* is a true *docbuster*.

The principle currency of the festival circuit, the high-profile point from which everything hangs, is "the festival film," that is, a film that meets the programming

requirements of festivals then proceeds to tour the global festival circuit with marked success. These films are often elevated to prominent programming spots (like opening nights) and included in festival press releases and promotional material. Hot Docs is no exception to this, and this chapter looks at the deployment of festival films and docbusters at Hot Docs. Utilizing the conceptual framework of "cultural populism," (McGuigan 1992) while keeping in mind the accompanying phenomena of liberalism and commercialism, this chapter focuses on the cultural politics of representation and the festival's structure of feeling, explored through the lens of the popular multicultural documentary *Babies* and its position in the culturally significant opening night film programming slot at the Hot Docs film festival.

In considering *Babies* and its programming position at Hot Docs, I seek to address the following questions: What does the Hot Docs screening of *Babies*, at once an archetypal "festival film" and an aesthetic and ideological celebration of "feel-good multiculturalism," (Said 2004, 11) reveal about the cultural politics of representation, as well as its role as the opening film at the festival? Further yet, what does the screening of *Babies* reveal about the intersection of documentary and the international film festival with regards to cultural politics, populism and liberal impulses at large Western media events like Hot Docs? This chapter addresses these questions, and focuses on the cultural politics of representation, seen through the lens of the vaunted 'crowd-pleasing' documentary. In particular, I look at the ways in which populism is harnessed as a liberal programming strategy, as well as the ways in which it is deployed in the construction and management of the social, mediated and discursive spaces at Hot Docs.

By way of pointing to the structure of feeling festivals institute and catalyze with opening night screenings, the following chapter disentangles the cluster of cultural and political forces at the documentary film festival site that form enduring features of the contemporary commercial mainstream film festival. That is to say, I will look at the deployment of cultural and political liberalism as well as populism as tactics in the larger strategic plan of *commercialization*. The association of these terms—populism, liberalism and commercialization—with a large, successful film festival may seem apropos to anyone familiar with tent pole industry events like Cannes, TIFF, Tribeca, LAFF[1] and Sundance. But it is the unique cultural and political history of documentary cinema—with its opposition to the forces at play at those above industry events—that nudges this discussion from mere description to critical intervention, by way of an ideological critique of *Babies*.

POPULISM

Documentaries are conceived, produced, distributed and exhibited at film festivals like Hot Docs with ticket-purchasing audiences in mind. Some are documentaries designed for niche audiences, such as the *Witness* documentaries, geared from the early stages toward policymakers and political decision-makers. Other niche documentaries are made for ethnically-constituted audiences or politically minded activists, or by niche interest groups (documentaries about motocross racing or WWII history, for instance). In each case these kinds of documentaries have niche audiences in mind, and while it is a rare filmmaker or distributor who doesn't want as many people as possible to see their

[1] TIFF: Toronto International Film Festival; LAFF: Los Angeles International Film Festival.

documentary, most are aware that they cater to niche subgroups and thus tailor the particular storytelling strategies and methods of distribution to them. The documentary *Helvetica*, for example, a film about the ubiquitous and eponymous font, was from its incubation targeted toward the creative class of designers and artists who would likely be most interested in a "nerdy" film about a typeface. Populism, in this context, overrides this niche marketing strategy and leads to the rise of what has been termed the 'docbuster.'

Populism is a term usually applied to politics, referring almost always negatively to policies, leaders, ideologies or institutions that "dumb down" content and communication in order to appeal to as wide a section of the population as possible (to the 'average person' as the turn of phrase goes). Populism's regularly positioned opposite is elitism — a term signifying an approach to politics and culture that is considered more exclusive and intellectual and therefore, historically and contemporarily more 'refined' and 'dignified,' although this is, McGuigan asserts (2003), shifting as academia increasingly engages seriously with popular and mass commercial culture.

Cultural populism is an "intellectual assumption" concerning the "symbolic experiences and practices of ordinary people" (McGuigan, 2003, 4), and as such is a framing mechanism for discussions concerning art and culture. As McGuigan goes on to say, unpacking and deconstructing "ordinary people" is altogether another endeavour, and the term is of course problematic in terms of a shared understanding and concise definition. Yet as a programmer of documentary events for the last decade, "ordinary people" resonates as a certain archetypal audience conceptualization - the audience members who aren't cinephiles, that is to say they are not film aficionados who bring to

the screening a predetermined, elevated set of tools of knowledge and skill with regards to the practice, discourse and art of cinema. Since the documentary events I have programmed have not been part of any film festival, it always felt natural to call these "ordinary audience members" *non-festival types*. This meant that our programming would appeal to the average Joe or Jane who weren't regular festival-goers, because after all, festival-goers are a niche audience, a minority historically conceived of as cinephiles and film professionals, and we (Cinema Politica) are interested in expanding interest in our screenings beyond and outside of that group.

Cultural populism's history lies in cultural studies, and the turn to the average Joe or Jane audience member as an active agent in meaning making via popular media consumption. Cultural theorists like Raymond Williams and Stuart Hall helped justify the study of popular media, like daytime soaps on television, as well as their associated audiences. Hall's encoding-decoding thesis suggested mainstream and popular media could have multiple readings, or meanings, depending on the viewer. Jefferson's (1975) theory of 'resistance through rituals' was applied to readers of romance novels, watchers of horror film and listeners of pop music, all with the understanding that popular media is a worthy subject to take seriously in the academy, and those who consume/experience it had been hitherto disregarded as sheepish masses. This work ushered in a theoretical companion to socialism, feminism, anti-racism and pro-labour movements and politics. McGuigan clarifies:

> Cultural populism in cultural analysis certainly came from the Left, initially neo-Marxist socialism, followed by feminism and anti-racist multiculturalism. Yet, the positions it took in the 1980s and since have unwittingly been homologous with neo-liberalism. (McGuigan 2011, 9)

A focus on consumption, consumer sovereignty and the privileging of choice, have, McGuigan argues, led cultural studies down a path that is positioning the theoretical work of cultural populism neatly within the confines of a neoliberal economic and political order (Ibid, 9-14). He argues:

> In fact, consumption became the cardinal term of a one-dimensional form of cultural-populist analysis. The audience/consumer was not only active. This remarkable individual was virtually *the* source of meaning-making in cultural exchange, in effect, much more powerful than the agents of authorship and production. (Ibid, 9)

It is the assertion of this thesis that the practical corollary to this theoretical equation is found in commercial international film festivals, Hot Docs included. Hot Docs maintains a steadfast focus on audience numbers as the indicator of success, illustrated by their lead line in each year's post-festival communiqué, such as the 2010 release:

> The 17th edition of Hot Docs, North America's leading documentary festival, conference and market, took place April 29-May 9, 2010, and shattered audience rush screening records, delivered more guest filmmakers and subjects, and reaffirmed Hot Docs' place as one of Toronto's leading cultural events and one of the world's leading forums for the documentary industry. (*2010 Hot Docs Annual Report* 2010, 2).

As is clear, the festival foregrounds rush lines, indicating an equation with sold-out screenings and success. The paragraph following the one quoted above leads with "Total audience numbers increased over 10 per cent to reach 136,000" (Ibid). This focus shows that the festival considers the audience member as a quantitative measure of success, in addition to the qualitative disposition (of taste) that would lead them to a festival like Hot Docs.

McGuigan writes that "Critics of cultural studies were becoming reasonably justified in dismissing the field of study – with which I had, to my growing alarm,

associated myself – for regarding shopping as a revolutionary act, in what was, to be sure, a typically exaggerated and to a large extent inaccurate critical judgement" (2011, 11). This impulse, to ascribe political agency and expression to non-political acts, leads McGuigan into his newer thesis of "Cool Capitalism," a capitalism that, in order to "command hearts and minds," obscures its "much less appealing back region" with appealing culture. A principle assertion of this thesis is that Hot Docs, whether consciously or otherwise, helps command hearts and minds into a liberal and commercial social order through the populist documentaries it programs: that is, the "cool" spaces it constructs and manages, and by way of the organization of the institution itself.

In a passage exploring the differences between Raymond Williams' conceptualizations of residual and emergent cultural formations, McGuigan writes:

> From this perspective, the working-class and women's movements are justifiably seen as historical forms of emergence, signifying collective and liberating possibilities, the oppositional power of which has frequently been neutralised by incorporation into dominant hegemonic arrangements whilst also, however, winning genuine concessions. (1992, 25)

While McGuigan is interested in the ways in which emergent movements can be subsumed (to varying effect) by dominant, hegemonic forces in society, the quote illustrates the motivation behind deploying populism and liberalism as theoretical constructs in this dissertation. That is to say, one could propose an altered version of the passage to suit the context as such: *the oppositional power of documentary is neutralized by incorporation into dominant hegemonic arrangements whilst also, however, winning genuine concessions*. While it is debatable, and for another project, whether at present documentary is either a residual or an emergent cultural formation, it will be argued that the genre, and its associated culture and politics, has eked out a historical identity—a

constellation of signifiers, associations and meanings—as an oppositional cultural force/formation in the face of dominant hegemonic societal arrangements. To name just one recent example, *The Coca-Cola Case*'s exposure of wrongdoings by the beverage company, one of the most powerful corporations in the world, who responded with legal threats to the filmmakers and distributors of the documentary, could be considered as continuing this oppositional lineage. The degree to which this historic oppositional characteristic of documentary has been neutralized by dominant cultural formations like Hot Docs, and which impact such a process has wrought, cuts to the heart of this dissertation.

Turning to this chapter's film, Hot Docs' choice to open the 2010 festival with *Babies* in the same year that social movements were responding globally to the 2008 financial crisis and ensuing austerity measures as well as many more environmental and climate justice movements (and thus passing on the many new documentaries directly engaged with those movements and currents), set a tone that conditions the festival's social space to disregard political activism. Yet the corollary to such programming choices—the choice to have a "protest sidebar" of films looking at social movements and political activism—also contributes to neutralizing such works as they are balanced against a populist norm, one that organizes cultural and operational regimes and practices that favour commercial interests (that are often politically at odds with the aforementioned historical formal quality of documentary as a vehicle for dissent and agitation). This compels the question, do populist films, policies and practices point to the ways in which the festival is choosing a path that is organized and aligned around populist principles at the cultural and political cost to documentary's dissenting and

politicizing potential? Is the "political imaginary" of the Hot Docs institution structured in such a way as to bracket out radical expression and action (either through programming ghettos, discursive strategies, and/or rejection of works), and if so, how does this impinge on the diversity of the genre, its related publics, and the claim by organizers that the festival "Shows what documentaries can do."[2]

BABY LOVE: *BABIES* THE FILM

> I don't think the movie's power owes to any message, either [sic]. Balmès has explained "Babies" as a One World parable whose intent is to transcend cultural and geographical barriers and show that people are people and babies are babies…It's not the message that matters. It's the filmmaking. (Matt Zoller Seitz)[3]

The "power" of *Babies,* as Seitz points out, comes from its lack of overt political message; a seemingly pure celebration of aesthetic humanity. Yet the film obfuscates the political and ideological underpinnings that prop up a supposed 'non-message' message of universal humanism. A 2010 feature-length observational documentary that follows the first year of the lives of four babies in San Francisco, Tokyo, and two smaller, rural communities in Mongolia and Namibia, *Babies* is more aesthetically expressive than politically expository in nature. The fly-on-the-wall approach allows for the illusion of a non-intrusive camera, filmmaker and crew, as a predominantly stationary frame captures 'everyday life' as though it were unfolding naturally and unscripted before the audience over the course of the film's seventy-nine minutes. Sequences typically feature infants in various states of play, rest, fuss, feeding and other activities common to toddlers. Medium-to-close range shots ensure that the focus remains on the babies so that even

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[2] McDonald, interview; Farnel, interview, 2012.

[3] Source: http://focusfeatures.com/babies/reviews (Accessed 2012-02-18).

during parental interaction we often only see fragmented body parts of the adults (a hand here, a leg or breast there). As the director Balmès notes in an interview: "Look at the shot where the two Namibian mothers are breast-feeding babies; you don't see their heads. By being selective within the frame, this makes it more universal to an audience."[4] This detached technique, however, also facilitates the 'touristic gaze' that has been problematized by Nichols, who after attending TIFF in 1994, wrote: "Like a tourist, we hope to get behind appearances, to grasp the meaning of things as those who present them would, to step outside our (inescapable) status as outsiders and diagnosticians to attain a more intimate, more authentic form of experience" (1994, 19). Documentary can indeed function as a mechanism to bring us into intimate spaces, but some, like *Babies*, offer no context or complexity and as such facilitate a gaze that is guided only by aesthetic considerations.

Stylistic choices can help construct a beatific touristic aesthetic, but also shape the communication of the film — in this case a message of universal humanism against which politics can only be seen as, at best, a distraction. As Nichols argues: "Style facilitates the documentary voice. Elements of style such as choice of camera angle, composition, and editing give the filmmaker the tools with which to speak to his or her audience, not in a purely factual, didactic way, but in an expressive, rhetorically, or poetically powerful way" (2010, 89). In *Babies*, the poetry and rhetoric of universal humanism—or universalism, a concept that has been problematized by Wallerstein (2006) as the postcolonial, post-Orientalist and Western-constructed "rhetoric of power"[5]

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[4] Source: http://focusfeatures.com/article/bringing_up_babies__director_thomas_balm__s_and_producer_alain?film=babies (Accessed: 2012-02-13).

[5] "Rhetoric of power" is the term Wallerstein (2006) uses to describe "European universalism."

used to describe and project on to the rest of the world (Ibid)—is constructed through rich colours and high contrast, intimate moments of wonder and joy framed close up, as well as editing that collapses the long march of time while eliding the many dull and darker moments of life. All of these elements flatten any opportunity for a multivocal narrative and are put to the service of a surface celebration of difference. As such, *Babies* provides an illustrative text of the politics of difference on display at international film festivals (Cagle 2010; De Valck 2007). As De Valck remarks, the politics of difference[6] at festivals serves a post-nationalist, globalized and capitalist 'moment' of history quite well:

> The ideology of the world market comes into full bloom when matched with postmodern and postcolonial convictions, because postmodernity's pet subjects such as circulation, mobility, diversity, and mixture are profitable to global trade. The world market embraces the deconstruction of nation-states and promotes open global markets and product differentiation. The differences between people, in their turn, are seen as market opportunities that can each be targeted by means of a custom-made campaign. (De Valck 2007, 69)[7]

In *Babies*, the politics of difference, realized as a typological mosaic of human difference, meets the twin needs of festival programming populism and commercial marketing, both extensions of the documentary life cycle concerned with consumption.

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[6] The politics of difference is a phrase often re-oriented as cosmopolitanism, but consistently deployed in festival programming and subsequent festival rhetoric interpreting programming.

[7] De Valck is in fact summoning the arguments of Hardt and Negri in order to make a point about the post-national, multicultural moment of the current international film festival circuit. De Valck (Ibid) goes on to point out that differentiation at festivals not only expresses and facilitates the shifting global and cultural-industrial capitalist system, but has facilitated the repurposing of "national" back into programming for festivals, offering new ways to consume cinema (where festivals historically began as national projects, now 'international' festivals can focus on national programs in sidebars, spotlights and spectrums). This serves as a moment of product differentiation rather than as an experience of alterity, as the former (differentiation) is part and parcel of the commodification of documentary explored in the following chapter.

Through stylistic choices the social context is concealed and subjective experience depoliticized — the disparate subjects (babies) are disconnected and de-tethered from the interlocking realities of a world structured by systems of exploitation and inequality. The beautification of location through matched formal techniques, the aestheticization of both the barren rural context and the intrusive urban context flatten the diversity of the babies' experiences, removing as many nagging social signifiers of difference and power as possible, thus seemingly creating a documentary "without a message," as Seitz states above, but whose anti- or *apoliticalness* is in itself masking the message of a universal humanism[8] – that no matter our differences, and prior to socialization, we all share in the joys of life, and that this should be foregrounded above the difficulties of difference. The combination of a simple and generally admired subject[9] and the construction, through careful filmmaking choices, of a universal humanist message make *Babies* a populist and altogether accessible film.

Establishing shots provide geographic context: the hilly and leafy wood-housed middle class neighbourhoods of San Francisco, the protruding and glittery skyline of Tokyo, the wind-swept plains in Mongolia and the arid, dusty terrain in Namibia provide quick and simple indexes for local context, along with corresponding identities created by and seemingly for Westerners (San Francisco as Western new age comfort; Tokyo as awe-inspiring modernity; Mongolia as barren flat lands; and Namibia as undeveloped origins of mud and dirt). Skin colour and ethnicity also index simple meanings - audiences can easily "locate" the upwardly mobile, privileged baby and its family by the

[8] This is the "One World Parable," or what followers of P.R. Sarkar call the "cosmic fraternity" of humanity. Source: http://www.prout.org.au/books/Universal%20Humanism.pdf (Accessed 2013-97013).

[9] Babies serve as a kind of 'blank slate' stage of human development, before the onset of full socialization, enculturation and the politics that accompany that development.

subjects' white skin. In this One World Parable, the advanced Western/American baby must be white, not black or Asian or Native or any mix reflective of the diverse American population. The mere inclusion of a quota of people of colour in positions of power or privilege is not what I am advocating, but the hierarchy causes one to wonder how the premise of the film would have played out if the San Francisco baby were not white.[10]

Would this confuse the message? Would audiences be less attuned to the simple, reductive formula above if obvious markers of difference weren't in place at the outset? In 1957 Roland Barthes wrote an essay entitled 'The Great Family of Man' on an exhibit that bore an uncanny resemblance to the issues on display in my account of *Babies*. The exhibit Barthes critiques was a traveling photography exhibition that purported to show the similarities of all stages of human life, from birth to death, across differences in time and space, in a way that would imply a shared communalism. As a vision of the "family of man" (Barthes 1972, 100) the selection and representation of subjects (and their attendant locations) is remarkably blunt in signifying a diachronic distribution of roles.[11] The Mongolians and Namibians come to stand in for the 'people without a history,' while the Japanese serve to illustrate a perhaps slightly more futuristic image of the North American present. Thus the white baby at the centre of the film serves to anchor and normalize the poles of an imagined historical teleology of development. Within this schema of development a number of anxieties are at play and operating below the surface. Whether that of exploitation in the context of neo-colonial regions of resource

[10] This is true, especially given the film's reliance on quick significations already at play in society.

[11] One wonders if an African-American or Asian-American baby from San Francisco would confuse the intended message. Or alternately, if the directors had selected a family from Windhoek, the Namibia's bustling capital city (pop. 322,000), where they would likely have similar basic infrastructure to other families in the film, would indexes be confused further?

extraction, or that of a fear of alienation through the rapid acceleration of technology in advanced sectors, the film alleviates these anxieties through the positing of a shared experience of human (rather than economic) development. No matter what the degree of exploitation or alienation, across time and space we share and will continue to share the simple and central fact of being born helpless.

Within this account of past and future is also a subtle racial hierarchy of the present. What is interesting in the context of the film is that this racialized hierarchy undergoes an epistemological transformation from what we might classically assume to be a fixed set of rankings. Rather than being constructed from a lineal account of descent, as was constructed in the 19th century, this racial hierarchy appears in the film as a set of positions posterior to the distribution of resources. That is, it is a hierarchy inflected by neoliberalism's dictum that 'we get what we deserve.' So the baby in Japan can appear to us as a vision of the 'future' insofar as the dominant narrative around Japan's economic success has to do with moral character and work ethic. In this way a racial hierarchy can be constructed not from an account of 'descent,' but from a decision made *after* having taken into account the current distribution of resources. It can thus respond to changes in the global economy while still invoking race and nationality as determining principles, offering a totalizing and flattened representation of equality.

Much like the film *Babies*, Hot Docs the festival directs us, through surface encounters with diversity, to an "ambiguous myth of the human 'community', which serves as an alibi to a large part of our humanism" (Barthes 1972, 100). Where a pluralism and diversity is managed along consumptive and brief encounters (and not deep structural or historical knowledge that say, serious film and cultural criticism at the

festival would facilitate) and festival participants mainly singularly experience diversity on screen or in the architecture of festival spaces (festive, celebratory and frenetic) Hot Docs, like *Babies*, is reminiscent, once again of Barthes' critique of the 'Family of Man' exhibition:

> Everything here, the content and appeal of the pictures, the discourse which justifies them, aims to suppress the determining weight of History: we are held back at the surface of an identity, prevented precisely by sentimentality from penetrating into this ulterior zone of human behaviour where historical alienation introduces some 'differences' which we shall here quite simply call 'injustices'" (Ibid, 101).

Barthes' criticism of universality through a flattening of diversity and denial of history resonates when he calls for "progressive humanism" (Ibid, 102), a departure from the model of totalizing convenience, directing us more toward the kind of tough and unpredictable territory of Chantal Mouffe's agonistic pluralism and the social justice spaces of activist-oriented events.

Trinh T. Minh-ha, theorizing mainstream documentary's "totalizing" tendencies when flattening these kinds of complex racial and class meanings for (Western) audiences, writes that "the unexpressed" or "the silent common people" are summoned in such films to "signify the real world" by privileged filmmakers serving up product for an "ever-buying and donating" Western audience "back here" (In Steven 1993, 96-97). *Babies* is certainly a film about "the common people," yet with a twist, in that the desire to service the needs of the unexpressed (literally: babies) is flattened across the hierarchal terrain of rich and poor demographics as well as a geopolitical context of inequity. Still, her argument concerning the hierarchal positions of the filmmaker, subject and audience rings familiar in that the film creates a sense of identification for Western audiences by

centering on the middle class white family,[12] and in line with the notion of determinate social stasis in that the four sets of subjects appear frozen in their own socio-political stations.

This popular and successful documentary fits the archetypal crowd-pleasing, feel-good *festival film*. That is, according to Wong (2011, 65-69) and others, is an accessible, aesthetically attractive, uncomplicated yet still novel film that champions the international film festival circuit. *Babies* achieves the above filmic qualities by way of an aesthetic triumphalism that is married to a conspicuous avoidance of politics, yet it is underpinned by ideological impulses vocalized by the director in many interviews. With regards to aesthetics, the French filmmakers have selected four "adorable," healthy and expressive infants to document and have wasted no expense on both initial production and later post-production. The images are rich in thematically organized saturated colours ranging from the otherworldly steely greys of Tokyo to the inviting natural greens of San Francisco to the primordial reddish-browns of Namibia and the bucolic browns and greys of Mongolia, while high saturation levels accentuate contrast in colour and lighting to create a positive thematic experience.

Concerning its political message, there is no discourse or rhetoric engaging the politics of inequity: neither of class, race, gender nor sexuality. Further, geopolitical concerns are elided in favour of a constructed and false equality among subjects, a superimposed equity that persists in the film regardless of the vastly divergent economic or political power each subject's family holds. It is, as the filmmaker says, a "One World parable" - a conspicuous reference to the optimistic and fairytale-like idea(l) of universal

[12] The family enjoys slightly disproportionate screen time, and are discursively deployed through the film's interpretative/marketing materials.

triumphalism over socio-political and economic difference, and as such it is a form of representation that shares less with social realism than it does with utopian fantasy. This is reminiscent of Hot Docs' utopic multicultural spaces, where country pavilions are reminiscent of their lineage at world fairs, where the privileged could make new "discoveries" about the world, including and mostly limited to the sensations of looking, touching and tasting (but not knowing) (Taylor 1998). Indeed, at Hot Docs there are three aspects to the affective space of multiculturalism and global discovery: films like *Babies*, the architecture of space at the festival where delegates grouped by country set up food tents and hold parties, and the discursive terrain (program notes and letters, press releases, promotional materials), as in (concerning Babies): "…the ultimate feeling is one of the extraordinary connectedness offered…"[13]

Barthes' writes that "We are at the outset directed to this ambiguous myth of the human 'community', which serves as an alibi to a large part for our humanism" (100). Underneath this vision of humanism Barthes emphasized the particular way in which the forces of history were obscured by an appeal to nature and the human condition. Barthes showed the tautology of this notion of a single human condition, from which no new knowledge could be produced, insofar as such claims merely confirmed the thesis from which they set out. In his appeal to an alternative 'progressive humanism' he emphasized that historical factors needed to be examined in order to give an account of the differences that mattered in life: the conditions under which life developed, thrived, and suffered, rather than a celebration of the timeless essence of such categories as birth and death and work.

[13] Source: http://www.hotdocs.ca/film/title/babies (Accessed 2013-03-19).

Thus as with the method of Barthes' ideological critique, what is revealed under the commonsensical representation of just 'what is' in *Babies* (the tautological human condition), is actually a range of anxieties, normative assumptions, and contradictions shaped by historical forces. The veneer of realism and fly-on-the-wall shooting is less a matter of the documentation of human sameness (which is always already established), than it is a papering over of the historical forces that gave rise to inequalities and differences. Since this contradiction is unable to be sustained, the 'realistic' aspect of the film has to draw on these more utopian inklings to support a film that would otherwise find little resolution. In projecting a 'One World Parable,' we are thus witnessing less the world as it is, and more a utopic world of myth, as indicated by the title of the collection in which the Barthes essay was collected, *Mythologies* – a representation shaped by the conventions of mythology but operating under the appearance of realism.

And it is an apparently resplendent realism at that. With gorgeous, dramatic locations, a bubbly world music soundtrack, domestic settings of tranquility and peacefulness, cute babies that epitomize the simplest aspects of human existence, and high-end production qualities, *Babies* is a polished work with undoubtedly mass appeal. According to Box Office Mojo, an online source for comprehensive box office figures for world cinema, box office numbers worldwide stand at an impressive $10 million (USD).[14] As the introductory quote (and the film's tagline) above attests, surely a sizeable portion of that mass appeal is the subject matter itself, but I would argue that it is the winning combination of a tautological subject, lush aesthetics, a lack of confrontational politics, and the alleviation of developmental anxieties (past and present) that gives *Babies* its

[14] The website ranks Babies as 22nd for all time (since 1982) top-selling documentaries. Source: http://www.boxofficemojo.com/genres/chart/?id=documentary.htm (Accessed 2013-05-30).

appeal to both audiences[15] and festival organizers, funders, sponsors and programmers alike. Indeed, *Babies* was the fifth top grossing documentary in Canada for 2013 (Getting Real/DOC 2013, 100).

A Small Place: The Touristic Gaze

> No matter who tells the story—the playwright, the discoverer, or the government official—it stars the same white male protagonist-subject and the same brown "found" object. The moment of convergence, conveyed in the present tense, is followed by the hesitant tension of unknowing. (Taylor 1998, 162)

Taylor's invocation of discovery and unknowing is mostly focused on exhibitions, but can be transposed on to most international film festivals in the West. When she writes of the discrepancy of power between the "discovered" (or discoverable) and the "society powerful enough to "contain all others" (Ibid, 165) she could be describing so many mediated encounters at Hot Docs, where the festival "assembles a compelling array of global stories,"[16] that I argue are presented for consumption and less for cultural exchange. While ostensibly it contains nothing but a positive way of thinking about the world, one that pre-emptively stifles critique through a celebration of life (who would disagree?), this idyllic vision simply has no correspondence with realities on the ground.

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[15] The tension between attraction to the subject and the experience of the text are summed up by one audience member's online comments here: "though the film as it stands is worth watching and is an entertaining piece of cinema, it never quite reaches the moment it seems to want to build towards: the humanity of all people. it settles instead for being a cute, fluff piece for the audience to coo over with numerous "oohs" and "awwws."don't get me wrong, though-the babies themselves are great, and watching their different personalities operating in different cultures is the driving force of the film. it's a very watchable film, just not as poignant as it could (or maybe should) have been" Source: http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1020938/?ref_=sr_3 (Accessed 2013-10-18).

[16] Source: http://www.hotdocs.ca/media/press_releases/hot_docs_world_showcase_assembles_a_compelling_array_of_global_stories1 (Accessed 2013-02-12).

Babies allows the audience to see the world through the documentary equivalent of rose-coloured glasses: no matter the circumstances, every family is content because they experience familial love. The articulation of this vision through pretty images and music is an enduring Western construction (Fusco 1992), found in travel writing, documentary film and television.[17] In *A Small Place* (1988), Jamaica Kincaid challenges the apolitical, overly optimistic gaze of the privileged Western traveler and provocatively reminds Western readers that the impoverished residents of 'other places' may seem perfectly content in their circumstances but Westerners shouldn't assume that the recipients of said gaze do not dream of better lives and mobility (1988, 34). This aspect of the film, the construction of basic contentment—that is, a happiness regardless of the social, political or economic situation—functions as a convenient device for Western audiences to appreciate the common aspects of humanity without having to be unnecessarily bogged down with considerations of power imbalances and the myriad issues that may be faced by the families in Namibia and Mongolia, for instance. The mother of Hattie, the San Francisco baby, draws on the touristic gaze, with a touch of patrimony, rather succinctly here:

> If only we had the acres and acres and Hattie could just be running free right now…That's one of the things that made me kind of wistful for an opportunity in some ways to live like that, but also recognizing we all do what we can in our circumstances to make the most to love our kids.[18]

There is no mention of poverty, suffering, struggle, or exploitation in the above Oprah interview, or in any other article about *Babies* looked at for this thesis, an omission that

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[17] Some contemporary television examples include: Globe Trekker, Departures, Art Wolfe's Travels to the Edge, An Idiot Abroad, YonderQuest.

[18] Oprah, http://www.oprah.com/oprahshow/The-Making-of-the-Documentary-Babies/4 (Accessed: 2012-11-13).

speaks to a film that offers no space nor encouragement for such a discussion, but rather precludes political consideration by framing the haves and have-nots as equals and collapsing difference and inequity between the realities of geopolitical privilege and exploitation.

Regardless of simplified subject framing, accessible aesthetics and pleasurable (or lacking) politics, *Babies* is far from simple. The documentary has complicated layers behind the seemingly straightforward storytelling, beautiful imagery, reductive worldview and political denial or erasure. Balmès made crucial decisions about how he wanted this film to look and how he wanted each family to be represented, as he himself admits in the following excerpt:

> I wanted [the Namibian family] to be totally disconnected from everything we know and that we consider as wealth and comfort and just to see that they could be happy and grow in a beautiful way...I was looking for a full level of technology relationship from the science-fiction atmosphere of Tokyo, which is where I think we will be in 50 years.[19]

There is a definite play between the stark Namibian setting and the jumbled life of the family in Tokyo, but this is not formally addressed, despite the asymmetrical economic relationship between northern industrialized countries and developing countries in the global south. Balmès' comments about the happiness and well-being of the Namibian family speak to a planned erasure of inequity by revealing a desire to frame the family as content despite having very little in the way of services, technology or other contemporary aspects common to Western countries.

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[19] Oprah, http://www.oprah.com/oprahshow/The-Making-of-the-Documentary-Babies/4 (Accessed: 2012-11-13).

Finally, when Balmès says that he thinks the technology-infused life of those in Tokyo is where "we'll" all be in 50 years, one can only surmise he is not including the Namibians as their place is in the timeless past that must be utopic and symbolically resurrected lest we consciously account for the historical changes our economic modes of production and consumption have wrought. Mouffe writes that when approaching schemes to draw collective identities we know that identities are not fixed, and that we are "never confronted with 'we/they' oppositions expressing essentialist identities pre-existing the process of identification" (2005, 18). On the contrary, these identities need to be constructed and mediated, so that the 'we' is constitutively dependent on the 'they' being referenced (Ibid). In this way Balmès' on-camera constructions signify the desire for a collective 'we' while his off-camera commentary mirrors his filmic constructions of a world moving in a definite direction, where industrialized countries will continue to rapidly develop and countries in the global south will continue to struggle to meet the essential needs of their citizens. This unequal development is not problematized or even critically approached at any point in the film. To do so would move the film out of a feel-good docbuster category and toward a more politically provocative, POV and therefore challenging type of documentary, the type of political documentary leveraged inside of, say, grassroots struggles for equality and some of the basic needs mentioned above.[20]

A version of *Babies* that foregrounds the unjust differences between subjects would be more in line with alternative and community media than commercial media, where objectives as well as "context and consequences" (Downing 2000, 44) extend

[20] Namibia has several NGOs working in the areas of early childhood development and education, both of which are seen as a major challenge in the country. More can be learned about this struggle through the National Early Childhood Development – NGO Association (NECD-NGO).

beyond the purview of the filmed subjects. In contrast, *Babies* is an ends in itself - by the filmmaker's own admission, it is a product meant to appeal to as wide an audience as possible. These ends are intrinsically connected to the filmmaker behind the project, whose idea launched the production, whose vision shaped it, and whose discourse around his film has further shaped its meaning and impact in the world. Nowhere in this equation does there appear to be any kind of non-commercial engagement with community or positioning of the film as a tool for education or social justice campaigns. Films highlighting structural inequity and oppression and connected to social justice campaigns, such as the Indian documentary *Jai Bhim Comrade* (2012*), where the filmic confrontations of difference resist resolution (in an opposite vein to *Babies*), have not opened Hot Docs in the last ten years; to do so would set a different tone for the festival. That tenor would be one of struggle, solidarity, community and activism – precisely the kinds of currents that have been—and were when *Babies* opened the festival—at the forefront of so much social activity as of late.[21]

Such films can rather be found in Hot Docs' institutional marginalia: special programs, sidebars and other marginal spaces secondary to spaces devoted to commercial vehicles like *Babies*. In 2010 the sidebar of activist-oriented films was called "Small Acts," in 2011 "Workers of the World," and in 2012, "Rise Against." It's instructive to note that the films contained in the program sidebar "Small Acts," which screened the same year *Babies* opened the festival, trade on similar feel-good prospects, and remarkably mirror the kind of touristic gaze championed in *Babies*, yet are put to the service of doing good, under the directive of 'small acts.' Seven of the nine films are

[21] Social activity that includes social movements like Occupy, Arab Spring and Idle No More.

about philanthropic white men in less developed parts of the world, such as *Citizen Architect: Samuel Mockbee and the Spirit of the Rural Studio*, *I Bought a Rainforest*, *A Small Act*, and *Soundtracker*. Whether they are building refuge for poor communities, buying rainforest land as a way to leverage consumer power toward conservation, paying for a child's education in Kenya, or recording the endangered sounds of the indigenous, all the films orient the global festival gaze toward the beatific sights of impoverished subjects. That is, toward global south others who reputedly benefit from the "small acts" of kindness by privileged Westerners.[22] None of the sidebar films, much like *Babies,* address or evaluate structural problems of inequity.

A Culture of Conformity: Capitalizing on Documentary

Festival films receive critical acclaim in the popular press as well as occupying multiple programming slots in the annual film festival circuit calendar.[23] Despite the oft-stated purpose of festival programmers to showcase novel works, or "new, aesthetically innovative content" (Loist 2012, 159) in the annual selection of titles, or to "discover" the next star auteur, the international commercial film festival circuit surprisingly functions as a culture of conformity that hones in on the same narrow selection of films.[24] A culture of calcified conventions includes a hierarchy of privilege that is partly determined by

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[22] Another of these films, *Fuck for Forest*, diverges somewhat from the model in that the scheme to help the indigenous impoverished subjects in South America is turned on its head when the hapless European activists discover their kind of philanthropy is not welcomed by the locals, who want jobs not charity. Still, the film doesn't offer an evaluative lens on the global context of inequity that allows the haves to arrive with money offerings for the have-nots.

[23] On its initial festival run, *Babies* alone screened at over twenty-five festivals.

[24] As Koehler says: the circuit really offers festival attendees the chance to see the "fifty or so outstanding films made that year" (In Porton 2009, 83).

where a festival falls in the yearly calendar, partly by size, and partly by the potency of a festival's commercial potential.[25]

With this in mind, Sean Farnel admits that an industry secret at Hot Docs is the massive disparity that exists between selections and submissions. In 2013 2,386 titles were submitted to the festival, with 205 selected (roughly 8.5% selection rate). However, according to Farnel, less than 10% of selected titles are "cold-submissions," meaning the festival has selected a title it has not already sought out, shown interest in, requested or acquired.[26] Following this arithmetic, this means that of the total "submissions" (a catch-all word that we now know refers to all incoming potential programming) for 2013 fewer than 30 films were encountered by the festival for the first time and programmed. Of those some would be shorts, and some mid-length. That means that of 205 films programmed in 2013, approximately 175 were sought out or acquired by the festival. Of that selection are the festival favourites, or festival films that have already played at other events, such as the 17 Sundance films that Hot Docs programmed, selected from 40 documentaries programmed that same year by the Utah mixed-genre festival. The programming inequity is a trade secret because, as Farnel points out, filmmakers pay a decent amount of money to enter their films in festivals like Hot Docs, and knowing their odds aren't one in ten (if we consider 205 selections from 2,386 "submissions") but are more closer to one in a hundred.[27]

Hot Docs' programming works largely in a closed system that is both effected by external sources in a system of festival circuit conformity, and part of its own

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[25] For the festivals that do not run parallel markets to the public screenings, such as True/False, they must develop other unique strategies that make their festival desirable to filmmakers and industry.

[26] Sean Farnel, email interview by author, March, 2013.

[27] Farnel, interview.

commercial-oriented internal logic. Hot Docs programmers travel the world and/or seek out titles to fit the festival's programming needs; the festival works closely with other mainstream doc-leader festivals like Sundance (a sponsor of Hot Docs); lastly, Hot Docs produces its own content: since 2008 the majority of Shaw-Media Hot Docs Funding recipients, if they complete their awarded project and it isn't programmed by TIFF (like Sarah Polley's *Stories We Tell)*, screen at Hot Docs. With the festival's new Blue Ice (another investor-sponsor of the festival) African production fund, the festival will now ensure their own content, even from as far away as the African continent.

On the commercial market differentiation is implemented into commodities only insofar as to create 'newness' and novelty for consumers who won't pay repeatedly for the same product. Yet the degree of difference is quantified by the exchange value, where cost of production will only be leveraged toward a product if its exchange value is worthwhile. As a commercial system for delivering goods to paying customers (the term used to describe festival attendees in the Hot Docs Annual Report 2010), this model would seem out of place at a cultural institution, yet if we look at the relatively closed and highly controlled content system in operation at Hot Docs, it would seem the festival is indeed conforming to not only a festival circuit's conventions, but to market logic as well. I call this kind of programming at Hot Docs "capital programming" for its insistence on capitalizing on known products that have sold on the festival circuit, or will sell based on previous programming knowledge.

Capital programming functions in stark contrast to "community programming" (Zielinski 2008), where programmers work with communities of peers, artists, activists and festival publics to represent the diverse interests in the field. Capital programming, as

a manifestation of commercial populism, where festivals serve their own interests to raise the popularity of the event in order to grow numbers in audience and revenue, serves a popular conceptualization of the 'average audience' member who will associate with mainstream and fairly streamlined commercial products more than differentiated, lower-budgeted, and radical-voiced works. Interestingly, this is a problem that has played out over many years in cable broadcasting in Canada. As Skinner points out: "Generally, the financial incentives point them toward the latter [community channel vs. commercial channel]. There have also been numerous complaints that large cable companies have cut back on community programming and moved to create program formats that mimic those of commercial broadcasters" (2011, 228). With the case of Hot Docs, the festival is working to ensure its own programming fits with its own brand, yet mimicry is always around the programming corner in the festival circuit.

In the current registry of international film festivals, of which there is only a handful of large and/or important players,[28] and among documentary festivals, Hot Docs is second in size and perceived importance to IDFA (International Documentary Film-festival Amsterdam). Doc festivals at the top of the food chain, like IDFA and Hot Docs, act as agenda-setting gatekeepers and determine programming content for those down the line. But Hot Docs' programming is also influenced by other large commercial festivals, so it came as no surprise among those familiar with the festival circuit that *Babies*—a

[28] In fact, the Federation of Film Producers lists fourteen competitive feature film festivals, and four non-competitive feature film festivals. In the category "Documentary and Short Film Festivals" FIAPF only lists five festivals and Hot Docs is not among those listed as a FIAPF registered festival. Source: http://www.fiapf.org/intfilmfestivals_2013_sites04.asp (Accessed 2013-10-10).

"mainstream documentary"[29] that was, by then, already a program mainstay on the festival circuit—was announced as the opening film of the 2010 edition.

Film festival documentaries that achieve crossover commercial success, or *docbusters,*[30] are the staple of the documentary festival circuit. Similarly to blockbusters, docbusters are the mass-appeal films that bring in crowds (and ticket sales) at festivals as well as generate press for the festival, while also translating their success into activity in larger commercial markets. Like blockbusters, they are exceptions to the hundreds upon hundreds of other films that struggle for funding, recognition and audience. Docbusters and blockbusters have much in common - they are accessible, pleasurable, and aesthetically and politically tame. There is so much family resemblance (Chanan 2007, 5) that in media copy docbusters often appear alongside blockbusters, such as here:

> On May 7th, as a film trailer has been making clear since last fall, "the babies are coming." More specifically, Thomas Balmès' documentary, "Babies." Following four infants from four different parts of the world, Blames' film is taking on "Iron Man 2" on Mother's Day weekend in a release wider than most documentary films can ever dream of. But if the intense popularity of that trailer suggests anything (or the fact that it was attached to mega-hit "The Blind Side"), the audiences could be coming, too. And tonight they most definitely will as the film opens Hot Docs in Toronto, Canada.[31]

The above Indiewire boilerplate reinforces the observation that docbusters like *Babies* have less in common with other film festival films than they do with Hollywood hits. Festival docbusters[32] are ultimately situated and marketed as commercial products, often

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[29] Will Sloan, "Babies," Exclaim, http://exclaim.ca/Reviews/Film/Babies_Directed_by_Thomas_Balmes (Accessed 2013-02-13).

[30] This is a portmanteau combining documentary and blockbuster.

[31] Peter Knegt, "Balmes' 'Babies' Is Born: Director Talks Doc Ahead of Fest Launch, Theatrical Debut," Indiewire, http://www.indiewire.com/article/thomas_balmes_on_his_babies (Accessed 2013-02-13).

[32] A note on taxonomy: not all docbusters play the festival circuit: Some achieve commercial success via commercial media channels exclusively. Therefore, I use "festival docbusters" to refer to commercially successful documentaries that have also achieved widespread circulation on the festival circuit.

sharing discursive, promotional and even screen space with Hollywood films. Hot Docs, as a commercial enterprise seeking out ticket sales, follows the code of the docbuster similar to the way mixed genre, fiction-dominated festivals elevate their own version of the film festival film, whether it is an American indie hit, the European art film or the next Quentin Tarantino or Sofia Coppola vehicle.

Concluding a chapter devoted to teasing out the qualities that make up "the festival film," and with a focus on the major commercial, mixed-genre and fiction-dominated festivals, Cindy Hing-Yuk Wong writes:

> …if we study the "successful" festival films, those that have won prizes and garnered a great deal of attention, we see that almost all are "serious" films, films that require work and do not allow the audience to just sit back and be manipulated. Carefully constructed rather than spectacular, austere and evocative rather than pedestrian, novel but referential, festival films may not constitute a genre per se but do constitute a process of genrification,[33] to use Altman's terms. (2011, 99)

As is apparent, Wong's theorization of the "festival film" is at odds with the ways in which I am positioning its documentary counterpart. Wong devotes the majority of her book, *Film Festivals: Culture, People, and Power on the Global Scene* to a discussion of fiction films and their political, social and cultural contexts, especially as they move through large, established, gate-keeping festivals in the international mainstream festival circuit such as Cannes, Berlin, and Pusan. And while Wong admits there is not one definition that describes the quintessential festival film, she does eke out a descriptive context that fits with dominant assumptions and understandings of film festival films—whether this portrait comes from critics, academics or the public at large—and that is the

[33] The process by which new genres are introduced and developed, usually through the mediations of film scholarship, criticism and institutions including festivals. It was Trinh T. Min-ha who, commenting on this process and its discursive nature, remarked that once the category of "Experimental film" entered the lexicon and programming spaces, the genre ceased to exist.

programming conformity that produces serious, difficult, non-formulaic, lower-budgeted, aesthetics-first films that are ultimately conceived of as "not belonging to the mainstream" (Wong 2011, 90).[34]

Yet with an unsurprising focus on the serious and difficult nature of mainly fiction film festival films, Wong—like so many other festival scholars—contributes to a festival discourse that only includes documentary as festival ephemera. This distinction is important to my study and this chapter in particular, because it is in the departure from the well-hewn characterization of "the festival film" as serious and difficult that documentary festival (and commercial) successes, or festival docbusters, offer unique insight. Discourse on the festival film such as Wong's typically outlines similar kinds of films that the major festivals conform to. That is, serious and edgy works that attract critical acclaim on the festival circuit for their inimitability, novelty and alterity.[35] Festival conformity is so accepted that it is rarely criticized in the literature. Wong even valorizes this conformist process of festival canonization (and genrification).[36]

Unlike the film festival film, the festival docbuster moves in the opposite direction in order to achieve status as a festival hit: where fiction film hits that screen at the major mainstream film festivals are differentiated from the commercial mainstream, docbusters are hits precisely because they can easily get folded into, or share attributes with the mainstream. It is my assertion that these countervailing forces are part of the

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[34] Wong contends that her description, like others, is not static, and that for instance, the odd quirky comedy can break the mould.

[35] Mexican documentary filmmaker Luciana Kaplan whose film *Eufrosina's Revolution* screened at Hot Docs 2013 says that she has observed, in her students and with filmmakers in general, a trend whereby the filmmakers "try to make festival films so that they can get into festivals and get prestige, win awards, network and travel" (Kaplan Talk, Concordia University, Montreal QC, October, 2013).

[36] She writes: "Festivals' embrace of more controversial subject matter follows a long tradition of seeing art as free and touting festivals as zones that champion that freedom" (Ibid).

same, larger equation of culture and commerce, whereby the mainstream expands and contracts and the margins constantly get folded in or recreated depending on the context. This is a process that has been endlessly repeated over the 20th century, whereby the rise of subcultures or alternative cultural products are appropriated and valorized as commodities to be consumed rather than as lived experiences ulterior to the dominant mode. Thus the expansion and contraction of the mainstream can be seen as the ebb and flow of surplus creation through variation, a sort of non-re-reimbursed outsourcing of cultural creation. So whereas in fiction a dominant force (Hollywood) has maintained hegemony over circulation and reception since WWII, documentary cinema, on the other hand, has never dominated commercially, at least in comparison to fiction, and is thus at a much earlier stage in the process of forming what could be called a populist centre with relational margins.

In comparison to Wong's specific description of the typical film festival film the docbuster differs in the ways in which documentary festival hits are evolving from a similarly *difficult and serious* category to one better described by adjectives such as *accessible and pleasurable*. Or more accurately put, there is a content-shift in programming at Hot Docs that increasingly valorizes the latter category while placing less emphasis on the former. Where fiction-dominated festivals like Cannes and Berlin may offer a platform to differentiate from mainstream Hollywood cinema, providing the infrastructure for the creation of distinction for works at the margins, documentary festivals like Hot Docs offer the opportunity to create a distinct documentary mainstream (out of an alternative media context). This process is yet another kind of *genrification* at work - the creation of the documentary hit, or docbuster. What is happening now on the

festival circuit is the consolidation of a set of formal principles (a genre) for the creation and advancement of the docbuster.

The Rise of the Docbuster

Documentary is always a few commercial/exhibition/distribution steps behind its more popular fiction cousin. For instance, documentary has only recently (in the last fifteen years) achieved substantial screen time at commercial cinemas with the odd Michael Moore hit, the nature or celebrity doc, and only very recently have illegal download and streaming sites been devoted to its dissemination. Documentary is also only very recently developing its own, albeit tepid, "star system" of directors (such as Spurlock and Herzog). To overcome this lag, Hot Docs is developing and supporting (from pre-production through exhibition) docbusters like *Winnebago Man* (2009*), *Babies* and *Rush: Beyond the Lighted Stage* (2010*), *POM Wonderful* and *Bhutto* (2011*), *Ai Weiwei: Never Sorry* and *The Queen of Versailles* (2012*), or *I Will Be Murdered* (2013*). This trend comes, after all, on the heels of the 1990s development of so-called 'indie' fiction's counterpart, the 'Indie blockbuster,' or, "quality film hits that were initially profitable in the art cinema niche market" (De Valck 2007, 209) but that, like the film *Juno*, crossover to commercial success.

De Valck charts the rise of indie blockbusters - usually films produced by large studio subsidiaries and made for fractions of a typical Hollywood budget while still upholding an "indie" aesthetic, as well as serious, challenging and quirky qualities now familiar to the genre. She argues that the discovery of "art cinema" and indie films as economically viable alternatives to Hollywood fare was one of the key shifts in the 90s that lead to a "new festival era" (Ibid). The combination of niche filmmaking and new

profit possibilities were incubated in the festival circuit, where "the film industry for festival films became professionalized. Sales agents and lawyers were the new key players at the negotiation table" (Ibid). Interestingly, anecdotal evidence gathered through discussions with documentary filmmakers at Hot Docs suggests that commercial practices, marked by Tribeca and Sundance-like programming and "the rise of the sales agent" are now upon the doc industry, as is the predominance of big budget documentaries, many of which are docbusters.[37]

If the champion form is the mainstream, populist documentary (distinguished in the docbuster), does this indicate a pure economic trend, an audience inclination, a marketing effort by film festivals, or a combination of several factors? For my purposes, I'm interested in one factor: the ways in which the commercial festival circuit, with Hot Docs and Sundance leading the pack in Canada, and the US, respectively, incubates and solidifies the qualities of the docbuster into convention. Or put differently, the extra-textual characteristics associated with the docbuster provide insight into the direction commercial documentary film festivals like Hot Docs are heading.

As a model for pulling documentaries out of the alternative ghetto and audiences into paid-for seats, the docbuster services the twin process needs of mainstreaming and commercialization. The model films are infused with populist impulses found in *Babies* and the festival apparatus at Hot Docs services the films through populist discourse and

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[37] Sales agents, which have been common at fiction-dominated festivals for decades and herald from the mainstream commercial system, are rights-buyers of documentaries, who then in turn sell those rights to distributors and broadcasters, creating, as some maintain, another mouth to feed in a chain with few resources. For an interesting interview with a sales agent working mainly in fiction, but discussing festivals, see: http://www.thefilmcollaborative.org/blog/2012/11/the-state-of-international-sales-for-independent-films/ (Accessed 2013-08-19).

programming as well as marketing.[38] The purpose for following such a code so rigorously at Hot Docs is to adhere to a formula that is designed to pull documentary cinema from the fringes into the centre where audience attention/appreciation can be maximized as can commercial potential both for industry and for the festival's budget figures. This strategy points to De Valck's argument which posits a new turn in the festival network, where, "one can also observe important diversions taking place (in both programming and pre-programming practices) that result in the inclusion of larger interest groups, namely the industries and the audiences" (2007, 209). As it is with other genres, practices and forms in art, media and culture, moving to the middle from the periphery increases the potential for monetization and is part of a larger process of professionalization, mass appeal and mass commercialization. If "indie blockbusters" like *Little Miss Sunshine* and *Garden State* are seen to elevate the alternative fiction cinema from obscure margins to popularity and robust ticket sales—including at festivals like Sundance[39]—why wouldn't the documentary world want its own hits to perform a similar function?

Of course, by focusing programming on doc hits (and docbusters) like *Reporter* (2009*), *The Cove* (2009*), *The Fog of War* (2010*), *Dragon Slayer* (2011*), *Becoming Chaz* (2011*) and *The Imposter* (2012*) Hot Docs isn't exclusively interested in making money. The festival also tries to raise the profile of the documentary form and "make

[38] While no in-festival specialized marketing for *Babies* was detected, there certainly was for the other two docbuster films that lead the following two chapters. With *POM Wonderful* Spurlock was present as were vendors of POM Wonderful Juice, who handed out free samples after screenings. With *Ai Weiwei: Never Sorry* an artist was commissioned to sculpt a life-size cardboard sculpture of the artist, which was placed in the entrance to the opening night cocktails gala event.

[39] *EW.com* writes: "Yes, the Sundance Film Festival is a temple to the glory of independent film and the purity of the art of cinema and blah blah blah. But it is also a vital marketplace for indie distributors to find the next blockbuster "Little Miss Sunshine," or acclaimed "Beasts of the Southern Wild," or wildly overpriced "Happy, Texas." Source: http://www.cnn.com/2013/01/24/showbiz/movies/sundance-2013-sold-ew (Accessed 2013-09-12).

distinctions in the world's annual film production by adding value and cultural capital" (De Valck & Soeteman 2010, 291). This can benefit directors and producers by providing a platform for screening films that would otherwise remain unseen and unelevated. However, the organization of this cultural capital can be leveraged for the festival's own self-preservation. As De Valck argues, "Festivals are not only concerned with films and filmmakers, bestowing them with cultural value but also with their own survival" (2007, 207). And yet the argument here is that these functions are becoming largely subservient to 'docbusting' processes that are meant to attract large audiences whose ticket sales can be leveraged as a core operational income source for the institution. Whereas the former, that of adding value to and increasing capital potential of films, is achieved through programming inclusion and special slots (such as opening nights or retrospectives), as well as prizes and awards, the real bread and butter for commercial festivals like Hot Docs is the added *economic* value that comes from mass appeal docbusters like *Babies*: accessible, pleasurable and uncomplicated films that pack venues with admission-paying audiences.

The Affective Space of the Festival

> It's not often that a documentary with no narration, subtitles or dialogue steals the hearts of millions of moviegoers. But put four adorable infants on the big screen and you might just have a shot.[40]

The Oprah quote above highlights the winning combination present in the docbuster *Babies* but also begs an investigation into the institutions that champion such films. Documentary has a rich and diverse history of speaking truth to power, of upsetting

[40] Oprah, http://www.oprah.com/oprahshow/The-Making-of-the-Documentary-Babies#ixzz1zqkQtG2s (Accessed: 2012-03-14).

the status quo and opposing dominant regimes of social organization and oppression (Zimmermann 2000). With this trajectory in mind, and with the acknowledgement that scores of these kinds of films are produced each year, it is indeed interesting to look at the mainstream, commercial environment and atmosphere Hot Docs annually constructs. While the previous section built on a textual analysis of *Babies* to argue for the particular formal characteristics of 'docbusters' as a whole, this final section will look toward a material analysis of the space of exhibition and continue to argue for the particularity of a festival 'structure of feeling' created and maintained by the opening screenings.

Festival space is an affective space (Hongwei 2010) where myriad cultural symbols, messages and signifiers converge on screens and in social spaces around the screens, competing for attention and contributing to the ways in which we "take in" the festival, or the way the festival feels, not to mention the encounters between people. At Hot Docs, the affective space is, like other commercial festivals, created along lines of inclusion and exclusion and is highly regulated. Officially designated social gatherings are held in spaces that are not usually accessible, without payment, to the general public. Post-screening Q&As are hurried: they are kept to under ten minutes so that audiences can be cleared in time for the next film screening. Festival ushers break up small, diverse group discussions that form in the cinemas and attached lobbies following the requisite ten minutes.[41] After ten years of going to and organizing documentary screenings, I can say with certainty that the films often inspire debate and dialogue, and effectively extinguishing that inspired reaction following a screening speaks to the managerial space of festival efficiency. It does not correspond to the festival's rhetoric of participation and

[41] Ushers and festival volunteers regularly inform audience members of the need to clear the space for the next screening.

diversity, where cultural encounters are meant to signify a vibrant, multicultural event of exchange.

Which elements are absent from the social spaces of Hot Docs are as illustrative of the lack of diversity as those that are present. Absent are tables for activist, cultural, and civil society groups to display and distribute their material, a common sight at community screenings. Absent are activist and civil-society guests-of-honour, invitees, and speakers. Absent are any such networks that may connect audiences and involve them in the issues they may have just seen on the screen. The rushed efficiency and harried movement is instead akin to a very business-like feeling that flattens out diversity and exchange as does *Babies*, and instead creates a commercial environment[42] best suited for consumption and commodification.[43]

SooJeong Ahn writes that "Audiences experience and reaffirm the sense of film festivals as events in real places as well…while film festivals as a system embody complex global negotiations, individual festivals occupy concrete spaces, histories and contexts" (In Wong 2011, 10). The complex global negotiations and the concrete spaces, histories and contexts of Hot Docs are highly structured and managed in a framework that befits a commercial model of cultural exchange, over that of community. Aside from

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[42] Fitting for such an environment, audience members are told by volunteers after each screening, on the way out of the venue, to indicate their rating on the ticket, by saying: "Your ticket is your ballot!" The ticket represents a capital transaction, where culture is accessed via pecuniary capability, and later that symbolic object of capital can be translated into a civic or political action by voting. The model suggests a kind of consumer-citizen participation, where other ways to create meaning, or to meaningfully become involved are trumped by a necessity to keep spaces clean of non-commercial or non-festival-approved materials, and to keep an efficient turn over of audiences by quickly ushering them out, with a quick vote on the way. This mimics or embodies the neoliberal notion that the market is the most efficient mode of determining and distributing value at a societal level.

[43] It should be noted that industry events like cocktail parties are totally different. While consumption is still foregrounded, in the way of food and alcohol, these spaces are specifically designed to facilitate exchange and encounter, among and between industry professionals, not regular attending audiences however.

watching the films, possibly asking one of the three allotted audience questions, or chatting with other attendees at exclusive gatherings, the documentary public is constrained to consumptive practices structured by a system of capital and shaped by populist programming strategy and liberal politics that infer a political sphere rather than facilitate the existence of one.

Returning to *Babies*, many audience members[44] complained after the film that with so many pressing issues in the world at the moment, it was incomprehensible that Hot Docs would open with an apolitical, commentary-free, observational documentary – thus prefiguring an apolitical post-screening space. Inspired by this reaction, three filmmakers and I[45] asked ourselves whether the festival would have allowed a component of the screening to be a kind of information dissemination and access event for involvement around the Nestlé baby formula campaign and boycott.[46] Given the fact that no activist spaces are present at Hot Docs and Nestlé is a Hot Docs sponsor, we knew our answer. In other words, the commercial space of the festival, as the affective corollary to ideology (the 'common-sense' of emotion), determines that anything beyond liberalist politics seems unacceptable. While Hot Docs provides screening space for a global range of documentary voices, the cultural politics of the affective space of the festival is decidedly one of managed uniformity, itself a corollary to universalism.

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[44] "Many" referes to the dozen or so audience members overheard discussing the film as well as the six-to-seven individuals the author directly spoke with about their impressions.

[45] All three wish to remain anonymous. The conversation took place after the *Babies* screening, on opening night of the 2010 Hot Docs festival.

[46] The campaign is a reaction to Nestlé's activities in influencing African mothers to use their baby formula instead of breast milk. More here: http://babymilkaction.org/nestlefree (Accessed 2013-11-01).

Bike Bells and Sponsorship Strategy

To illustrate, I'll briefly turn to a real example of an intervention that took place in 2006, in response to a new corporate sponsor pre-film advert projected at the festival. Hot Docs had selected the documentary about consumer advocate and anti-corporate activist Ralph Nader, *An Unreasonable Man* (2006*), to screen the same year the festival signed a sponsorship deal with General Motors (GM).[47] The Ford marketing involved high visibility logos and adverts at the festival but the most controversial was a video advert[48] for the Ford Cadillac Escalade (a model not known for its fuel efficiency) that played before every film at the festival. Audience members apparently took issue with the screening of the advert, especially before a film about Nader, and began booing the ad at screenings. By the third day, dozens of audience members were bringing bike bells to screenings and ringing them in unison with the booing, in an effective effort to drown out the advert. This was a rare moment of audience-led collective dissent at the festival, and put into relief the tension between progressive political action and mainstream commercialism, the cultural politics of which are captured nicely in the following letter to Toronto's culture weekly, *Now Magazine*:

> Smells like mean spirit
> Letter-writer Mark Shouldice applauds the chorus of boos from many in the audience that "challenged the Cadillac Escalade commercials that preceded all screenings" at the recent Hot Docs festival (NOW, May 11-17). The audience certainly enjoyed the irony of GM sponsoring a festival that screened the Ralph Nader biography *An Unreasonable Man*. By the third day of the festival, booing the Escalade commercial had become quite the running gag. At least I hope that's all it was. I'm as mindful as anyone of the evils multinationals inflict. But in my opinion gleefully booing a company whose sponsorship helps enable the top-quality festival you're attending reeks of smug, pseudo-activist hypocrisy.

[47] Nader is known for confronting and opposing corporate malfeasance in the American auto industry.

[48] The advert can be viewed here: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oa3qnIGP4RA (Accessed 2013-11-01).

Alistair Wentworth.[49]

The above letter shows how a populist-liberal attitude also manifests in audience members who attend Hot Docs. Wentworth (and likely others in attendance not booing or ringing bike bells) is more sympathetic to the festival's relationship with its corporate sponsor than with the contradiction of showing such an advert before a documentary about an anti-corporate activist.

For its part, Hot Docs acknowledged reception of a message from those audience members responsible for the political intervention. In an interview with then Managing Director Brett Hendrie, he remembered the festival's response: "We definitely heard our audience and learned a lesson. At future editions we have taken care to not mismatch the commercial spots with the film that plays after."[50] In other words, the lesson learned wasn't that the audience does not want to see ads for gas-guzzling vehicles from a large corporation. Instead the message is one of damage control and business management: how to better match advertising with programming. This illustrates Hot Docs' approach to constructing and managing the social spaces of the festival - participation and activity should be limited to consumption, and when contesting views or actions disrupt the status quo flow of consumption, steps must be taken to revert to the business model. Things that 'feel uncomfortable' simply cannot fit into the affective space of the festival, since participation is limited to the domain of consumption rather than action or agitation. As in the classical political economy of Adam Smith, antagonism comes to be mediated through a monetary relation, reducing the overt execution of power over others but

[49] Source: http://www.nowtoronto.com/news/story.cfm?content=153480&archive=25,38,2006-.cfm (Accessed 2012-02-13).

[50] Brett Hendrie, interviewed by author, Toronto, ON, Marc, 2012.

relaying it through a new relationship of domination – that of an empty formal equality, the likes of which are found in films like *Babies*.

This empty formal equality, equally present in the programming decisions, and the way space is structured at the festival, manifests itself at another level of the festival – that of the internal composition of those directing the festival. Each year for the last six, the popular press and the organization's own discourse has touted Hot Docs as a huge, growing success. From both the popular press and the institution itself there has been a focus on increasing screenings, initiatives, and audiences as well as on programming. In their internal 2010 annual report, Hot Docs writes: "Hot Docs' identity is strongly associated with intelligence, innovation, playfulness, and relevance. Hot Docs cultivates new audiences and customers through a diversity of programming choices, geographical expansion, extensive marketing and outreach, and the creative use of all technologies available" (Hot Docs Annual Report 2010, 22). As key marketing words Hot Docs consciously avoids terminology that may indicate a space of political debate, agonism, or even antagonism. Instead, their description is one that is keenly in line with business and technology public relations.

That said, nearly every Hot Docs premiere press release announcing the line up of each year's festival uses the word, or words synonymous with, "diversity." The popular press, not missing a beat, follows suit, as with the following *Variety* headline: "Hot Docs unveils eclectic slate" (March 24, 2010). Diversity is nearly always linked to the films and the subjects in the films (who are sometimes invited as guests). But are the spaces of the festival offering up cultural, social and political diversity? And, lastly: is the same

level of diversity reflected in management, programmers, with decision-makers at the festival?

Public Diversity, Private Homogeneity

Hot Docs management and decision-makers lack diversity as a group. Diversity refers to various aspects of representation (who is represented, how, by whom, etc), from gender to sexuality to race and ethnicity to corporate identity and community. Looking at the highest decision-making body of the festival, the Board of Directors (BOD), helps to illustrate a disconnection between the public image of diversity of representation and the actual internal homogeneity of the festival's operations. Whereas *Babies* champions feel-good multiculturalism, the institution promoting *Babies* mirrors another kind of surface diversity. Of twenty-two Board members (in 2012) seven are female, twelve have corporate backgrounds, eighteen are owners of production companies, and none are people of colour. Looking at the programming staff a similar picture of homogeneity emerges: of the seventeen programming staff there are two individuals whose ethnicity is not Caucasian (one Latino and one Métis programmer). In fact, when considering the entire staff of the festival, over sixty people, less than ten percent are people of colour. Speaking with one festival administrator who self-identifies as "Asian" about the race and ethnic makeup of the festival's management and staff, she admitted to me that this topic is discussed among the people of colour who work at the festival but "isn't on the radar" of upper management, and was pleased to hear someone was taking an interest: "It's great that you are looking critically at the diversity of the festival. We often say, sarcastically, that Hot Docs is diverse if you look at the volunteers and the mostly Asian

workers tapping away on keyboards doing administrative work, but the decision-makers and important people of the festival are all white."[51] This festival worker finally added: "What's frustrating is Toronto is diverse. Documentary subjects are diverse. It's [Hot Docs] supposedly all about diversity, but internally that isn't the case at all" (Ibid).

The strong corporate presence and lack of civil society representation on the BOD, the lack of ethnic diversity in upper management staff and on the BOD, as well as with programmers, and in marketing and communications, suggests that the festival is concerned with a PR image of diversity,[52] but does not actively pursue such an agenda in the structure and management of the festival. This *diversity gap* connects with arguments made within critical race theory that diversity is often leveraged as a public strategy to create progressive images of institutions, while the very same institutions reinforce hierarchies of inclusion and exclusion that shut out people of colour from decision-making positions in organizations.[53] This level of promotional, but not structural, diversity recalls *Babies'* multiculturalism, a glossed-over and intangible fantasy of equality that masks underlying structures of hierarchy and inequity.

The behind-the-scenes lack of diversity at Hot Docs presents a crisis of representation for a festival that trades on diversity and that has become one of the most important cultural gatekeepers both for the genre and for the culture of documentary. Yet this crisis has gone unexamined, which further shows the continued and widening

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[51] "Lee," interviewed by author, Toronto, ON, April 2012.

[52] As an aesthetic evaluation of twenty years of program covers, where diversity reigns, reveals.

[53] This diversity gap not only exposes the disconnect between the diversity on screen and behind the scenes at Hot Docs, but the gap between the festival's management and staff ethnic makeup and that of Toronto, one of the "most multicultural cities in the world," where in 2006 only a little over 26% of the city was made up of individuals of European origin. Source: http://www.toronto.ca/toronto_facts/diversity.htm (Accessed 2013-09-09).

disconnect between Hot Docs and the communities associated with documentary subjects, topics, and indeed screenings. Much as *Babies* is mythically structured as a 'One World Parable,' so the internal organization of the festival puts on a veneer of diversity while continuing to re-enforce inequalities by failing to acknowledge the need to proactively engage those differences. As such, Hot Docs could be said to embody a "One World Festival" aura – a manufactured diversity that does not match the felt spaces of the festival.

CONCLUSION

At a number of levels, from the internal organization of the Board of Directors to the programming choices, and from the affective environment of consumption, efficiency and apoliticalness at the festival to the formal/textual qualities of the docbusters chosen to open the festival, everywhere we find a discourse and presentation of inclusion and diversity that masks over the reality that politics as an antagonistic relationship to power and hegemony are either invisible or unwelcome. Instead, a post-political populism reigns, in which we all ostensibly participate in a 'One World Parable' of a globalism without friction. This recalls Nichols's 1994 essay on TIFF where he wrote that "the political will be refracted not only by our own repertoire of theories, methods, assumptions, and values, but also by our limited knowledge of corresponding concepts in the culture to which we attend" (19). *Babies* personifies the guiding vision, affective space and logic of the Hot Docs festival, where Western-oriented global audiences are given the opportunity, the paid-for privilege, to attend to other cultures through a mediation process that is politically refracted by not only our own internal repertoires, but

by the festival's structure of feeling as well. If the politics of difference is flattened to the equality narrative and diversity becomes pretty window-dressing for Multiculturalism, then a festival like Hot Docs is missing so many other political opportunities to "show what documentary can do," and as such, brackets out and marginalizes the countless other narratives and expressions on display that disrupt, contest and confront the kind of Western, liberal, consumer-oriented one championed in *Babies* at Hot Docs.

CHAPTER 4 - SELLING OUT AND BUYING IN: POM WONDERFUL AND THE COMMODIFICATION OF DOCUMENTARY

> Remember, it's entertainment that inspires social change … It's not social change that's entertaining. (Evan Shapiro, on new "social action entertainment" channel Pivot)[1]

INTRODUCTION

As I walked into the reception room for the opening night gala at the 2011 edition of Hot Docs it was difficult to miss the commotion just to the right of the vast space of vaulted ceilings, renaissance sculptures, imposing floral arrangements and vast tables of finger food and libations, frenetic as it was with the hustle-bustle of hundreds of mingling guests. Camera flashes were bursting repeatedly and shrieks of laughter could be heard from the spot where a giant cut-out poster advertising the opening night's film, *POM Wonderful Presents: The Greatest Movie Ever Sold* (*TGMES*), towered up above festivalgoers' heads.[2] The large yellow poster featured a nearly naked Morgan Spurlock strategically covered with sponsorship logos and brand names, as he grinned and pointed at his groin, which was covered with a white sign that displayed the documentary's lengthy title. And there in front of the promotional signage, standing in front of a marketing representation of himself, was Morgan Spurlock in the flesh and blood – still very much a marketing representation, donned as he was in a suit covered in logos head-to-toe and hamming it up for the cameras while pointing to the placard of himself, eerily replicating the exact expression his own countenance beamed out from the poster. It was

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[1] Adam Benzine, "Pivot's Shapiro: 'We are a general entertainment network,'" Realscreen, http://realscreen.com/2013/03/28/pivots-shapiro-we-are-a-general-entertainment-network/ (Accessed 2013-05-25).

[2] POM Wonderful is an American juice company that sells pomegranate juice in signature bubbly bottles.

a triumphant, if short-lived, moment of self-referential branding which completed the cycle of marketing that began with Spurlock himself.

The intrepid producer and filmmaker was at the festival to promote his new documentary, to be sure, yet he was also there to promote himself—his brand—and perhaps less obviously, the festival itself. Wearing his then signature festival circuit outfit, a business suit made up of the same logos and brand names on the promo poster, the charismatic producer-director mugged for the cameras and posed with fans and random festival attendees, literally embodying the process of cultural commodification - in this case, of documentary culture. Personifying the brazen and largely uncritical provocation contained in his film, a documentary that extols the uncharted path of producing a documentary through corporate sponsorship and product placement, the filmmaker famous for questioning the nutritional value of McDonald's in *Super Size Me* (2004) grinned for the cameras as he stood abreast of the film's tag line, prominently displayed on the large, lit poster: "He's not selling out, he's buying in."

This chapter intends to not only tease out the divergent culture/capital forces at play in the process of cultural commodification at Hot Docs, but "to mobilize this complexity in aid of rethinking the effects that commodified forms of culture have on the potential for different types of human experience" (Gunster 2004, 8). That is, like the vein of critical theory in which Gunster positions himself, I am interested in how the process of commodification impacts subjectivity, particularly when a relatively non-commodified form – the documentary – is produced and disseminated with exchange rather than use value in mind. Spurlock, particularly through his most recent film, *TGMES*, embodies these changes, self-reflexively filming the process by which he searches to not only 'sell'

his film, but to 'buy in' to the process itself. That is, the commodity-form is not only imposed externally on the finished product for the purpose of exchange, but in fact re-organizes production itself, taking it upon itself in the very act of making the documentary. And while we can extract critical lessons from this example, Spurlock seems to uncritically embrace the process as though it were a template for future production. Distressingly, film festivals, Hot Docs included, have mirrored this process of re-organizing production by partnering with NGOs[3] for the purposes of producing 'do good' single message films, and so Spurlock's anticipatory stance could well increasingly come to pass. Thus this chapter aims to understand the commodification of documentary in both its subjective effects as what we imagine to be socially possible, as well as its objective changes in the production of documentary itself.

Marx famously noted in *Capital, Volume 1* (1867) that capital is not an object, but a process— and yet the commodity is the realization or articulation of capital as process, congealing in a product the contradictions of the society that produced it; that is, cultural commodification is the process of transforming ideas, knowledge and culture into things or products designed for consumption. Commodification as it is typically understood entails that production takes place for the end purpose of exchange rather than use. Experience can also be commodified – the experience of being entertained, for instance, is sold to customers at various media outlets (Miller 2006, 129). This includes film festivals, as De Valck indicates: "We can assert that festivals nowadays can both screen marginal films and offer commodified "experiences" that are popular in the present-day cultural economy. The commodification, however, does not necessarily point to a high-

[3] For a look at the rise of liberal and mainstream NGOs in conjunction with neoliberalism, see: http://www.socialistreview.org.uk/article.php?articlenumber=9868 (Accessed 2012-08-13).

low cultural divide, but can also be related to changes in regimes of perception brought about by the technological transformations" (2007 195).

Thus documentaries, rather than being constructed for a multitude of uses, of which I champion 'radical commitment,' are increasingly subservient in their production to the needs of exchange – of the numbers game. This process of commodification is not always immediately achieved but requires the slow mobilization of ideas and resources over time, and through institutions like Hot Docs. *TGMES* represents simply a particularly poignant moment in the commodification of the particular cultural environment of the documentary that—unlike its more commercial fiction film counterpart—has historically diverged from configurations of commodification and the valorization of consumer gratification and pleasure, or entertainment (Zimmermann 2000, 26). It is the unique configuration of documentary dissent and commercial consent that make for an interesting discussion of commodification as an underlying process at play in the intersection between culture and commerce at the site of the documentary film festival, and fully realized in this opening night film and the spaces around it.

AD NAUSEUM: POM WONDERFUL THE FILM

POM Wonderful: The Greatest Movie Ever Sold opens with upbeat bubbly music and handheld panorama shots of an advertising-saturated Times Square in New York City. Spurlock's signature buoyant hosting voice initiates what is near non-stop narration with the following quip: "Everywhere you look these days it seems someone is trying to sell you something." This scripted observation amounts to an ironic foreshadowing in the

sense that ultimately Spurlock is also trying to sell the audience member something: his film, his film's arguments, his film's sponsors' brands, and the Spurlock brand itself.

He then notes that "we" are inundated with advertising and marketing and with so much out there, "What's a poor multi-million dollar multinational corporation to do?" With his well-honed tongue-in-cheek style, Spurlock instantly positions himself as on the populist side with the commoner. In this way, as in *Babies*, Spurlock addresses and creates the 'common' person as though this were an internally homogenous group. His populism, unlike *Babies* (which doesn't even feign the existence of inequalities of power) relies on a dichotomy of those pulling the strings, in the know – the corporate elite – against everyone else, at least at the outset. Notably, he does this early in the film, thus positioning himself as a fellow traveler and guide - someone who has confronted corporations in previous endeavours, thus establishing the sense of trust that is his brand. By placing "poor" in front of "multi-national" Spurlock manages a subtle mocking of large successful businesses. The film's host and the audience very well know that the corporations in question are not impoverished, struggling, nor in any kind of marketing want. From the beginning then, the documentary hints at a kind of political activism, or at least an awareness of the vast inequity between the corporate elite and average citizens, thus helping to frame the film as a "bastion of free speech" battling the powers that be. In this way *TGMES*' director would seem to fit into the socially-conscious category of filmmakers that Aufderheide describes as: "… interlocutors with the public—that is, viewers in their role as democratic citizens and active members of their own society. They associate knowledge with the act of getting involved with political change and monitoring corruption" (2012, 21).

Seemingly aware of his cachet as a rabble-rousing corporate-prodding provocateur, Spurlock situates his documentary experiment neatly in the folds of "alternative media" through his own discourse, but inevitably creates a communication platform that obviates alternative qualities the film might seek to express. He mostly does this through narration and the odd interview with critical perspective. As an example, early on in the film he states the film's principle objective, one that is arguably shared with the goals of alternative media: "The goal of this film is transparency." Alternative media, among other things, seeks to be accessible, transparent, serve a community, animate social change, and challenge the status quo (Howley 2010, 1-12). As a check list one could seemingly check off most of the above, however reluctantly, in *TGMES*: accessible through the use of simple language and settings; transparent insofar as it is explicitly about making a film with corporate sponsors; serving a community of fans expecting a corporate critique of marketing; and lastly challenging an industry status quo that posits that documentaries cannot be funded through product placement, internal adverts, branded entertainment schemes and co-promotional corporate sponsorship schemes.

Soon after his sarcastic comment about "poor" corporations Spurlock enthusiastically narrates: "If I'm going to make a docbuster it seems these companies[4] are a good place to start." A quick montage of brand logos segues into the filmmaker's first meeting with industry elite, the two men behind Radical Media. In keeping pace with a veneer of soft-activism, Spurlock remains on 'our side' by taking us behind the scenes, into the belly of the beast of the marketing world, beginning with this highly profitable company. With top-selling clients in Hollywood and across the media spectrum, Radical

[4] This is a reference to the top four marketing corporations that, according to the film, control, in aggregate, over %75 of US marketing.

Media has made a huge impression in the industry, and so sitting down in their boardroom with the company's founders seems as good a place as any for Spurlock to seek out advice on how to initiate his film sponsorship project. What we do not learn is that Radical Media is the same company responsible for bullying activists — in 2012 the marketing giant threatened a UK activist media conference with a lawsuit because they had chosen the name "Radical Media" for their event.[5] It seems the company has registered the name as a trademark and, cynically, they police infractions aggressively. The exclusion of these facts, indeed an interesting side story that would help reveal even more about the inside of marketing and its avariciously ambitious tendencies, reveals Spurlock's real status as an entertainer who is interested in producing product for consumption rather than animating social change or challenging the effects of marketing and advertising. Entertainment certainly has its place, and many excellent documentaries are entertaining *and* informative for instance. It is a question, as Downing (2001) would say, of intent: is the intention to entertain or sell product, or perhaps both? Doc trailblazers like Spurlock trade on documentary's truth-claims while delivering entertainment, and confusing the two is problematic: "But critical discourses can also highlight what viewers value about a genre that is more about fact than fiction. They like how documentary leaves the question of reality open, compared with Reality TV, which has moved from the borderlands into entertainment" (Hill 2013, 87). Spurlock, as a borderlands entrepreneur perched between social documentary and pure entertainment,

[5] Jamie Love, "Marketing Company Trademarks 'Radical Media' Threatens To Sue Real Activists," Techdirt, http://www.techdirt.com/articles/20110501/00523214103/marketing-company-trademarks-radical-media-threatens-to-sue-real-activists.shtml (Accessed 2011-11-31).

strikes a problematic pose for the industry, yet is welcomed at Hot Docs without any critical context.

One aspect of alternative media is empowerment through the processes of production and reception (Rodriguez 2001). Docbusters that insincerely trade on alternative media currents like *TGMES* present a false or misleading sense of empowerment: the claim to empower audiences with the knowledge of the marketing and ad world is limited to descriptive narration, interspersed with observational montages of business meetings and micro-interviews with critical voices. The promise of empowerment is even acknowledged by Radical Media executive Robert Friedman when he says, upon hearing the pitch for Spurlock's film: "When you first hear it is the ultimate respect for an audience," because, aaccording to those in the film, of the level of transparency the film seeks to showcase. Spurlock responds, "We want it to be the *Iron Man* of documentaries"[6] and Friedman replies, "I *love* that you're selling out!" Later in the film another wealthy, successful adman corrects that earlier refrain and supplies the film with its tagline: "He's not selling out, he's buying in." The message is that accepting commercialism as a strategy doesn't contradict qualities associated with documentary culture, and is somehow different from selling out.[7]

Writing more than forty years ago, Bell noted that a principal "cultural contradiction of capitalism" at the time was that material means no longer determined social reality, at least not wholly, noting that "what is played out in the imagination of the

[6] The *Iron Man* franchise, produced by Hollywood studio Paramount Pictures (with Marvel enterprises) is well-known for bringing in massive capital returns through the twin marketing scheme of promoting the film itself (ticket sales and other cross-platform sales) and in-film product placement - its branded entertainment approach earning it kudos from the advertising and marketing work as well as calls for boycott from cultural critics, such as here: http://www.theguardian.com/film/filmblog/2008/may/05/ironman (Accessed 2013-08-08).

[7] The fact is, Spurlock has never been a committed political filmmaker and therefore is past selling out.

artist foreshadows, however dimly, the social reality of tomorrow" (1972, 11). Bell continued

> There is now in art—as there has increasingly been for the past hundred years—a dominant impulse towards the new and the original, a self-conscious search for future forms and sensations, so that the *idea* of change and novelty over-shadows the dimensions of actual change. And secondly, there has come about, in the last fifty years or so, a legitimation of this cultural impulse. (Bell 1972, 11-12; emphasis author)

Bell continued to discuss this "tradition of the new" (Ibid) as it was articulated in the economy, technology and other aspects of society. Inverting the classic Marxist paradigm however, the scholar was interested in the ways in which bourgeois culture responded less to a material (and industrial) reality, and instead explored the cultural implications of the logic of capital diffusing within culture, manifested in thought and imagination. The idea of perpetual change and novelty is a function of a market economy, organized around industry and guided by capitalism. This process implies differentiation of products without regard to underlying structural changes in what is on offer. Steady, unobstructed consumption necessitates differentiation, and this market externality applies to the realm of culture as well, as Gunster reflects: "…it is not far to the recognition that postmodern capitalism itself functions through the organized seeding of vast fields of cultural difference to maximize the volume and rate at which cultural commodities are harvested and exchanged" (2004, 249). 'Newness' then is a function and expression of the logic of capital at festivals, and novelty orders much of the festival experience (Loist 2012, 161). In this regard Hot Docs is but another seeded field yielding documentary products like *TGMES*.

With regards to Spurlock's novel experiment, the filmmaker introduces the idea of differentiation and novelty in the film itself, which in fact is not opposed to the logic of

capital, but rather an extension of free market logic into the realm of documentary cinema at the very level of production. As an expression of "branded entertainment" (Sayre 2008; Lehu 2009), Spurlock's film presents this idea of change and novelty as though it were a natural historical progression, as the filmmaker buys in or joins forces with the very industry that is ostensibly on the critical chopping block, and he wants the audience to buy in as well, selling the idea of wholesale complicity as a pleasurable experiment the audience can embark on, guided by the familiar and folksy director himself. As such it promises to be a *different* consumptive experience, similar to the promise of differentiation at Hot Docs, where the experience of multiculturalism is reducible to consumption.

The film's content is mostly made up of abrupt interviews with marketing and Hollywood industry men, a sprinkling of critical academic voices like Noam Chomsky and Ralph Nader[8] intercut with footage showing Spurlock in meetings and enjoying the use of sponsorship products like Mini Cooper cars, clothing, food and men's health products. Technically speaking the film is poorly made: poor camera handling, inconsistent sound, choppy editing, and the lack of a coherent compelling narrative make for a substandard and unremarkable film, were it not for the novelty of how the film was financed and made. This lack of technical acuity and compelling storytelling may explain why *TGMES* never reached Spurlock's deal with POM Wonderful juice of drawing $10 million at the commercial box office in exchange for $1 million in sponsorship money.[9]

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[8] Nader is subtly mocked when Spurlock gives him a new pair of shoes from one of the film's corporate sponsors, while extoling the virtues of the company for the camera.

[9] The insider-industry aspect of the film is indeed of interest to those working in the documentary milieu, as it offers a new method for funding and making docs in an era of damaging austerity measures, arts cutbacks, and channel-closing for the genre. That is, documentarians should begin to conceive of their projects as products of exchange from the get-go, and do away with the kind of motivations Steven (1993)

In one sequence of the film, the current dire climate for documentary—and the prospect of commodification as a viable solution—is constructed as allegorical to the current crisis in US public education. In the sequence Spurlock meets with public school administrators in Florida, who, faced with massive cuts to education programs and operational budgets, have turned to selling advertising space on school board vehicles and school property. Spurlock asks the administrator: "Why are people so against advertising in school?" To which she responds: "School is sacred and is meant for learning. But when you're in a school and your budget is getting cut…" At which point Spurlock interrupts her, finishing her sentence with "…you have to get creative." Smiling, he then proceeds to purchase advertising space from the school to eventually use for marketing the film's release.

Interestingly, this one scene from *TGMES* encapsulates the core of the film: a seemingly viable, and excitingly innovative solution to resuscitating an under-resourced and under-performing public resource is now available. It is now possible to commodify and commercialize that which was previously not. This model is, almost without exception, framed in the film as a win-win for all parties concerned (with little to no mention of the students, or the larger public). Introducing the logic of capital as an innocuous and indeed constructive market force that can assist and enable public culture—in Spurlock's case, public culture articulated in documentary cinema—is normalized, valorized and even made light of in the school sequences of *TGMES*. The US school system becomes a signifier for the documentary industry, where market solutions are sought to shore up a public and ailing system. The commodification of publicly

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documents with the new wave social documentarians of the time when Hot Docs first launched.

subsidized services and media is normalized through the entire film: if there is no money to make documentaries (from traditional sources like foundations, government programs and broadcasters) then it is only reasonable to turn to the marketplace of advertising, and embrace what Mark Fisher (2009) calls "capitalist realism" – that is to say, there is no alternative to the ordering meta-system, of which commodification and marketing are functioning parts.

CONSUMERISM, DOCUMENTARY & THE ARTIST-AS-ENTREPRENEUR

Spurlock, who has been quoted as saying that "documentary film has truly become the last bastion of free speech,"[10] is a filmmaker who trades on documentary's democratic, expressive, and educative qualities. Yet the business-savvy filmmaker seems—at least with his most recent projects—to have other objectives in mind than democracy and freedom of expression. Ostensibly, *POM Wonderful: The Greatest Movie Ever Sold* is a behind-the-scenes film about the world of marketing, advertising, corporate branding and sponsorship. Spurlock has claimed, at least to the Hot Docs opening night audience in 2011, that those who watch the documentary will "learn more about advertising and marketing than they ever imagined" and that the film will "change the way you look at advertising, TV and films." Trading on his reputation as a corporate muckraker and agit-prop provocateur established in the wake of his highly regarded documentary *Supersize Me*, with *TGMES* Spurlock performs a similarly-styled man-with-

[10] The full quote reads: "When the film-maker Morgan Spurlock told an American festival audience 'we live in a world where independent documentary film has truly become the last bastion of free speech' he won a round of applause from the packed house. Michael Chanan's wide-ranging and illuminating study of international documentary film-making re-reads its complex history and present flourishing from the perspective of this fundamentally democratic aim" (Description for *The Politics of Documentary*, Michael Chanan, 2007). Reference http://www.palgrave.com/products/title.aspx?pid=305329 (Accessed 2013-08-25).

the-microphone investigation into the behind-the-scenes annals of the corporate world. Where *Supersize Me* confronted the wholesome veneer of marketing and outright false claims made by food industry giant McDonald's, *TGMES* is a film about working *with* similarly large and profit-motivated enterprises, not against them. Where *Supersize Me* elicited a damage-control campaign on the part of McDonald's as they tried to counter the negative message in a popular film that convincingly showed the devastating health consequences of consuming the fast food chain's products for one month, *TGMES* extols the virtues of the multiple corporate partnerships between the documentary production and the corporations featured in its frames.

TGMES is, using Spurlock's own assessment, a docbuster that has enjoyed widespread circulation on the festival circuit, and has gone on to achieve an admirable box office success, with figures of $638,476 domestically,[11] as well as other commercial dividends including a distribution deal with Sony Classics and Netflix, sponsorship extensions and cross-platform sales through the film's "co-producing" brands like JetBlue Airlines (which promoted and played the film on flights) and POM Wonderful Juice.[12] *Deadline* has reported that Spurlock has even gone on to leverage his interactions with the brands featured in *TGMES* to start a new company, Warpaint, "a commercial production company that will serve as a home for innovative directors who are looking to expand their craft into more diverse and lucrative opportunities" (Fleming 2012).

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[11] Source: http://boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=greatestmovieeversold.htm (Accessed 2013-11-01). This figure doesn't come close to Spurlock's objectives of earning 10 million, but *TGMES* represents a docbuster-in-the-making, as the filmmaker self-described his film as such and as it paved the way for Spurlock's future endeavours, including directing boy band film *One Direction: This is Us*, which has incidentally earned nearly $70 million at time of writing. Source: http://boxofficemojo.com/people/chart/?view=Director&id=morganspurlock.htm (Accessed 2013-11-01).

[12] *POM Wonderful* promoted the film on their product packaging and in television commercials. Figures for the extended cross-platform and multiple product revenues are unavailable.

Spurlock himself states that, "After working directly with brands and advertising agencies in the placement exposé *The Greatest Movie Ever Sold*, as well as directing multiple commercial spots for other production companies, I saw an opportunity to create a much more director driven entity,"[13] highlighting the point that as an experiment in commodification, the project aims to reach well beyond the documentary itself. It's also interesting to note Spurlock's conflation of artistic freedom and commercial enterprise, where he implies that "buying in" isn't just good for business, it's also good for artistic integrity.

All this commercial activity for Spurlock is, much like *TGMES*, heralded as innovative and positive, with his brand of combining entertainment with "social action" considered a winning combination in the festival world, as well as in the industry literature. Popular culture and cinema trade magazine *Realscreen* placed Spurlock fifth in their "Trailblazers 2012" list, where the account of the director's trailblazing is peppered with the spoils of commodification: "Morgan Spurlock's diverse portfolio of creative ventures continues to expand year-on-year, and among the highlights for 2012 were the launch of a feature doc and web series with Yahoo!;[14] the launch of commercial production company Warpaint; a UK-based talk show; and even his own limited-edition action figure."[15] After outlining other deals with CNN and an upcoming 3D music video and documentary, the article concludes that "…you would be hard pressed to find a

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[13] Bob Marshall, "Morgan Spurlock and Friends Launch Commercial Production Company," AgencySpy, http://www.mediabistro.com/agencyspy/morgan-spurlock-and-friends-launch-commercial-production-company_b32773 (Accessed 2013-01-23).

[14] Both the film and series are called *Mansome*, about men's grooming habits and hosted by two celebrity actors from Hollywood.

[15] Realscreen, "Trailblazers 2012," http://realscreen.com/2013/01/25/realscreen-presents-trailblazers-2012-pt-2/ (Accessed 2013-01-28).

filmmaker who has better capitalized on their initial success" (Ibid). Further to that, Spurlock, it seems, has a philanthropic side:

> Not only that, but Spurlock has proven to be a consistent champion of the non-fiction industry, supporting short doc initiatives by Cinereach; partnering with U.S. fest DOC NYC for a branded content initiative; fronting a Current series reflecting on the greatest docs of all time; and joining the advisory board for the non-fiction industry's flagship confab, the Realscreen Summit.[16]

Realscreen not only lists Spurlock's achievements, but also frames them in the context of advocacy for documentary ("a consistent champion") as well as the unique occasion of the filmmaker's project of "branded content" with a documentary film festival (DOC NYC). Lastly, in a nod to promotional convergence, it is reported by *Realscreen* that Spurlock has joined the board of a *Realscreen* flagship initiative. Touted as a trailblazer for his multiple commercial projects, Spurlock is the champion of commodification in the documentary world, no longer merely agreeing to the terms of exchange imposed by capital, but internalizing the need to think in terms of exchange itself in the production of documentary, as though this were a troubling anticipation of a new 'culture of documentary' centred around commercially-oriented 'strategic vision' and 'brand recognition.' Looking at the strategic plan contained in the Hot Docs 2010 Report (the three-year plan is summarized in the report) one can see that the festival has met several goals, many of which are economic. It's original three-year projection for total self-generated income, for instance was $1.4 million (from $954,000 in 2007) and this was, apparently matched spot-on. External revenues (public and private sector partners) were projected to grow from $1.3 million in 2007 to $1.5, but managed to pass expectations and reached $2.62 million in 2010 (Hot Docs Annual Report 2010, 4). As the report

[16] Realscreen, "Trailblazers 2012," http://realscreen.com/2013/01/25/realscreen-presents-trailblazers-2012-pt-2/ (Accessed 2013-01-28).

states, showing "what documentaries can do is the driving force for the strategies" found in the plan (Ibid), yet the diminutive Section D, on "Films and Screenings" is revealing, when viewed alongside the economic indicators. Not only do the ratings, which are based on polled delegates (pass holders, not the general public, with 483 out of 2,028 invited completing the survey), show mediocre results, but there is no commentary indicating this is an aspect of the festival's strategy. Of note are the results for the question "Please rate the quality of the presentation of films (e.g. venues, technical quality) on a scale of 1 to 5" (Ibid). Ratings go from 3.7 in 2006 to 3.9 in 2010, indicating a fairly tepid response to the festival's screening space as well as a tepid response to the data. Priorities, it seems, are with revenues and those are increasing each year from ticket sales and sponsorship.

Returning to Spurlock and trailblazers listed in *Realscreen*, the entry below Spurlock on the Trailblazers 2012 list is (former) Hot Docs Executive Director Chris McDonald. The article introduces McDonald by way of checking off the many new initiatives that Hot Docs has launched under his purview, and following up with the usual rollout of impressive audience and film screening stats. McDonald rarely reveals insider's secrets, instead opting to adhere to the PR strategy for Hot Docs.[17] Still, when *Realscreen* asked the head of the festival what his bravest professional decision ever was, he shared a little piece of the mythic festival origins, the by-now conventional narrative of one individual turning around the festival, during the "New Management" phase (see Chapter Two):

[17] As with his response when asked about reflections on working with documentary, bridging both the art and business worlds: "It's very rewarding, and exciting….I think the work that we've been able to do in directly supporting artists in non-conventional ways, has motivated, the group, all of us" (Ibid).

> I guess it was to leave the comfort of the Canadian Film Centre 15 years ago and become Hot Docs' first full time employee, when there was no money, really no audience, and very little infrastructure. (Ibid)

Not only does this quote[18] reinforce the "official" history of Hot Docs, that the festival really took off and set in motion the popular success it is today only after 1999, the year McDonald took the helm, but the proximity of these two "trailblazers" on the *Realscreen* industry champions list reinforces the developing documentary convention of embracing its commercial aspects.

While Spurlock is only one filmmaker among many, his *doc-eponymous* significance resides in the self-conscious assumption (and ascension) of the variety of roles he has chosen to embody: the socially conscious artist, the entrepreneur, the doc-celebrity, and the crowd-pleasing performer. The latter three of these performative roles and identities fit well within the process of commodification and the cultural management of documentary culture. These qualities combine to make Spurlock a sure-fit for a documentary film festival interested in achieving mainstream status, sending journalists and audiences home feeling good from having been entertained by one of the few documentary filmmakers in the business who seems to have accepted the capitalist paradigm while keeping his alt credentials. In Miller's investigation of the "book wars" between independent sellers and the chains that entered the market in the 1990s, indie booksellers are cleverly designated as "reluctant capitalists" (2006). Spurlock, as an indie filmmaker at once performatively confronting the corporate bullies while working with them to produce his films, resembles less a reluctant capitalist than a reluctant activist.

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[18] The rest of the quote follows as such: "I left a cushy job to step into the unknown. I had a sweet deal – we had a swimming pool and a tennis court – and I moved to an office with literally no furniture. It was a big roll of the dice, but it was certainly the best and bravest decision I ever made" (Ibid).

McDonald and Hendrie, who were, according to Farnel,[19] worried about "offending" audiences with an artsy opening film one year, for their part, also negotiate the borderlands between art and commerce, at least in the pages of Hot Docs programs, where the two write: "…documentaries are not just good for the mind and soul, but also good for business" (Hot Docs Program 2013, 13).

BUYING IN TO DOING GOOD: SOCIAL CONSCIENCE AS SOCIAL COMMERCE

Another manner in which Hot Docs contributes to documentary consumerism is by facilitating the commodification of doing good. If there is one area of activity at Hot Docs that distresses former programmer Farnel, it is this aspect:

> [W]hat is troubling in the last five years is the commodification of goodness in documentary. The money that is coming into the forum [Hot Docs Forum, formally Toronto Documentary Forum or TDF] now is all about corporations and funders attaching themselves to a certain kind of goodness: this is good for society, for this cause, for this social issue, and what this means is it has totally impacted the filmmaking, because there are a lot of filmmakers willing to take the money to produce that goodness, but this has stifled the politics: the films are tame, they are pep-rally films made for everyone to agree on an issue, a kind of propaganda—sure a good propaganda, supporting things that we all love—but it's really doing a lot of damage to the form. (2013)

Commodification is not only the process of turning something into a commodity for consumption, it also has to do with bargaining for appeal and producing the need for consumption itself. The outcome is not entirely predictable for the financiers, producers, and marketers hoping to recoup and make money from investments in documentary. That is to say, in order to hedge the risk factor, certain kinds of films become more attractive than others, especially when prior docbusters have charted a path to festival and commercial success. If new wine can be poured into the old bottles and the label "doing

[19] Farnel, interview.

good" stuck on, then perhaps programmers, investors, funders and broadcasters will have another film like Sundance favourite *The Cove* (2009*) on their hands.[20]

The same year *The Cove* took the festival circuit by storm, the UK-based Sheffield documentary festival took on the topic of NGOs at a festival "session" (a panel discussion that requires a delegate pass to attend). Battle of Ideas, one of the session partners, reflecting on the session topic, writes: "When filmmakers are encouraged to promise 'associated outreach campaigns' to maximise the impact of their film and its message on behalf of social action funders, what distinguishes documentary film-making from mere political advertising?"[21] *Broadcast Now's* Katherine Rushton reports that session participant Nick Fraser (Editor of the BBC documentary strand "Storyville") "slams NGO 'propaganda' docs" while still saying "high quality NGO docs, such as *The Cove*," have their place (March 31, 2009).[22] Intriguingly, much of the hand wringing over the increased involvement of NGOs in documentary cinema is related to the decline of so-called "impartial journalism" (Ibid). The rise of NGO documentaries, or Fraser's term "campaigning journalism" (Ibid), is worrisome for Fraser and Farnel, who are troubled by NGOs' affecting the outcome of documentaries. Of course NGOs are not merely filling the gap left from "impartial" investigative and news journalism, but are filling a funding gap exacerbated by austerity measures and other public funding cutbacks. Lastly, NGOs provide much-needed infrastructure to support outreach campaigns that many social

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[20] *The Cove*, which exposes the slaughter of dolphins by Japanese fishers, triumphed on the festival circuit and has since grossed nearly $1.2 million in box office revenue (http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=cove09.htm). The documentary, which won the Audience Award at the 25th Annual Sundance Festival in 2009 and 24 other major awards, was made in collaboration with a host of NGOs working on the issue, notably Ocean Alliance and Animal Welfare Institute (more here: http://www.takepart.com/cove).

[21] Source: http://www.battleofideas.org.uk/index.php/2009/session_detail/2683/ (Accessed 2013-08-23).

[22] Katherine Rushton, "BBC Storyville chief slams NGO 'propaganda' docs," http://www.broadcastnow.co.uk/bbc-storyville-chief-slams-ngo-propaganda-docs/2014809.article (Accessed 2012-03-16).

justice documentary filmmakers look for, and are simply incapable of providing themselves.

If NGO steering is cause for concern, it is fascinating that little concern has been expressed over Spurlock's model. This could be because *TGMES* is seen as an anomaly in the industry, whereas it takes such forces forming a concrete and noticeable trend before a fevered pitch is expressed in the documentary community. But for-profit entities have been quietly influencing documentaries, even commissioning them, for years.[23] Still, where sponsorship in fiction is much more entrenched and accepted, documentary is in a unique position in making claims on truth and actuality that can serve as a register for anxieties around impartiality and objectivity.

When NGOs (or corporations for that matter) collaborate with documentary filmmakers, which kinds of documentaries are produced and which are not? Based on NGO docs that have drawn attention and critical acclaim at Hot Docs in the last five years, the films tend to have liberal politics, populist entertainment qualities, and are oriented around consumption, such as works like *An Inconvenient Truth*, *The Cove* and *Blackfish* (2013*). While there are exceptions,[24] the form of such films has a "take away" that is tailored to consumer-oriented action such as buying the right light bulbs, boycotting certain restaurants or aquatic theme parks, respectively. Farnel, continuing his discussion of NGO docs, worries these films ultimately scale back the political in favour of wide appeal:

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[23] The corporate promotional video *Carbon for Water* (2011) comes to mind – a documentary produced by the company featured in the film and that has won numerous awards at environmental festivals.

[24] Greenpeace Canada commissioned Canadian documentarian Peter Mettler to make a film on the Alberta Tar Sands and the result is a stunning, abstract and commercially unfriendly polemic against the industrial project called *Petropolis* (2012*).

> The so-called political films are really tame, not dangerous and not changing minds…just reasserting common opinions that the people that go to documentary films already have…[these are] documentaries made as campaign and advocacy films for audio-visual infants… other political films don't get the festival exposure because they're seen to be too difficult for audiences…It's also doing damage to the political effectiveness to the films, because the audiences are becoming deadened to the form: OK here's another documentary that is going to make me horrified it will have told me everything I need to know…That kind of commodification is problematic and it's all about where the money is coming from. Now the deliverable is goodness and this has taken the danger out.[25]

It is interesting that Farnel links this to NGO docs through commodification. Part of the commercial imperative is of course having products that are easily consumed, and this objective seems to often dovetail with larger, more established and mainstream NGOs[26] who are looking to communicate their message to as wide as audience as possible, and at Hot Docs in the form of the liberal consensus documentary.

What these films have in common with *TGMES* and *Ai Weiwei: Never Sorry*, the documentary considered in the next chapter, is that they are 'take action' docs trading on both documentary's association with truth-telling and the social justice imperative. Influenced or infused with the consumer impulse either through NGO participation, corporate sponsorship or audience reach objectives, all are documentaries that have leveraged huge cultural, political and economic capital to tell stories that compel audiences to consider a societal issue, dressed in form and follow-through that suits the current structure of feeling. And whereas NGO collaborators contribute with outreach campaigns, festivals, including Hot Docs, help add value in other ways.

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[25] Farnel, interview.

[26] That is to say, NGOs that also happen to frame politics and action in Western liberal constructions around rights and deliberative democracy - such as Amnesty International, Greenpeace and Human Rights Watch.

POSITIVE SOCIAL CHANGE FOR CONSUMPTION

Much has been written of "value-adding" at festivals (De Valck 2007) whereby cultural artefacts accumulate value by virtue of their association with certain festival brands. The Sundance Festival is one such recognized brand in the industry, and Hot Docs is jockeying for its own brand-recognition as well, having in the last five years initiated multiple cross-platform consumer ventures. Folding into the brand the notion of "doing good," Hot Docs inaugurated "the Good Pitch" in 2011, based on an established model carried out at other festivals in previous years:

> The inaugural Good Pitch was held at the BRITDOC Film Festival in 2008, aiming to maximize and broaden the impact of those documentaries dealing with positive social change. After leaving Hot Docs, the Good Pitch will also make stops at this year's SILVERDOCS Festival as well as IFP's Independent Film Week in New York City. The Good Pitch at Hot Docs is supported by Fledging Find, Working Films, CIDA, The Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade Canada, and Canadian Lawyers for International Human Rights. (Hot Docs)[27]

"Positive social change" is not only mediated in sidebar programs like "Small Acts" and talks on how to entertain and change the world, but also through the establishment of initiatives, funds and other production-oriented configurations at the festival. From the list above, one notices that it isn't just NGOs who are shaping the vision of doing good in documentary, but government agencies as well, recalling Druick's discussion of the role governments play in mediating education and De Valck (2007) discussion of the declining role states play in international film festivals. These new social good configurations not only offer a reimagined way for the state to be involved in film festivals, but offer a chance to be affiliated with PR-friendly initiatives as well. They of course also offer an avenue for private business (like General Motors or Coca-Cola) to

[27] Source: http://www.hotdocs.ca/media/press_releases/hot_docs_toronto_documenary_forum_focuses_on_human_rights_issues_with_the_g (Accessed 2012-07-01).

make inroads to "doing good." Giroux warns of this trend when he asserts: "The lack of political imagination that permeates mainstream culture is matched by a lack of collective outrage against glaring material inequities and by the growing belief that today's culture of investment and finance makes it possible to address major social problems…" (2000, 507). Finally, these new ventures, by virtue of moving toward mass appeal, reinforce the dominant discourse of human rights at festivals (Iordanova and Torchin 2012). This focus ultimately brackets out other kinds of interpretations of "doing good" like anti-capitalism, direct action, or anarchist philosophy, to name a few.

Commenting on the ways in which Human Rights discourse dominates mainstream discussions of activism at commercial film festivals, Iordanova and Torchin imply that Human Rights film festivals "function like the earlier European film festivals: as sites for celebrating alternatives to Hollywood, its industry and aesthetics" (2012, 3). They admit that, while the festival site functions in part as a "performative pulpit" (Ibid, 7) for activists to voice their concerns (at HR festivals), festivals engaging in social good agendas also "…provide an appealing opportunity for image laundering and propaganda. Both the public and private sectors can benefit by becoming investing partners and associating their brands with a high-level ethically and socially responsible event" (Grassilli, 42). This kind of doing good PR partnership culminated at Hot Docs three editions earlier, when the festival collaborated with one of the world's worst human rights and environmental abusing corporations, Coca-Cola,[28] allowing the company to serve as the festival's environmental films sponsor. Consuming good therefore takes on

[28] See Saint Joseph's University Students for Workers' Rights information packet on Coca-Cola's labour abuses for one example: http://org.ntnu.no/attac/dokumentene/cocacola/cokeinfopacket.pdf (Accessed 2013-10-04).

twin effects as audiences consume the goodness found in the environmental films as well as Coca-Cola's greenwashing, despite the company's own record on the environment.[29]

DOCBUSTERS & MASS APPEAL PROGRAMMING

While Grassilli warns of the above situation contaminating programming, where "They [sponsors] can in turn, however, use their funding to pressure or influence the programme according to their own needs and wishes" (2012, 42), Hot Docs organizers deny any such crossover between the business and art sides of the festival.[30] However, for a festival moving in a mainstream direction, these kinds of partnerships (doing good partnerships) help the festival, its partners and films, associate with positive consumer-oriented campaigns around social justice and the environment. In this regard, *TGMES* works as the perfect consumer-oriented 'do good' opening film. What is interesting about the decision to lead with *TGMES* is that Farnel, despite his opposition to "safe" NGO films, admits that programming *TGMES* was ultimately a safe decision:

> *POM Wonderful* was a good opening night film at Hot Docs for a number of reasons. Its director is the closest we have to a star in documentary culture, and this presented us with one of the few opportunities we have had to do what fiction festivals do that all the time. I like the film as entertainment, because it is a business story a lot in the audience will like it, I knew it wasn't dangerous, Chris [McDonald] and Brett [Hendrie] were nervous it would offend people. There are too many layers of irony to offend. It was a good opening night film, but as a political film it's pretty soft. But the film is clever: there are a few moments of self-awareness around consumerism and media and advertising but nothing in the film that will change people's lives.[31]

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[29] For more on this, see *The Economist* story that details the charges laid against the company in India: http://www.economist.com/node/4492835 (Accessed 2013-08-02).

[30] McDonald and Hendrie speak in interviews of the existence of a "Chinese Wall" between programming and sponsorship.

[31] Farnel, interview, 2013.

All the components of a docbuster are there: celebrity and fame, entertaining content, previously programmed at other festivals (*festival-approved*), and populist appeal. Farnel has said that these qualities have come to be the key ingredients for an opener because the opening night is meant to be celebratory and "nobody wants anyone leaving depressed," rather the film has to contribute to, or be the centre piece (ideally) in a "good night out."[32]

I do not blame any programmer for taking this approach, and as a programmer, I often find myself looking for the "crowd-pleaser" to open a season with, leaving the tough stuff for later in the year, once some loyalty has been built. But that is a long-term strategy for programming docs over the course of a whole academic semester (at Cinema Politica). Film festivals like Hot Docs generally last a week to ten days. And according to Farnel, the opening night audience is not the festival audience, but a strange mix of the public at large with some festival-going participants topping the numbers. This means the opening film has to make an impression on people that likely have not already purchased or received passes for the festival. In this way, then, the film has disproportionate significance on public perception of the festival, which reflects on the structure of the rest of the festival, even if programmers claim not to be affected by pressures to set a tone. Farnel programmed at Hot Docs for half a decade, and, according to interviews and his own writing, was always interested in bringing a more thoughtful, critical edge to both programming and the spaces around the films.[33] Still, management pressures limited his choices. As he notes:

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[32] Farnel, interview.

[33] It is interesting to note that from his second year as head programmer on, Farnel introduced each of his letters in the front section of the Hot Docs programs with quotes from literary figures, artists and philosophers. I have yet to see this occur anywhere else in the Hot Docs programs. Perhaps a subtle gesture to inject critical engagement into an entertainment regime, or just and expression of Farnel's personality, either way his write-ups connect with his desire to see more "dangerous films" to use his words, at

> [The opening night film is the] marketing lead for the festival, it usually gets a headline or two, always generates press. It's very important for marketing and publicity, has to do all that, and that will determine your choice, which limits the field. You also have to be realistic about the audience that will watch that film and deliver a "nice" night at the movies for them. More than 50% of the audience will only have that one festival experience so as a curator it's not my time to make a point. (Farnel 2013)

Farnel is balancing concerned managers (McDonald and Hendrie), an unhappy BOD, and an either bored or challenged audience.

These are the pressures that express and reflect the larger structure of feeling developing around documentary: that it engages pleasurably, that it is clever but not rigorous, and that it appeals to as wide a demographic as possible. Amy Miller, a radical committed documentarian, has personally discussed the pressure put on filmmakers by festivals and funders to produce films with wide appeal:

> The argument has been made to me dozens of times: the general public wants to watch a documentary that is looking at the climate crisis and yet "feel good" afterwards. The critics and festival programmers have argued that I should tone down the severity of the problem and focus on making sure fence sitting audience members don't feel so 'depressed' with the bleakness of the situation that my films paint, and if I were to do this then my films 'would be much better received, get into big festivals, get massive distribution, win awards..."[34]

One articulation of this developing 'common sense' in the documentary world is the embrace of consumerism in place of education or citizen engagement, and this is why *TGMES* functions as a synecdoche for documentary commercialization or documentary mainstreaming - precisely because the film champions business aspirations over artistic expression, mass appeal over social change and the marketing of consumption over the promotion of ideas or social action. Aufderheide links the rise in popularity with pleasing

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festivals.

[34] Amy Miller, email interview with author, May, 2013.

the customer: "And as documentaries become ever more popular, more of them are being produced to delight audiences without challenging assumptions" (2007, 5-6).

As an opening film, *TGMES* started a conversation; one that was framed by a combination of mild concern around corporate sponsorship of social documentary and predictions that this was the future foretold, if the genre was to survive. Yet, aside from the more seasoned radical filmmakers and activists in attendance, there was little sustained interest in the film, not the kind that would be generated by opening the festival with something "dangerous," as Farnel calls docs that contest and challenge various calcified rules, regulations, systems and structures in documentary cinema.[35] These films disrupt conventions of content in documentaries as well as the social contexts that surround them. But as Farnel points out, the festival is essentially run by cultural managers—as opposed to artists/activists in the CIFC era—so opening with a film that is 'easy to manage' is optimal. In this case, the provocation around the novel suggestion of corporate branded documentary became an asset, not a prickly diversion from regular festival objective of "having a good night out."[36]

In fact, in terms of management, it is interesting to note that Hot Docs made no efforts to further explore the argument or message of *TGMES*, and instead exploited the film's docbuster and celebrity potential for pre-festival PR. An event interested in critical engagement on important issues raised in programmed works may have organized a talk with the director and others about "branded entertainment" or the dilemma facing documentary makers stuck between public and private funding, in the same spirit as the

[35] Farnel, interview, 2013.

[36] Hendrie, interview.

2008 Sheffield talk mentioned above.[37] The *Doc Talks* I attended were held over the duration of the festival and were co-sponsored by the NFB and the Ontario Cultural Attraction Fund. The presentations, which focused on "safe" and well-hashed documentary topics, did not pick up the conversation from *TGMES* and advance a critical inquiry into the way artist-entrepreneurs like Spurlock are working with, not against, the forces of free market capitalism. Further, in the talks I attended, it became clear that in each case the audience members were more interested in engaging in a critical dialogue or debate about the inherent tensions between working with documentary as social change and as commercial force or commodified form. A collective concern for the genre's imminent detachment from its aforementioned 'heart and soul' (community engagement, social justice and grassroots organizing) was palpable at these and other events, where participants regularly summoned the example of *TGMES*.[38]

CELEBRITY, DOCUMENTARY, HOT DOCS

Leading with copy about the *POM Wonderful* screening *The Hollywood Reporter* had this to say about what to expect from programming at the 2011 edition of Hot Docs: "Don't expect love-at-first-sight storylines or blue-lit love scenes. Hot Docs means mostly celebrity-driven pics or portraits about the realities of war and conflict and personal struggle."[39] Indeed, concomitant with the rise of the consumer-oriented

[37] Instead the three talks organized at the 2011 edition were the following: "Docs Making a Difference: Can One Film REALLY Change the World?; Docs - Modifying Minds? Are docs transforming the WAY we SEE our world?;" and "Docs Fuelling Debate: Docs Igniting DISPUTE or DIALOGUE?" (Hot Docs Program 2011, 51).

[38] As for the topics up for debate at the talks, the usual consensus around documentary's peculiar ability to instill both dialogue and debate, to be one-sided and fair, and to muckrake and inform were on display.

[39] Etan Viessing, "Hot Docs Unveils 18th Edition Film Slate," The Hollywood Reporter, http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/hot-docs-unveils-18th-edition-169945 (Accessed 2013-09-17).

docbuster at Hot Docs has been the convergence of celebrity and documentary cultures. This, I maintain, is a result of the increasing commercialization of the form and the overarching strategy deploying populist consumption. Celebrity documentaries and celebrity culture has found a stable space at Hot Docs in the last decade, especially the last five years. Morgan Spurlock is one doc-celebrity circulating as a commodity on the festival circuit, consumed by cameras and folding his brand into the marketing of his film in talks and interviews.[40] But there are others.

In the commercial sense, non-fiction cinema is playing catch up with fiction, and is incubating and fostering its own celebrity culture (or importing it) (See Czach 2010, for the relationship between celebrity culture and festivals). I designate three kinds of celebrities in documentary: the auteur (ex. Morgan Spurlock, Werner Herzog, Errol Morris), the subject (ex. Joan Rivers in *Joan Rivers: a Piece of Work*, 2010*, Bill Hicks in *American: The Bill Hicks Story,* 2010*, or Chaz Bono in *Becoming Chaz,* 2011*), and the cross-over celebrity[41] (ex. Adrian Grenier, who directed *Teenage Paparazzo,* 2010*; and James Franco, who co-directed *Interior. Leather. Bar,* 2013*). There are other levels at which celebrities function in documentary, but regardless of the role, celebrities and celebrity culture bring attention to festivals, and only recently has this aspect of commodification been deployed in documentary culture.

In his delightfully witty essay on celebrity culture, Epstein asks, "What are the values of celebrity culture? [...] They are the values, largely, of publicity" (2005, 10). Whereas mainstream commercial fiction films come equipped with a battalion of

[40] And all the while he is not serving as an interlocutor of the message or artistic expression of his work.

[41] These are individuals who are celebrities in other milieus, like fiction film, music or gaming, and who then migrate with their fame to documentary when they direct or produce.

publicity-generating celebrity actors, documentary promoters and organizers have tended to nurture publicity through the public discussion of the issues and topics contained *within* the films themselves, often connecting with social movements and activist/civil society campaigns (Downing 2001, 32), putting cultural studies' turn to "rethinking culture [with] a focus on power an inequality" into action (Swidler 1995, 29). Turner calls this "film as social practice" (1999, 10). That is not to say the same isn't true of press coverage or popular literature engaged with fiction fare, it's just that the presence of a celebrity will drive the PR up and over any other discussion in the mainstream news and culture. And so it is that each year newspapers and other media in Toronto feature articles about the celebrities at TIFF, and more recently, the same is true of Hot Docs. Liam Lacey, a respected Canadian film critic, signals this growing trend at the 2011 edition of the festival when he warns "The Special Presentations at this year's Hot Docs show such an emphasis on celebrity, the documentary festival risks being confused with its more glamorous fall cousin The Toronto International Film Festival."[42]

These accounts, where "both celebrity and neophyte" come together at Hot Docs,[43] get promoted over more thoughtful, introspective and critical pieces about the films themselves. In an endless tautological loop, mainstream media claims to respond to audience/consumer demand, while media critics claim demand is created by a culture that vaults celebrity above other artistic and social considerations.

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[42] Liam Lacey, "Hot Docs festival aims at celebrity in special presentations," The Globe and Mail, http://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/film/hot-docs-festival-aims-at-celebrity-in-special-presentations/article572395/ (Accessed 2013-11-01).

[43] Examiner.com, "Hot Docs 2013: what's goin' on," http://www.examiner.com/list/hot-docs-2013-what-s-goin-on (Accessed 2013-11-01).

Celebrity culture has become more diffuse with the advent of the Internet, mobile technologies and *infotainment*, and documentary culture under the management of mainstream commercial interests is no exception. Gunster, seeking to explain the role of celebrity in capitalism (vis-a-vis Adorno), argues that

> In capitalist societies, identification with the fascist leader is largely replaced with the cult of celebrity … This identification is often intensified by its pseudo-collective nature: forms of community are constructed that are based mainly on a shared subordination to and/or imitation of the values, beliefs, style, and image of particular celebrities. (2004, 55)

Communities of fans (and the curious) who follow celebrity culture can now find a host of access points in documentary culture at events like Hot Docs, where before there were none. While the festival has yet to fully capitalize on celebrity guests, programming does reflect this growing trend.

Sean Farnel, former Director of Programming for Hot Docs, tells one interviewer that in order to increase audience capacity the festival turned to the appeal and allure of celebrity: "But even at Hot Docs this year [2011], we had this goal to expand our audience so we also dabbled in the celebrity-driven work…" (In Iordanova and Torchin 2012, 226). The inclusion of celebrity culture at the festival is coupled with a shift in focus from issues to personalities, as could be seen in 2010 when social media exploded with tweets and updates on Facebook discussing rumours that the celebrity director of *Teenage Paparazzo*, Adrian Grenier, was in Toronto and had been seen at various Hot Docs venues. As the rumours escalated, it became clear that none of the chatter entailed anything about his actual documentary, which was premiering at Hot Docs that year. The advent of 'star sightings' at film festivals has traditionally been the purview of larger,

commercial fiction-oriented festivals like Cannes and TIFF, a point not lost on at least one Toronto critic:

> Except for the absence of star director Adrian Grenier (a.k.a. Vincent Chase, star of HBO's *Entourage*), last night's Canadian premiere of *Teenage Paparazzo* felt less Hot Docs, more TIFF. One of the few films with a big-name backer, and a filmmaker known widely to the public, the film's marketing is based on exploiting the fame and fan-following of Grenier—and isn't it ironic, when the film is about, well, just that.[44]

When Bracken says above, that "[it] felt less Hot Docs, more TIFF," she is succinctly describing the affective shift in the structure of feeling (from issues to personalities) reflected in the programs and schedules of Hot Docs.

This thesis does not intend to contribute to a moral panic on the existence of celebrities and celebrity culture at Hot Docs, as it is a complex topic that requires discussions of negotiation and identification that exceed the purview of my topic, but I am concerned, again, about the ways in which the trend constitutes a consumption-oriented shift toward building a commercialized documentary cinema in Canada. In particular, I am concerned about the effect this increased presence has on documentary filmmakers that are opposed to such elements, as well as for films that fall outside the framework of commodification.

As these cultures come together they also influence and shape the symbolic power of the festival, not just as tastemakers but also at the level of production. Iordanova writes:

> It is along similar lines of public visibility that activist film festivals often pursue the involvement of celebrities. The approach is similar to the longstanding practice of UN agencies and other large NGOs enlisting ambassadorial assistance. While

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[44] John Semley, "Hot Docs Planner: Serving Up Sass, Famous Rock Photogs, and OMG Vinnie Chase Totes Made a Movie!," Torontoist, http://torontoist.com/2010/05/hot_docs_planner_serving_up_sass_famous_rock_photogs_and_omg_vinnie_chase_totes/ (Accessed 2012-09-15).

> mainstream events rely on quasi-professional activist personages such as Bianca Jagger, Bono or Bob Geldof, some activist causes receive prominence due to the involvement of celebrities who become personally engaged…" (2012, 15)

Celebrities, then, help sell doing good to both audiences and funders, and the escalation of their presence in documentaries, behind documentary productions and at documentary festivals, is yet one more indication of the ways in which the genre is undergoing commercialization.

THE SUNDANCE NORTH MODEL

> *We live in an age where it's tough even to walk down the street without someone trying to sell you something. It's at the point where practically the entire American experience is brought to us by some corporation. Utilizing cutting-edge tools of comic exploration and total self-exploitation, Spurlock dissects the world of advertising and marketing by using his personal integrity as currency to sell out to the highest bidder. Scathingly funny, subversive, and deceptively smart, The Greatest Movie Ever Sold shines the definitive light on our branded future as Spurlock attempts to create the "Iron Man of documentaries," the first ever "docbuster"! He may very well have succeeded.* - Sundance Festival Liner Notes, 2011 Program.

At once acknowledging the corporatization of culture while denying the obvious – that *TGMES* contributes to such effect – the Sundance liner notes above offer no real critical assessment of commercialization or self-branding. While Spurlock's recent film illustrates the process of the commodification of documentaries in a particularly self-reflexive and consenting way, it is also part of larger forces that are shaping the festival circuit. These forces include the network of celebrities emanating from Hollywood to the indie/documentary festival scene. The following section looks at four distinct ways in which Hot Docs is commercializing documentary by following the "Sundance North

Model,"[45] and concludes by considering the implications of these configurations on two kinds of documentary, the radical committed documentary and the liberal consensus documentary.

Much has been written (See: Chin and Qualis 1998) about Sundance's transition or evolution from indie showcase to the 'Hollywood-light' event that it has become, complete with a confluence of marketers, agents, actors, distributors and representatives from the major studios and their subsidiary minors, or mini-majors. Yet Sundance is also seen as a successful film festival among critics, ranking among the top ten in the world (Wong 2011) as a major bastion for liberal politics, indie film culture, and lightening deal making. What is less scrutinized is how this festival is being exported as a model for other independent film festivals seeking to follow a similar mainstream commercial path. Hot Docs is one such festival, and by adapting many of the strategies and conventions of Sundance, the Toronto festival continues to facilitate the commodification processes that have been tried, tested and developed at Sundance, of which *TGMES* is a key product/example.

Sundance and other major festivals in the US (like Tribeca) have increasingly played an active role in the market and forum side of Hot Docs, sitting at pitches, developing coproduction schemes between the festivals and other countries, and marketing their own brand to the Canadian outpost. This quiet putsch of the festival is perhaps best evidenced by the change in moniker of the Hot Docs Audience Choice Award to the Sundance Channel People's Choice Award in 2010, or in the staggering rise

[45] Hot Docs has, over the past five years, developed a close relationship with the Utah festival, where delegate exchanges are frequent (not just during festival dates), where programmers share information, and where Sundance managers are invited to Hot Docs to promote their brand and, crucially, to represent and promote Sundance films.

of Sundance documentaries migrating to the Hot Docs programming of the last five years, a trend that in 2013 saw nearly half of all Sundance-programmed docs screen at Hot Docs.[46] And despite management's talk of a "Chinese Wall" between the financial back end of the festival and front end programming, the steady stream of Sundance-supported or programmed films populating the Hot Docs roster each year is cause for concern for those seeking space for local or national cultural expression. Are Sundance films simply better documentaries? The real issue is that, given their production values, subjects, and politics, Sundance films are more commercially successful (Cottrell 2009). The Sundance model, which combines its in-house funded films with hand-picked titles that have the kind of commercial appeal that allows them to succeed in the market place, is currently being adapted at Hot Docs, where the festival has tripled the titles it 'picks up' from the Utah festival in just five years.[47] Hot Docs is also, as discussed elsewhere, adhering to the in-house festival production formula that has proven successful at Sundance.

The most recent illustration of Sundance's influence at Hot Docs can be found in the March 6th, 2013, announcement of the 20th edition's "28 Films in the Special Presentation Program... a high-profile collection of world and international premieres, award-winners from the recent international festival circuit, and works by master filmmakers, and featuring some star subjects."[48] As the line-up of films the festival reveals to the press and public, and as a set of already acclaimed films (or at least programmed at acclaimed festivals), the list has tremendous significance for the ways in

[46] This trend is mapped out in Appendix A.

[47] See Appendix A for more details.

[48] Source: http://www.hotdocs.ca/media/press_releases/hot_docs_announces_28_high_profile_special_presentations (Accessed 2013-07-19).

which the festival markets itself. Looking at the 28 titles more closely, 19 (68%) are listed as American productions and just four (14%) are Canadian. A total of 17 of the 28 titles (61%) are affiliated with Sundance, directly or indirectly (through funding or programming). Every American documentary that had not already had an international or world premiere and had been programmed as part of the 28 announced titles was a product of the Sundance Institute and/or Festival.

The Sundance affiliation is seen as a stamp of high quality by many in the industry, and the American festival has become a major funder and programmer of documentaries, establishing a blueprint of festival-as-producer for Hot Docs to follow. As Wong notes, the prestige of Sundance is seen to translate into commercial success and mainstream status: "Sundance has become, for some of its successful veterans, a training ground for Hollywood-like or Hollywood-lite careers with larger-budget films for more mainstream audiences and multiplex box offices, especially in the United States" (2011, 3). Whereas this equation is drawn from the lineage of "indie films" receiving funding from and/or getting screened at Sundance and then going on to commercial success, Hot Docs shows some early signs of this adoption, though the impact of Sundance is best seen in docbusters and commercially-oriented documentaries.

Lastly, the apotheosis of diversity—standardization—can be seen to be taking place at Hot Docs, notably in programming organization and the bracketing out of dissent at the festival as a whole (which is discussed elsewhere). Whereas early editions of the festival had categories and awards for "Most Poetic Film," and "Best Socially Engaged Documentary," Hot Docs has conformed to the international festival circuit model of categorically downsizing differentiation to meet universal sections that translate across

cultures[49] and has now adopted the standard sections of "Special Presentations," "Canadian Spectrum," and "International Spectrum."[50] While the festival does maintain some identity with its small handful of unique annual categories, the shift to standardized categories in 1999 reflects an early adoption of festival circuit conventions.[51]

Standardization allows the smooth running of the commercial circuitry, so that films can increasingly be made to cater to a certain sensibility ("safe" films) and that those films can increasingly be more easily fit into programming slots at commercial festivals. In other words, standardization facilitates the circulation of certain documentaries into certain markets and contexts, but flattens out unique characteristics of both festivals and films as crowd-pleasing documentaries are programmed into *World Showcases* at festivals everywhere. Thus in making documentaries conform to the needs of exchange, the structure of film festivals has increasingly demanded simple, standardized categories into which films can be more easily slotted.

PUBLIC DOCUMENTARY CINEMA

If, at an increasingly commercial Hot Docs we have the rise of the docbuster and celebrity culture, the adoption of the Sundance model and the *NGOification* of producing 'good,' then what might be situated opposite this trend toward commodification that

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[49] This universalizing tendency is reminiscent of international chain restaurants that do not change décor or presentation; an international festival elite more easily consumes international categories.

[50] Programming organization is rounded out by an annual spotlight on a particular country ("Made in Italy"), an NFB retrospective, a focus on one particular filmmaker, and lastly, one unique category that changes from year to year (in 2011 it was films on labour, in 2012 it was films on activism and protest culture, and in 2013 it was films on "forward thinkers").

[51] It should be noted that Hot Docs is not alone in conforming to these standards: the much more community-oriented, local and less commercial documentary film festival RIDM (Montreal) changed its idiosyncratic categories (such as "Caméra au Stylo" and "Eco Caméra") to similar *spectrum-style* categories in the 2000s.

actually stands a chance at treading water? In teasing out these qualities illustrated in *TGMES* and other Hot Docs documentaries as well as other aspects of the festival, I seek to not only understand this reconfiguration toward commodification, but advocate for a more public documentary cinema (Zimmermann 2000, xx) in Canada. As I've argued elsewhere, institutions like Hot Docs are more crucial than ever to documentary cinema's cultural relevance, popularity, commercial viability, and general survival. In just two decades the festival has gone from a small weekend gathering of filmmakers critically discussing and screening each other's work, to a massive ten-day, multi-million dollar event. The festival now has its own production envelopes, international distribution schemes and yearlong documentary media events. During this same period, especially in the last decade, traditional documentary institutions like the National Film Board have struggled to maintain vitality and relevance in a changing market and under shrinking state funding regimes (Waugh, Baker and Winton 2010, 12).

It is therefore no longer prudent to ask if a film festival like Hot Docs will, in the near future, be important to the commercial and cultural success of documentary, but rather to ask what that influential role currently resembles, and in which ways is the festival negotiating the long-held tensions that inevitably manifest when an alternative or marginalized cultural form undergoes processes of commodification as part of a strategy of commercialization?

Theorists who analyze the relationship between culture and capitalism agree that the notion that films made through and by the capitalist industrial system can facilitate the system's own demise is wishful thinking. This sentiment is perhaps best captured in the title of Heath and Potter's 2004 book *The Rebel Sell: Why the Culture Can't Be*

Jammed, a reference to dominant (commercial) culture's tendency to appropriate and monetize the margins in a continuous cycle of commodification, whereby "radicals" and critics of consumer culture unwittingly help feed the system they so adamantly oppose. With regards to the counterculture in the sixties the authors retort: "What ever happened to this project? Forty years later, 'the system' does not appear to have changed very much. If anything, consumer capitalism has emerged from decades of countercultural rebellion much stronger than it was before" (Heath and Potter 2004, 8). While this is a very reductive analysis of the effects of social movements and countercultural currents,[52] it does resonate as to the ways in which consumerism appropriates cultural and political dissent.

On the one hand, the evolution of Hot Docs can serve as evidence of Heath and Potter's central premise, whereby the festival started out as an alternative to the status quo, only to become, years later, the status quo itself. On the other hand, the practice of dissent and the presence of contestation in public (and private) spaces is much more nuanced than "jamming the culture." If film festivals can be seen as "…spaces of resistance…[that operate] as sites of political and cultural transgression…" (Killick 2013), then Hot Docs can be imagined as a space where symbolic resources are potentially harnessed toward dissent, resistance and contestation of mainstream, status quo currents in documentary culture and beyond. While Killick[53] is speaking exclusively of niche, non-commercial festivals, it is with hopeful optimism that I apply the same set

[52] To wit: many changes and shifts occurred in the organization of society as a direct result or at least in part from the social movements of the 1960s, not to mention the under-valued conditioning of new political communities of individuals.

[53] The Killick article "Spaces of Resistance" Film Festivals and Anti-Capitalism," can be found on line here: http://filmint.nu/?p=8230 (Accessed 2013-11-01).

of ideals to a larger, mainstream commercial festival like Hot Docs — precisely because its roots are alternative (unlike mixed-genre or fiction festival counterparts TIFF, Cannes and others) and that it is irreducibly part of documentary culture and practice (and therefore by extension a culture of contestation and dissent).

Of course not all documentary fits perfectly into the "alternative" camp, and increasingly larger big budget titles make their way into the mainstream of the public sphere and marketing worlds. That said, those films are exceptions to the rule: the vast majority of documentary, much like indie fiction, remain outside of mainstream media and popular culture. Independent political documentary, in contrast to commercial mainstream fiction, is a space where politics are worn on the proverbial sleeve and where contention and criticism of established structures and systems, provocation, and anti-oppression sentiments give shape to the images and sounds projected.[54] As a way of distinguishing the genre from most fiction, and certainly from the vast majority of Hollywood and commercial mainstream fare, documentary has carved out a place of publicness (either with the public's interest in mind or else not delineated by commercial restraints [Zimmermann 2000, 35]) as well as critical engagement with popular and fringe elements of culture and society.

The notion of publicness connects back to the roots of documentary, as "absorbed by national educational hegemonies" in the interwar period as film in general was subsumed "into an international struggle about the role of technology in the formation of political utopias" (Druick 2008, 67). Druick further maintains: "Indeed, the encouragement of citizen formation through the use of film in classrooms as an

[54] Such as is often the case with such films that critically approach patriarchy, consumerism and capitalism.

alternative to Hollywood fare was part of the self-conscious efforts that helped to usher in the documentary film as a form widely studied and used by educators" (Ibid).[55] Publicness is then connected to cultural citizenship, itself linked to the notion that the "freedom to participate in culture is contingent on both freedom from prohibition and freedom to act via political, economic, and media capacities" (Miller 2006, 73). Documentary, as an expression of alternative media, can and does facilitate such freedoms and modes of participation.

Sociopolitical documentary, as an expression of the publicly constituted "information arts," privileges the production of cultural artefacts or texts in order to effect socio-political change (as education or as agitators for action) and promote use-value over the privileging of commercial objectives. This latter virtue is one of the unique characteristics of a cinematic form more historically associated with alternative media than it has been with commercial, corporate and mainstream media. That is to say such documentaries are less driven to shape and control symbolic power by the profit motive or capital accumulation and are more characterized by the incentive of social engagement or political outcome as a return on the 'investment' of time, resources, and labour that is required to produce and disseminate a documentary. As Ellis points out, "At the heart of documentary film- and programme-making lies an urgency to communicate" (2012, 1). I would add that an overriding motivation to reach commercial success could mitigate such urgency, instead creating a commercial imperative to communicate. Whereas radical committed documentaries epitomize urgent communicative interventions in the public

[55] Druick's study looks at international and national liberal institutions and their constitutive effects on documentary as an educational form, and as such she highlights the public nature of documentary from its early years as an instrument of governments and international relations.

sphere and media discourse, liberal consensus documentaries (and their distribution-marketing apparatus) focus first on numbers (pecuniary and spectatorial) then, if germane, on socio-political impact.

What we have is a qualitative change that results from a quantitative shift: by focusing on numbers we lose track of the purpose of our actions. And this is occurring at multiple levels, from the internalization of such imperatives in Spurlock's performance, or else its external imposition through programming decisions at Hot Docs, or else a change at the very mode of production itself, where 'doing good' is itself subordinated and appropriated by large mainstream NGOs. Reaching as wide a possible audience then, influences, if not wholly determines the content, message, and perspective of the film. Given that the political and social docs that are launched at and funded by Hot Docs are increasingly determined by NGOs,[56] the program is itself increasingly determined by festival conformity and publicity.

The idea that you can have your critical cake and eat it too – that you can produce, say, effective, critical documentary interventions in popular culture while appealing to a wide middle demographic with consumer-friendly product – is not a realistic, nor likely desirable goal for radical political documentary filmmakers. Still, they do find themselves in a bind some of the time, when considering how to find balance and measure between "dangerous" or daring and "safe" and comfortable. Amy Miller, whose radically committed documentary *The Carbon Rush* (2010) was rejected by Hot Docs in 2010, is a filmmaker negotiating this terrain:

> My films have been criticized by festival programmers, critics, and distributors who say that I do not provide enough or any palpable "solutions" to what I am

[56] In other non-film examples, Choudry calls this process "NGOization" (2013).

> looking at… Supposedly, the critics have argued to me, that these fence-sitters (or we can call them *the general public*) want to 'know' about a problem (i.e., industrial capitalism/civilization is leading to rapid climate chaos and the total destruction of functioning eco-systems world over) but don't want to feel confronted with the knowledge that they, and their lifestyles are, inevitably part of said problem. They don't want to learn how capitalism is *the problem*, point final.[57]

Miller's filmmaking does not fall into the liberal consumer documentary trap, and therefore does not attract programmers of liberal commercial festivals like Hot Docs. It doesn't offer commodity-based solutions, a comforting message, or a strategy for issue rapprochement based within the paradigm of consumerism and small acts. Is it possible her film is just bad? Following the film's non-festival screenings, accolades from film critics and filmmakers would suggest otherwise. Is there a conspiracy afoot to keep her film out of festivals? Unlikely. The suggestion here is that other films produced as commodities (like *TGMES*[58]) or that offer solid consumer choice in the commercial market,[59] will trump selections of films that posit structural critiques that implicate[60] and possibly leave audiences feeling emotionally down, even if economically it doesn't always play out this way. But the capitalist realist sense that 'there is no alternative' is nevertheless part of the festival circuit.

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[57] Amy Miller, email interview with author, May 2013.

[58] Recognizing the gap between ideology and economics, *TGMES* did not live up to its performance-promise by its director and other funders, but nonetheless embodies the elements of commodification and expresses them with some measured success, at least, for a *documentary*.

[59] The year Miller's film was rejected, Hot Docs programmed the sidebar films "Small Acts," which is discussed elsewhere.

[60] Of course exceptions make their way into programming, usually due to festival conformity - a film that has become a festival favourite, such as *Gasland* (2010*) or the structural critique and audience implication that plays out points to a foreign culture, removed from most industrially developed, festival-sporting nations, such as *Dreamland* (2010*), about the fallout from austerity measures in Iceland.

CONCLUSION

Zimmermann elaborates on the long-held and practiced qualities of documentary as producing destabilizing mechanisms, political interventions, and social provocations in her incendiary book *States of Emergency: Documentaries, Wars, Democracies*. In it, she seeks to discursively reclaim what she believes to be independent documentary's status as "a fulcrum for producing reimagined radical media democracies that animate contentious public spheres" (2000, xx). Her project explores documentary works as "disenfranchised by transnational media corporations—radical political documentary as well as experimental forms, low-end as well as high-end technologies—at its centre...[while] decentring[ing] documentaries that circulate as part of commodity culture...[focusing] exclusively on documentaries that seek to remake public culture" (Ibid, xix-xx). This quote demonstrates the peculiar blend of capital and culture that is always present when one looks at political documentary, but it puts the emphasis on public versus private, or put differently, films that do not embody and express the commodity fetish and instead seek to intervene as cultural artefacts and public communications within commodity culture.

While this thesis is interested in the transformative role of documentary in public culture and politics, the objectives here differ in that I wish to *centre* the documentaries Zimmermann "decenters" in her book - those that circulate as commodity forms in global circuitries of culture and capital, and in particular those that champion the commodity form at commercially-oriented documentary film festivals like Hot Docs. Or, put differently, I focus on commercial docs and docbusters in order to point to a space at

documentary's second most 'important' event, a space that is increasingly open and designed for such documentaries.

Having periodically returned to the documentary that opened the festival in 2011, *TGMES*, and indeed having leveraged this film as an exemplar of the liberal consensus documentary/commodity doc, I hope to have opened a discussion characterized by layers of economic abstraction shot through with the specificity of a cultural artefact and its constellation of social, cultural, political and capital considerations. The objective has been to interrogate how commodification and consumer docs fit into the process of managing media from the margins to the mainstream. That is to say, I have sought to use Spurlock's film as a wedge to pry apart the viscous layers of culture and capital that have congealed at the site of this festival film, a site that includes Hot Docs. Ultimately, by focusing my attention on the films at the centre of these processes playing out at Hot Docs, I hope to reveal the limitations documentary commercialization imposes on activism, contestation, dissent and intervention as well as the kinds of discourse, institutions, programming and social spaces "commodity docs" contribute to and benefit from.

CHAPTER 5 - FLIPPING THE (FOREIGN) BIRD: LIBERAL RIGHTS DISCOURSE, CONSENSUS & DISSENT

> As universalism is ascribed the status of natural law by the West, non-conformity permits the right to intervention, whether through aid or warfare. It is an idea that allows an artist such as Ai Weiwei…to be heralded in the West for conforming to its ideas on human rights. Rather than interrogating the notion of rights and universalism, however, the rhetorical framework of the exhibition treats them as given. (Haq 2012)[1]

INTRODUCTION

Haq's evaluation of the Ai Weiwei contribution to the 'Newtopia' exhibition touches on a similar vein to this chapter – the symbolic and political mobilization of liberal rights discourse by cultural institutions. At the centre is the Chinese artist, Ai Weiwei, who by April 2012, had provoked Western media chatter around his dissident acts and subsequent oppression to peak. Ai had been steadily in the mainstream news for a series of incidents, the most recent of which was his disappearance for several weeks after being held by Chinese authorities. Much like the newly anointed international *cause célèbres*, Pussy Riot,[2] Ai's star had risen meteorically in only a handful of Western news cycles, where in just a few months he went from an obscure art world name many in the West had never heard of to becoming practically a household name. Ai had captured the attention and imagination of the West, as a symbol of peaceful resistance inside the oppressive communist Chinese regime, and the excited buzz in the line-up waiting to get into the Bloor Theatre on a warm April 26,th 2012 evening was perceptible to even those walking by the brightly lit marquee that read: *Ai Weiwei - Never Sorry* (*AWNS*).

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[1] Source: https://www.frieze.com/issue/review/newtopia-the-state-of-human-rights/ (Accessed 2013-11-01)

[2] *Pussy Riot: A Punk Prayer* screened at the 2013 edition of Hot Docs.

It was the opening night of the nineteenth edition of Hot Docs and every chair in the 700-seat refurbished theatre was full of excited audience members. On screen and strategically positioned around the theatre the principle marketing image for the documentary, that of Ai erecting his middle finger to the Chinese government buildings in Beijing, expressed a simple, defiant and almost playful act of contestation.[3] On stage, Executive Director Chris McDonald greeted the audience, and proclaimed the unmatched populism of that year's festival, illustrating earlier evaluations that Hot Docs was embracing such a tactic as part of its strategy. "Tonight's film is an incredible tale of bravery and individual perseverance, so please sit back and enjoy the screening, and the rest of the festival!" The audience cheered and clapped, and sat back for what had been promised as an entertaining and thrilling political documentary — an opening night that would surely live up to the Hot Docs motto, "outstanding and outspoken."

The popular press in Toronto and elsewhere had stoked the fire in the run-up to the screening, which promised to showcase the near mythological qualities of an individual and the details of the David and Goliath battle he had waged against one of the world's superpowers. These elements had all the makings of a Hollywood tale — the lone hero taking on an impossibly formidable villain, with some added mysticism around the apparent singularity of an internationally renowned Chinese dissident-artist in the leading role. Ai Weiwei, then, was set up to supersede all human expectation. Charlotte Cook, in her role as new Director of Programming, told the media at a press conference: "We're focusing on people who are active for change and also technology... He embodies both of

[3] Ai Weiwei is widely recognized for his signature provocation: holding up his middle finger to various institutions across the globe, usually government buildings.

those — he's very active in social media. He's a catalyst for change from the viewpoint of human rights and art…" (CBC News, 2012).[4] Expanding on this, Cook makes clear that the Ai Weiwei film is an ideal opener for Hot Docs, touching on many levels of import for the occasion:

> AI WEIWEI: NEVER SORRY is a perfect story of art as a means for change…It is an incredibly appropriate opening night selection as it encompasses so many ideas we wanted to highlight throughout this year's program: from one person standing up for something they believe in, to the power of technology to drive change, to the strength of creativity as a whole. (Hot Docs Program 2012)[5]

The privileging of the lone idealistic crusader fits the ideological framework of a Western liberal rights and activism discourse, and combined with a valorization of technology's potential to facilitate social change, upholds the status quo of Western democratic liberalism. This chapter looks at the liberal politics of rights discourse and activism as an expression of Hot Docs' commercialization process. By returning to 2012's opening film and the politics associated with the documentary, this chapter touches on the ways in which politics are carefully constructed at the festival so as to champion mainstream rights and 'consensus dissent' discourse while bracketing out other kinds of political expression. The chapter also connects liberal rights discourse to the notion of consensus, especially as it is bound up in the liberal consensus documentary – with *Ai Weiwei: Never Sorry* being the archetypal example of such expression.

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[4] Source: http://www.cbc.ca/news/arts/story/2012/03/20/ai-weiwei-hot-docs.html (Accessed 2012-08-26).

[5] Source: http://www.hotdocs.ca/media/press_releases/hot_docs_2012_to_open_with_canadian_premiere_of_ai_weiwei_never_sorry (Accessed 2013-01-12).

AI WEIWEI: NEVER SORRY, THE FILM

Ai Weiwei: Never Sorry is the first film by Alison Klayman, produced by Adam Schlesinger.[6] The documentary is distributed by Sundance Selects, Madman, DCM, Mongrel Media, iTunes, Amazon and Netflix. *AWNS* has played over sixty film festivals and has achieved widespread critical acclaim and considerable commercial and festival circulation. It is remarkable for first time documentarians to screen at Sundance,[7] unless of course the filmmaker has gone through the Sundance production channels prior to the festival event. As a trendsetter on the festival circuit (including for documentary), it's likely that the three dozen or so documentaries screened at Sundance each year will go on to circulate on the festival circuit, just as Klayman's film has.

The film is an uncritical portrait of political artist Ai Weiwei, as it follows him over two years. Klayman happened upon her subject while in China to learn a new language and study film. The American filmmaker completed the festival cycle of internal content production when she won the Special Jury prize at Sundance in 2012, after having been a Sundance Fellow in 2011. Having made a solidly constructed, if fairly standard, documentary portrait about an exceptional individual, Klayman should be commended for the technical treatment of the film. The former freelance journalist also had the good fortune to happen upon Ai Weiwei at a time when international attention suddenly turned toward the artist as he came up against the repressive state bureaucracy of his country.

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[6] Schlesinger's biography on the *AWNS* page lists his producer credits as a Sundance hits list, a list of films that have been supported by several grants, foundations and festivals (including Good Pitch and the Sundance Institute).

[7] Of the 1,694 documentary submissions in 2013, Sundance accepted 40 (a success rate of 2.4%). Of the 40 accepted, 12 received prior production funding from the festival or its sister organization, the Sundance Institute. A total of 12,146 works were submitted (4,044 of which were feature-length films) and 119 feature-length titles were selected. Source: http://www.documentarytelevision.com/foundation-funding/sundance-film-festival-success-stories-what-are-the-odds-for-documentaries/ (Accessed 2013-03-09).

The film is mostly comprised of interviews with Ai and footage of art making or of troubled (and violent) encounters with the authorities. Many Western artists and art critics throughout the film praise Ai for his acts of dissent and bravery against the Chinese government as well as for the ways in which he politically provokes. In the film's ninety-one minutes Ai is presented as a very unique, creative, and driven individual who uses art as a way to communicate to the world about social and political issues important to the painter, sculptor and conceptual artist. There is a framing of Ai as an eccentric organizer, as he is represented as an altruistic yet somewhat detached artist who no longer personally makes the art, but directs massive crews of assistants in large warehouses. Connected to this is the construction of Ai as an international celebrity, a hagiographic approach that is bolstered by the near non-stop praise from the dozens of interviewees. Ai himself provides little insight into his artistic vision or process, and instead is presented as a creative and industrious personality reacting to his circumstances.

The film itself is not a remarkable artwork, nor a political provocation, unlike the film's subject. It does not explore the fundamental issues and debates around human rights, but rather upholds the Western consensus that frames standing up to abuse in China as a matter of individual expression. Writing about an Ai Weiwei exhibition, Haq has called into question these kinds of unspoken, ideological tenets. That universalism is communicated as a liberal rights framework, prefigured at the site of the film (as Haq says, not questioned, but "a given") speaks as well to the festival space of Hot Docs, where a liberal rights framework for political participation, centred on individualism, consensus, consumption and deliberative engagement (at talks) rules the day. Klayman,

for her part, similarly treats human rights (and the rights-relativism between the West and China) as a given as well. It is interesting to note that celebrities, heroes, and big personalities in documentaries tend to not only overshadow the films that feature them, but also inspire a confusion of praise for these projects with praise for the subjects themselves. Reading through the reviews of *AWNS* it is difficult to discover engagement with the actual film. Instead most, if not all, speak exclusively of the subject, Ai Weiwei.

Yet if we take another film about a remarkable artist-subject, a documentary rejected that same year by Hot Docs, we see a completely different approach to filmmaking, and a completely different reaction to the project. Marielle Nitoslawska's film *Breaking the Frame* (2012) profiles feminist performance artist Carolee Schneemann. Her filmmaking matches the artist's abstract, non-linear approach to expression. The film is a beautiful, original and provocative contribution to art documentary and experimental film. But Schneeemann's dissent is situated in structural hierarchies of gender and sex in art and capitalism, embedded in the North American context. The film is an expressive and playful interpretation of its subject, and conveys the abstract and powerful critiques of patriarchy and capitalism while avoiding standard documentary conventions like interviews and linear storytelling. With *AWNS* the audience is encouraged to root for a foreign artist fighting against a foreign government. With *Breaking the Frame* the audience is encouraged to experience the art and politics of a domestically situated artist who is critiquing the structures that shape our social relations, economic models and culture. In this regard *AWNS* does not offer any structural critique that implicates or confronts the viewers.

What is remarkable about *AWNS*, including its fit for the opening film slot for Hot Docs (as articulated by Cook) is its subject, not the vehicle that delivers said subject. In this way, *AWNS* is similar to *TGMES* and *Babies* – all documentaries that do not challenge conventions of form or social context, but that offer seemingly exceptional subjects who are easily accessed, consumed and which, at the end of the day, invoke a pleasant sense of having 'done good' by consuming or witnessing, rather than the unease that accompanies the complex feeling of complicity or the complexity that accompanies complicit structural critiques.

A LIBERAL FRAMEWORK OF CONSENT AND DISSENT

Like most concepts rooted in political philosophy, liberalism is politically multifaceted, while the concept has become the site for some of modern history's most vociferous and protracted battles, there is an orienting quality in returning to its roots: the individual, freedom, and private property — as famously articulated by John Locke (Bishop, 2007).

Kymlicka, in an effort to rescue liberalism from left-wing detractors, has written an impressive volume devoted to the relationship between the concept and community and culture. He writes:

> It is commonplace amongst communitarians, socialists, and feminists alike that liberalism is to be rejected for its excessive 'individualism' or 'atomism', for ignoring the manifest ways in which we are 'embedded' or 'situated' in various social roles and communal relationships. The effect of these theoretical flaws is that liberalism, in a misguided attempt to protect and promote the dignity and autonomy of the individual, has undermined the associations and communities that alone can nurture human flourishing. (1991, 9)

AWNS and Hot Docs express and reflect aspects of a Western liberal rights framework, where diversity has, at least in Canada, become synonymous with multiculturalism. Indeed, a contemporary expression of liberalism in state policy is "Multiculturalism," whereby a cosmopolitan society of divergent cultures is celebrated but measured and managed against a European hegemonic ideal (Smolicz and Secombe 2009; Shohat and Stam 2003). Kymlicka has written extensively on multiculturalism as a positive and humanist outcome of liberal philosophy and policy, but that diversity—as Hot Docs illustrates—has limits. *Babies* is perhaps the perfect example of a documentary representation of Western liberalism's policy articulation of multiculturalism, where various social agents' contexts of race, class and geopolitical position are disembedded in the service of a glossed-over celebration of difference in culture, united in behaviour. Where 'diversity' is celebrated as a kind of consumptive practice (festivals and parades organized around screenings, food, and music for example) in the Western context, participants are encouraged to experience a kind of consumer diversity, without getting entangled in the gritty and insecure reality of intractable difference and the messiness of real felt and acted-upon pluralism. With this liberal framework in mind, Shohat and Stam remind us that multiculturalism has been co-opted by many factions of society. Multiculturalism, they write

> has become a contested and in some ways empty signifier onto which diverse groups project their hopes and fears. In its more co-opted version, it easily degenerates into the diversity of college catalogues or the state- or corporate-managed United-Colours-of-Benetton pluralism whereby established power promotes ethnic "flavours of the month" for commercial or ideological purposes (2003, 6).

The diversity and liberal rights framework is expressed at Hot Docs, through films like *AWNS*, as a political imaginary that displays diversity and dissent for Western spectators

– a consumable screen diversity where one can be removed from Ai Weiwei and not interact with Chinese, art-performance, or dissent cultural currents.

Liberal rights discourse, with its emphasis on the individual, tends to position rights and freedoms around individual agency and situates power as a constraining, abstract force on individuals, rather than a structuring force maintained by the collective association of individuals. Relatedly, liberalism is the social and cultural arm of neoliberalism, the ideology that underpins free market late term capitalism. Neoliberal economic policies have exascerbated the income disparity between rich and poor, have deregulated industries formerly regulated by governments thus causing environmental and human rights abuses, and have bolstered an international system of trade law and management that removes agency from localized actors and nations and places power with global governing bodies like the IMF, WTO, or the World Bank. Organized resistance to neoliberal policies and practices often goes under the banner of the international global justice movement (formerly called the anti-globalization movement). Critics and protestors point out that neoliberalism has been the ideological foundation that has allowed rampant economic globalization to deepen inequity and injustice in the world (Appadurai 2001, 586).[8] Neoliberalism is closely connected to liberalism as a set of socioeconomic policies and actions. Giroux calls this the "terror of neoliberalism" and accounts for some of its defining characteristics:

> Wedded to the belief that the market should be the organizing principle for all political, social, and economic decisions, neoliberalism wages an incessant attack on democracy, public goods, and non-commodified values. Under neoliberalism everything either is for sale or is plundered for profit. (2005, 2)

[8] Which is to say: a corporate elite controls the free movement of goods and financial assets, benefiting a wealthy class, while 'average' citizens, and especially the poor and undocumented, are not free to move globally and labour remains the exploited base of the system.

While this could hardly be the set of policy points used to describe Hot Docs, the festival does reinforce dominant social, cultural and economic norms that are expressed in the structure of feeling that sees public and alternative media subsumed by mainstream commercial currents. As such, "Civic engagement now appears impotent as corporations privatize public space and disconnect power from issues of equity, social justice, and civic responsibility" (Ibid, 5). While Hot Docs does manage engagement around consumptive practices it brackets out civic participation that could be expressed in public forums or tabling for activist groups, for instance.

Liberalism, then, is the social and cultural set of ideas and principles that dovetail with economic neoliberalism, whereby individual liberty, legal equality and private property are the foundational tenets upheld as necessary qualities for a functioning, democratic society. In postcolonial criticism this liberal tradition is often cited (see Shohat and Stam 2003) as contributing to the colonization of the Global South by the West - a process of economic, social, and cultural exploitation continues through the neocolonization of trade regimes, resource exploitation and inequitable wealth generation (Giroux 2005), it is also the philosophic underpinning for the current dominant system of Western deliberative democracy and free market capitalism. As an ideological support for democracy and capitalism, liberalism is of interest not only for its relationship to commercialization, but because this thesis is written, in the company of other humanist and socialist scholars, in solidarity with those who are struggling against systems that uphold and perpetuate injustice and unsustainability.

As this thesis is interested in the social context of media (as opposed to the aesthetic or economic), I share then the social preoccupations of Lowe and Lloyd, who

write about the connections between capitalism and liberal politics in the introduction to the edited collection *The Politics of Culture in the Shadow of Capital*:

> We will be arguing for the need to reconceive the "social" — as the terrain in which politics, culture, and the economic are related — in terms radically other than those given by post-Enlightenment rationalizations of Western society. This separation of spheres that constitutes "society" is seen in liberal legal and political philosophy to emerge alongside capitalism as a product of historical development. While Marxism arises as the critique of capitalist exploitation, it has not critiqued the theory of historical development that underlies liberal philosophies. (1997, 3)

The editors go on to describe liberalism as an emancipatory discourse of the West that describes (and prescribes) the eventual development of modern subjects and cultures — individuals are political subjects to their respective states, cultural subjects to their respective nations, and economic subjects to capitalism (Ibid, 4-5). This particular tripartite subjectification of the individual is part of the liberal tradition, and connects with the root of the philosophy, the free-acting individual. As the "social arm" of neoliberalism, the emphasis is on individuals over collectives or communities (Walsh, forthcoming).

As a core tenet of Western liberal rights discourse, individualism thus compellingly implicates certain kinds of documentary texts, contexts and institutions, where films are by individuals and about individuals, while institutions like Hot Docs focus on this at the expense of emphasizing social collective context. The festival emphasizes the individual through programming (films about individuals and spotlights on filmmakers), specially focused discourse and events on "moguls" and industry leaders, pitches (where filmmakers pitch, gladiator-style, to a room full of colleagues and industry players), panels (where one person speaks and everyone else listens) and the general valorization process of key industry figures like Nick Fraser (BBC) and Jan Rolfkamp (Films Transit).

Even workshops, one-on-one "micromeetings," prizes and funding are focused on individuals rather than collectives.[9]

DISSENT TOURISM

Ai Weiwei: Never Sorry is a different kind of film than *TGMES*, and while the emphasis on the individual still permeates the film text and context, *AWNS* is intriguing for the ways in which a politically liberal rights perspective has been applied to the construction of the documentary using a trope I am calling *dissent tourism*. Dissent tourism appeals to Western audiences because of the foreign nature, or "Otherness" of the cultural and political context of dissent. Currently the Chinese, Russian, North Korean regimes and African dictatorships top the list of acceptable villains. This is why liberal consensus Hot Docs films like *AWNS* (China), *Pussy Riot* (Russia), *The Red Chapel* (North Korea) and *The Ambassador* (various African countries) hit their liberal mark so well — they all show individuals taking on oppressive regimes from each of those contexts. The influx of liberal consensus documentaries on North Korea that have graced the screens of Hot Docs (and other festivals) in the last five years is a case in point (*The Defector: Escape from North Korea, The Great North Korean Picture Show, The Red Chapel*).[10]

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[9] Intriguingly, the True/False documentary festival in the US has offered a break from this conventional focus on the individual by awarding the top cash prize to a selected "cause" from one of the films (which goes to subjects or institutions associated with the topic).

[10] While Hollywood has been dutifully obeying the unwritten directives of the current political regime to avoid vilifying America's largest trading partner, as explored here: http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/films/features/and-hollywoods-latest-bad-guys-are-the-north-koreans-8553970.html (Accessed 2013-11-01), documentaries can step in to serve up some liberal critiques of China and help fill the void.

Part emotional and political transference, documentaries that showcase individuals fighting against oppressive regimes help build liberal consensus and usually provide some compelling and entertaining drama (see *Pussy Riot* or *Bhutto* for example) in the process of upholding status quo attitudes and dominant Western frameworks for rights, democratic process, due justice, etc. Further, if the 'bad guy' is a state that the Western production company's government actually has close economic ties with, like China, the film then pirouettes delicately between criticism and entertainment, with the end result looking like *AWNS*: less a deep and damaging structural critique or analysis of the Chinese government's oppressive policies and practices and more a celebration of an interesting and dissenting artist inside China. In this way *AWNS* fits into the liberal consensus documentary framework as a documentary that doesn't challenge, implicate or confront Western audiences with radical politics, systemic critique, or a collective vision. Instead the film is, as described on the official site, an "inside story of a dissident for the digital age who inspires global audiences and blurs the boundaries of art and politics"[11] This short blurb highlights a central component of liberalism that the film champions: it is focused on an individual inspiring a global audience, but inspired to what ends?

Following the film's "Take Action" link leads to a page with recent Twitter activity from the @AWWNSorry account and this text:

> In Ai Weiwei: Never Sorry, Ai Weiwei (@aiww) uses Twitter to report on social injustices and inequalities. Due to restrictive bail conditions, Weiwei's ability to freely express himself online is now fragile and never guaranteed. We invite you to keep his voice a loud part of the digital conversation and empower one another to engage, create, and localize Weiwei's global cause. Retweet Weiwei's quotes using hashtag #NeverSorry and let us continue his example![12]

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[11] Source: http://aiweiweineversorry.com (Accessed 2013-04-15).

[12] Source: http://aiweiweineversorry.com (Accessed 2012-12-12).

Unlike the more consumption-based 'take action' suggestions of *TGMES*, *The Cove,* and others, *AWNS* encourages audiences and fans to engage by retweeting the artist in order to "localize Weiwei's global cause" while promoting the film at the same time (by using the hashtag #NeverSorry), thus conveniently and fortuitously combining 'social action' with 'social marketing.' Exactly what is the global cause is remains unclear, but the most intriguing aspect of this suggested action is that the people working with a film about free expression and dissent are asking supporters to merely copy and paste the expression of someone else, while at the same time becoming marketing ambassadors for the film. This kind of follow-through social action does not seek to involve audiences in any meaningful or tangible campaigns around art, expression, or human rights. Instead it is a superficial communications and marketing strategy built on the notion of audience participation in a closed promotional loop, one that continues to perpetuate the liberal myth of the single social agent of change.[13]

United Expression Media, the production company behind *AWNS,* has also launched a tie-in campaign called "Friends of Ai Weiwei" in order to "encourage artists, musicians, actors, writers, and film-makers to join in projects that promote the universal right to 'Free Expression'[14] around the world."[15] The Friends of Ai Weiwei link leads to a tumblr page with the following description: "A global collaboration by citizens

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[13] That is not to say the film does not encourage consumption of dissent: the film's site offers an online store where one can purchase *AWNS* shirts, tote bags, buttons, magnets and more.

[14] As an aside that would require more space to fully flesh out, it is interesting to note that the kind of 'freedom of expression' championed in *AWNS* and by Hot Docs through its programming and discourse positions power in the negative (in this case the power of the oppressive Chinese government), as constricting forces, rather than situating power in expression itself – Nichols (2001) documentary "voice" or Hall's (1994) power in representation, for instance.

[15] Source: http://www.unitedexpressionmedia.com (Accessed 2012-12-12).

throughout the world supporting our universal right to 'Free Expression.'"[16] The site includes assorted miscellanea like photos, quotes, tweets and other fragments related to Ai Weiwei or the theme of free expression. Links serve to close the film-marketing-social circle by linking back to the film's site, a second online store, the film's twitter page, and the film's Facebook page. Aside from a page with supporting non-profit logos and links, there is little "take action" facilitation connected with this film outside of promoting Ai Weiwei and/or the film: "We intend to use this platform to build a sustainable and collective 'voice' to serve this mission, inspired by the continuing work of Ai Weiwei, while broadening the inclusivity of artists, actors, writers, directors, musicians, journalists, poets, and activists to contribute and join. Revenues generated from the sale of books, media, and prints support the operating costs for this global initiative."[17] It also appears that these "friends" are mainly those with access to PayPal, Visa, MasterCard and a working relationship with the English language (the only language the film's site and Friends companion site is offered in).

This leads to the point of discussing *AWNS* as an example of a liberal consensus documentary at Hot Docs in the first place: the politics emerging from liberalism's emphasis on individualism, as I have highlighted here, is consensus around a kind of *dissent tourism*, a variation of "feel-good diversity"[18] that foregrounds and celebrates a dissent that is 'safe' for Western audiences due to its distance, its implied immunity for the audience (versus implication) and its lack of critical structural critique.

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[16] Source: http://friendsofaiweiwei.tumblr.com (Accessed 2012-12-12).

[17] Source: http://www.friendsofaiweiwei.com/pages/about-us (Accessed 2012-12-12).

[18] Yasmin Nair, "White Chick Behind Bars," In These Times, http://inthesetimes.com/article/15311/white_chick_behind_bars/ (Accessed 2013-08-02).

THE 'FEEL GOOD' POLITICAL SPACE OF HOT DOCS

How are regulated political consensus, the foregrounding of the rational, law-abiding individual, the managed diversity of multiculturalism, and 'acceptable' dissent tourism reflected in the social spaces of the Hot Docs film festival? Film festival spaces are often characterized as points of encounter for cinephilia and world culture (Czach 2010), transnational loci (De Valck 2007, 206) where individuals, culture, and capital circulate and bump into each other while consenting to a common goal: the appreciation of film (cinephilia) and the propagation of film culture and industry (market). Zielinski has described such spaces as "heterotopias," utilizing Foucault's concept of "Other" spaces, while Fung has described festivals as marked by a "recurring motif of inclusivity" (Fung quoted in Zielinski 2008, 28), and still others evoke Anderson's "imagined communities" when describing festival communities. All of these conceptualizations of festivals draw from, whether tacitly or explicitly, notions of liberal democratic theory and practice. The festival is the public meeting point of democratic culture par excellence: a utopic space where diversity is celebrated and difference becomes a unifying quality, projecting a one world vision celebrated by festivalgoers and culturecrats. And while I wholeheartedly agree with Zielinski's flagging of the potential to overplay the importance of space in determining other qualities of festival incarnations like publicness and democracy, social space is central as an ordering mechanism for other political, cultural and economic determinations. For Hot Docs that space reflects the festival's tagline, "Outstanding. Outspoken" in its highly structured and managed resemblance of the perfect liberal democratic social space - a clean, professional, multicultural and convivial space free of dissent, disturbance or dispute.

Chantal Mouffe has spent her career critiquing liberal democratic philosophy, focusing on the "democratic paradox" (2000) of consensus, pluralism and reconciliation inherent in the liberal democratic project (2005, 2). In the following passage she identifies the object of her criticism, and one she also signals as affecting democratic institutions:

> Notions such as 'cosmopolitan democracy', 'good governance', 'global civil society'…all partake of a common anti-political vision which refuses to acknowledge the antagonistic dimension constitutive of 'the political'. Their aim is the establishment of a world 'beyond left and right', 'beyond hegemony', 'beyond sovereignty' and 'beyond antagonism'. Such a longing reveals a complete lack of understanding of what is at stake in democratic politics and the dynamics of constitution of political identities. (2005, 2)

Eschewing the kinds of political identities that one finds at alternative and fringe festivals, Hot Docs—through its programming, highly structured social spaces, and discourse—constitutes a feel-good political space dominated by some of the tropes mentioned in this chapter.

Democratic liberal philosophy has inflected Western discourse, policy and institutions with a set of guiding principles and values that serve to undermine what Mouffe refers to as "the political," that is, the transformative power of intractable disagreement and politicized dialogue carried out under accommodating circumstances.[19] Liberal democratic regimes have emphasized consensus based on exclusion, whereby "agreement" between divergent (rational) social actors is reached based on the a priori exclusion of alternatives (voices, perspectives, politics).[20] Mouffe writes that "…next to individualism, the other central trait of most liberal thought is the rationalist belief in the

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[19] This usually refers to an ideal setting not compromised by private or state interests, akin to the fine-tuning of Habermas's public sphere, vis-a-vis Slack (1993).

[20] And example would be when male policymakers make decisions on behalf of, or that directly effect, women.

availability of a universal consensus based on reason" (Ibid, 11). Consensus as a belief in the rational resolution of disagreement is thus opposed to the actual practice of the a priori exclusion that establishes the boundaries of consent in the first place. Thus Hot Docs' post-screening discussions resemble more a quick complimentary sampling of the audience than a protracted dialogue, debate, or discussion. An imposed time limit of around ten minutes not only precludes such interaction, but also tends to also preclude a more critical or intellectual engagement with the film and filmmaker (As in: "Please keep your questions quick and to the point as we do not have much time").

For those who imbue documentary with transformative political potential, this assessment is troubling if we agree that major documentary gate-keepers and showcase fora like Hot Docs are indeed acting "under the influence" of liberalism.[21] The festival is not only cancelling any potential to open up a "space of resistance" (Giroux 2005, 532) that would allow pluralism to be expressed, but negates the existence of antagonism by offering no opportunity for opposing views and critical voices (against the festival, the sponsors, the politics in the films, etc.). Mouffe continues:

> Liberalism has to negate antagonism since, by bringing to the fore the inescapable moment of decision — in the strong sense of having to decide in an undecidable terrain — what antagonism reveals is the very limit of any rational consensus. As far as liberal thought adheres to individualism and rationalism, its blindness to the political in its antagonistic dimension is therefore not a mere empirical omission but a constitutive one. (Ibid, 12)

It is in this way that liberalism permeates and shapes the social spaces of Hot Docs — through a managerial design of sociability, spatial and social organization at the festival

[21] That said, there never existed a dominant festival form not born out of the trappings of liberalism (at the onset of the festival network, which is well-documented by De Valck [2007] and many others, liberalism was oriented toward the concentration of power, symbolic and material, of the nation state at film festivals), but that is not to say that alternative histories of the development of festivals don't contain instances of non-liberal formations, such as those explored in the history of lesbian and gay festivals by Loist (2012) and Zielinski (2008).

whereby consensus and other liberal democratic ideals are foregrounded, and disagreement, conflict and antagonisms are relegated to the margins, virtually contained safely on the screens, or excluded altogether. Mouffe argues that in the place of cosmopolitan or deliberative democracy we should strive for an agonistic model of democracy. Crowder explains Mouffe's theory as emphasizing

> the inevitability of conflict in political life, and the impossibility of identifying final, rational and neutral decision procedures, because of the ubiquity of power hierarchies and the multitudinous plurality of values. On the other hand, Mouffe distinguishes agonism from mere 'antagonism', or destructive conflict. (2006, 2)

This begs the question: is the potential for agonism given space at Hot Docs? While creating a consumer experience that is pleasing and encourages repeat patronage, the festival's commercial strategy clearly occludes space for real concerted agonism. Conflict arises when competing views or perspectives clash and antagonisms flare up and disagreement dominates discourse, space and action. Potential for such conflicts can surely be found in the articulation of hierarchies of valuation around right and wrong, especially situated in a media form so closely connected to notions of "truth" and pushing many ethical buttons.

One aspect of contemporary Western liberal rights discourse is the moral registry of 'right and wrong' or 'good and bad,' a derivation that, according to Mouffe, comes from classic liberal registries of 'us and them.' This illustrates the binary nature of conflict or antagonism, whereas agonism is polysemic, and encourages a multiplicity of perspectives and views that do not always change. The transference from a political equation of friend or enemy to a moralistic one permeates contemporary mainstream documentary culture and politics. In popular media conservatives resort to 'us/them' binaries, such as the

right-wing news broadcaster Fox,[22] while liberals claim to eschew such brazen binaries. Yet liberal interests have also constructed a mostly accepted binary of good and bad or right and wrong.[23]

All this is to say that where political discourse names the "evildoers" and "our enemies," a more nuanced conception of value hierarchies is part of the liberal paradigm, where consensus-based judgments are reinforced in diffuse ways at events and institutions like Hot Docs. Mouffe argues that this amounts to a kind of erasure of competing perspectives, and ultimately marginalizes radical and divergent views. This is what I take to be her criticism of the "neutrality" of deliberative democratic liberalism. Crowder offers more insight on the liberal conception of "the good" when he notes that while the neutrality or consensus of liberalism is unsustainable, it should not be completely thrown out, but perhaps tweaked to include more opposing views. Crowder concludes, "Much the same position can be reached by those comprehensive liberals who argue that the liberal conception of the good can be understood in a capacious or 'parsimonious' way that leaves room for many different interpretations" (Crowder quoted in Galston 2002). Yet Crowder's conceptualization of liberalism's description of the good (reminiscent of the earlier discussion around "doing good") is somewhat disingenuous in that it is merely a hypothetical suggestion that there is an approximated or conditional kind of neutrality in liberal practice. On this count, it is instructive to return to Mouffe, whose criticism of the liberal emphasis on the possibility of and desire for consensus (and

[22] See *Outfoxed: Rupert Murdoch's War on Journalism*, a documentary that critiques Fox News.

[23] Some documentary examples will illustrate: concerning the environment, recycling is good and plastic bags are bad (see *No Impact Man* and *The World of Plastic*, respectively). Concerning geopolitics, China's government is on the wrong side of human rights and Western nations are on the right side (see *Ai Weiwei*). Concerning climate change, incremental change in individual behaviour is the 'right' response and the dismantling of the free market capitalist system is the 'wrong' response (see *An Inconvenient Truth*).

subsequent erasure of alternative, clashing perspectives) offers the strongest critique of liberal rights discourse in documentary culture. Western values, shaped by democratic institutions, parliamentary governance, heteronormativity, patriarchy, colonialism, racism, eugenics, ableism and the related subjugation of knowledges (to harness Foucault) have, over time, established hegemonic moral values around good and bad.[24] This manifests at Hot Docs in the form of dominant discourses and policies around free market capitalism, human rights, geopolitical hierarchies, "doing good," and social justice. But discourses and policies are difficult to isolate, and measure on their own. Instead one can see their influence in the mediated social make up of the festival. Looking more closely at three of these dominant discourses of consent[25]—*market logic*, *rights and social justice*, and *consumer-citizenship*—helps to further tease out the role of liberal rights discourse in the commercialization of documentary at Hot Docs.

MARKET LOGIC

The dominant discourse of market logic is expressed at Hot Docs in several ways, some of which have been mentioned previously. Hot Docs is part of the system that currently champions commercial-friendly documentaries, some of which become docbusters – products that adhere to market principles of supply and demand largely shaped, in cinema, by the mainstream, commercial fiction system. Market logic does not completely set the agenda at Hot Docs, but is a dominant discourse that has, since the

[24] It is true this list is comprised of mostly derogatory influences, and that is not to point out the absence of positive influences but to indicate that the liberal idea (and practice) of consensus is wrought with problematic philosophical and political underpinnings.

[25] That is to say, such discursive formations serve to underpin, reinforce and reflect some of the dominant tenets and traits of liberalism that manifest at Hot Docs and work toward creating a space of consensus while ensuring contestation is mitigated to the margins.

1980s, steadily shaped a structure of feeling that favours privatized spheres for art and media. As Steyerl claims:

> The progressive privatisation of state media has led to a rapid commercialisation of their content. Formal experiments are replaced by docutainment and serial catastrophe. This means that experimental and reflexive documentary practices have lost their base and have become homeless. This applies to some areas of classical documentary film production as well as to more experimental and artistic works. They have dispersed into a fluid and [u]ncertain space, which is neither exclusively governed by the claims of specific national cultures nor by any single clearly distinguishable market logic. This space extends from alternative public spheres into the artfield [sic], from university auditoriums to youtube [sic] and self-organised projections, from glamourous [sic] film festivals and blockbuster art shows to the informal distribution of video tapes from hand to hand. (2008, 12)

With the continued pressures to succumb to the modes of cinematic production, distribution and exhibition imposed by free market capitalism, an organizational and expressive logic takes hold at institutions whose stance is determinately resilient, not resistant. Hot Docs maintains a careful image of state patronage and public education, displaying the logos of the numerous governmental agencies, including large state bodies like the Department of Canadian Heritage and Industry Canada, who supply pecuniary support during the ten days of each edition, with sandwich boards, posters, promotional material in the media and projected graphics before screenings.[26] Hot Docs' corporate patrons also enjoy similar visibility at the festival and then some, most notably at screenings preceded by advertisements (such as the earlier-mentioned Escalade advert). As has been mentioned, this has produced some backlash among festivalgoers and

[26] As well as throughout the year at "Docs for Schools" — an extension of the festival meant to bring the educative qualities of the singular event to a broad range of high school students at their institutions during the year, between festival editions. Hot Docs management, working with programmers, selects films with educative qualities, develops learning and teaching guides, and disseminates the materials to participating schools, which agree to promote the festival. Not entirely altruistic, this scheme, which is incidentally practiced in various ways at numerous festivals, provides free educational documentaries to students at little cost to the festival (who is not paying licensing fees for the works) and in return will likely see some of those same students turn up at the festival in the future as paying customers.

filmmakers, who most recently took issue with Coca-Cola's sponsorship of the "Environmental Films" section. Appendix F shows an image taken while I sat in the audience, of the projected advert for Coke (before an environmental film screening) during the 2010 edition. The current "presenting platinum partner" of the festival is Scotiabank, whose adverts feature most prominently across the festival media. The financial institution has, since 2011, been the principle corporate brand associated with Hot Docs – a relationship that has grown into a special section of the festival that supposedly tackles major societal issues, called "Scotiabank's Big Ideas." Searching through the films, I have yet to find a selection tackling the problem of the global banking system. Other prominent sponsors are a mix between corporations like Dundee Wealth (finance), Ford (auto), Rogers Group of Funds (media), Telefilm (state), as well as foundations like the Ontario Trillium Foundation, various Arts Councils, and other state and provincial funding agencies.[27]

This mélange of high visibility for both market forces and state sponsors signifies the coming together of state and market forces, and as such reflects wider currents in the culture, where a market logic is permeating media and art institutions (De Cauter 2011, 10). The imposition of corporate symbols and messages in the social spaces of Hot Docs is by now standard procedure for any arts festival working in the mainstream. However, other aspects orient the social spaces of Hot Docs toward a market logic within the liberal framework, such as the degree to which festival managers appear as professional business people. Hot Docs management strike a slick aesthetic in their conservative professional

[27] In 2011 Coca-Cola withdrew sponsorship offers after the festival responded to filmmaker protests and letters over the environmental film sponsorship by suggesting the corporation sponsor another aspect of the festival, amounting to one victory for social justice and dissent at Hot Docs.

attire.[28] With pressed black suits, newly shined dress shoes and black ties, the Executive Director, Business Manager, Market Director and other management individuals who appear at social events and introduce various screening engagements, appear as not only very professional, but very serious, orderly and one could say (as attendees often do) "corporate." This has been a departure from earlier incarnations of the festival's management, as can be seen in archival photos and in older programs where t-shirts, sweaters and jeans ruled the day. All this is to say, there has clearly been a concerted move to appear more professional in the business sense, perhaps a manifestation of the functioning of market logic at the festival where a business aesthetic trumps any kind of artistic aesthetic.[29] On a last note, this business-professional aesthetic has even influenced the festival's mediated and projected image of their audience: for the festival's 20-year anniversary Hot Docs presented a full page audience commemoration on page 59 of the 2013 program that reflects an enduring market logic. The text reads: "Hot Docs salutes its amazing audiences. Thanks for 20 Outstanding Years."[30] The accompanying full-page image of audience members, made stylistically blurry, features mostly Caucasian, middle-aged audience members all of whom are dressed in suits and ties (for the men) or evening gowns (for the women). With professional photographers hired to capture images of the festival each year, it would be a stretch to assume this was simply the best image the festival had at their disposal. More likely, Hot Docs is reflecting in its own market

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[28] See Appendix G.

[29] This could come down to personal style, but the aesthetic choices of the festival's management are similarly professional with all top position employees at the festival. This stylistic choice, reflective of market logic at the festival, can be seen in contrast to the presentation of the Festival Nouveau Cinema in Montreal, where there is little industry-dealing (there is no market conference) and where festival managers, including the Executive Director Claude Chamberlan appear on stage and throughout in casual clothing.

[30] See Appendix C.

logic discourse of promotion, an ideal audience type: middle aged, good-mannered (everyone in the photo is laughing or smiling), and dressed as if they are going to the ballet, certainly not a political or activist screening of a documentary.[31]

RIGHTS AND SOCIAL JUSTICE DISCOURSE

Another articulation of liberal rights discourse that permeates the Hot Docs festival is the discourse of rights and social justice and their relation to the concept of tolerance. Once again, this discourse or influence functions as a way of constructing consensus and eliding conflict at the festival by its very nature of finding the vast middle ground while marginalizing dissent. That is to say, at play is a set of prefigured moral configurations reflecting dominant Western liberal frameworks around human rights and individual liberty. Discourse around rights, social justice and tolerance permeates the festival, but in a manner that is consensus-based, focused on individuals as change agents and instrumentality as the problem-solution paradigm.[32] Those compelled to put forward critiques of the Western conception of human rights and tolerance will find little room at Hot Docs, as with *AWNS*, these are a "given."[33] Films and talks often start from the premise of universal human rights, as defined from a Western, liberal and individuated

[31] I have included an image of this page in Appendix C.

[32] The rise in popularity and proliferation of TED Talks illustrates this phenomenon, and has largely gone without popular criticism, save for pointed barbs pointing to the cult of consensus, where ideas and expertise are not meant to be challenged, here: http://www.newstatesman.com/martin-robbins/2012/09/trouble-ted-talks (Accessed 2013-10-21).

[33] One minor aspect of exclusion speaks to the ways in which the social spaces mitigate any participation of devout religious folks in the documentary community: every social space is organized around the activity of alcohol consumption, a practice that is at direct odds with practicing Muslims and other select religious followers. This brackets any discussion of human rights, social justice and tolerance instantly, as, along with the exclusion of low-income festival attendees, a portion of the local (and international) demographic is kept out of the conversation.

paradigm, and rarely, if ever, begin by questioning those a priori conditions for equality and justice.

As has been mentioned the very model the festival uses for post-screening discussions is prohibitive in terms of deep discussion, the airing of a multiplicity of views (including—crucially—radical and alternative perspectives, especially anti-capitalist), and of healthy conflict, which impinges on critical engagement. Antagonism, as "an ever present possibility" (Mouffe 2005, 16) is a form of conflict that, "in order to be accepted as legitimate, needs to take a form that does not destroy the political association" (Ibid, 20) or institution. Hot Docs, reflecting a diffuse liberal structure of feeling that is propagated by Western media and political actors, denies the political and thus eliminates the risk of injuring its own reputation and space of "safe" conviviality, one that is structured by market logic and liberal sensibilities around rights. Discussion at post-screening sessions is relegated to quick points and questions, amounting to a fragmented display of affection and/or interest from audience members and staff or volunteer facilitators. This hyper-management approach to a "discussion" about the film represents a conspicuous attempt to control the conversation and corral subsequent comments into a spirit of congeniality and appreciation (the question/comment by the facilitator is often congratulatory and consists of "how did you manage to do this or that…") while establishing a kind of management authority over the proceedings. Audiences are rushed out after ten minutes to make way for the next screening's audience.

These very short and surface, post-screening discussions between artists, management and audiences are so heavily managed and designed by the festival to be positive and efficient, that any kind of discussion or debate about structural change,

radical transformation or massively opposed viewpoints becomes awkward, if not impossible. This structure serves the purpose of moving things along quickly and maximizing screen space, as well as contributing to an atmosphere of pleasurable consensus. If the festival scaled back the number of films or screenings, it would allow for more substantial, engaged and involved discussions and debates after each screening. But keeping Q&As 'short and sweet' serves the twin purposes of commercialization: an efficient schedule with ample room for revenue-generating screenings and a feel-good social atmosphere that precludes radical, multifarious discussion and debate.

At the Ai Weiwei screening this model made for a stilted and superficial Q&A that was over after about ten minutes. The discussion centred on the filmmaker's access to her subject and not the politics of the film or the film's subject. Later however, as documentary events go, there was much debate and discussion outside of the venue (on to Bloor Street), about Ai's politics, the quality of the filmmaking, and the experience of the filmmaker. The point of the matter is that Hot Docs manages its screening spaces in such a way that protracted and heavily invested debates, disputes and dialogues must find their own space, outside of the official spaces of the festival – not always an easy feat.

Whether this model is the outcome or effect of the process of commercialization or a concerted tactic in the process of commercialization, or a combination in the cycle, is uncertain. The outcome of such a post-screening discussion model and the overall design of the social spaces around screenings, which are mostly devoid of Mouffe's kind of agonistic pluralism or any kind of expressive politics (let alone political action), is

evident however, as a festivalgoer who has attended at over one hundred Hot Docs screenings and events over the last several years.[34]

ACTIVISM

Films with an urgent message or perspective, or those that are tied to social movements and activist campaigns that have the potential to trigger social inclusion and political involvement are common among political documentaries, yet find muted response at Hot Docs, thus limiting the possibilities for social transformation. These are take action documentaries that are sometimes referred to as "activist films" and almost always have a "take away" element, such as the campaign to remove the corporation's legal status as an individual (*The Corporation* 2003; 2010*) the animal rights movement (*The Ghosts in Our Machine* 2013*), the amnesty for political prisoners campaign (*Pussy Riot* 2013*), or the environmental movement and campaign to shut down the Alberta tar sands (*H2Oil* 2009*). These films are most often launched simultaneously with campaigns or are joined to existing campaigns through cross-platform promotion and cross-pollination among civil society groups and individuals working on the issues. Further, the filmmakers behind these take action docs often collaborate with advocates during the production and follow-through to commercial distribution and grassroots dissemination.

As an organizer of grassroots, activist documentary screenings, I feel well positioned to describe what forms of mediated social space can accommodate and

[34] As an aside, the author has also attended hundreds of documentary screenings at other, less-commercially-oriented festivals and activist-organized events. At Cinema Politica, for instance, post-screening discussions last well over an hour, and are usually terminated because either the filmmaker is tired or there are only a few left in the audience. At RIDM screenings in Montreal, post-screening discussions likewise last much longer, as the discussion after the screening of *The Act of Killing* at the 2012 edition can attest: the audience and filmmaker sustained a dialogic space that last 1.5 hours.

facilitate political activism. At Cinema Politica screenings there are nearly always five components: the event organizers and volunteers, the filmmaker, the film, the audience and civil society or activist group members and their wares. The projections of the documentaries serve a dual purpose: for the audience to encounter or explore an issue and as a catalyst for post-screening action. Post-screening action takes place after the credits roll and the lights come up and the guest speakers take the stage. The microphones are distributed throughout the audience and everyone and anyone is encouraged to make comments or ask questions. On stage the filmmaker fields questions about the film and local activists and organizers inform the audience of their campaigns, how to get involved, and clarify points from the film. These post-screenings often last an hour, sometimes more, and are usually terminated not for lack of participation but because the room booking has ended.

Political activism is facilitated by the presence of civil society organizers and activists who table at the event and disseminate campaign and organization materials to the audience as they leave or enter, or when they approach the tables for inquiry. Audience members that feel inspired to take action on an issue or problem explored in the film just projected can immediately "plug in" to local actions, campaigns, and communities. Audience members who may not have the social disposition to approach organizers and plug in immediately can take materials home with them to become more informed and perhaps participate at a later date. Either way, the opportunities for social action are not only present but highlighted (with posters, announcements, speeches, table displays) at such screenings.

Cinema Politica and other activist-oriented documentary initiatives understand documentary to not only be a commodity designed for consumption, or a liberal projection to replace action in symbolic regimes of "doing good," but as a bridge, catalyst and igniter for audience members seeking deeper engagement or who are inspired and moved to act based on their response to the film. Hot Docs, as part of a commercialization and mainstreaming framework, denies and even actively rejects this approach to documentary cinema. The festival, instead of creating social spaces where audiences can continue the conversation, get involved and plug-in, sanitizes the social screening space as a space of consensus (with the film and with the festival) devoted to consumption and short, surface dialogue with little to no participation of activists and civil society organizers. A case in point is the 2010 Hot Docs screening of *H2Oil*.

H2Oil – Subverting the Commercial Festival Space

In 2010 Shannon Walsh introduced her film at the Hot Docs Bloor Theatre in Toronto. Walsh thanked the festival for selecting her film and thanked the audience for attending. It was an unremarkable beginning to what would be a remarkable screening, at least in the context of Hot Docs' liberal screening spaces. Walsh's film *H2OIL* is a documentary with a decidedly critical POV aimed squarely at the tar sands. The film highlights the excessive water consumption that sustains the extraction of bitumen, as well as its pollution effects and devastating impact on local First Nations communities. Walsh is herself connected with many activist and anarchist groups, organizations and individuals working in the areas of environment, poverty and aboriginal rights. The film is meant to be precisely the kind of critical intervention Zimmermann (2000) speaks of,

acting as a tool for organizers, and a catalyst for critical dialogue and debate on a controversial topic among the Canadian public. In short, the film is meant to inform, engage and activate, as well as sustain attention, turning on its head Participant Media's maxim that entertainment inspires social change, as Walsh's film tries to show that social change can also be entertaining.[35]

Embodying the subjectivity of a filmmaker *and* an activist, Walsh followed up the projection by inviting local activists on to the stage with her and announced the tie-in activist events, inviting everyone in the audience to go the next day to a panel discussion organized with the Aboriginal Environmental Network on resistance to the tar sands and solidarity actions with aboriginal communities in Alberta and elsewhere. It also did not come as a surprise when Walsh facilitated the politicizing of the screening space, commandeering an otherwise prosaic process of friendly questions and answers, by suggesting to the audience some radical tactics for shutting down the tar sands.[36] Walsh's provocations and suggestions had an electrifying and politicizing effect on the social space of that screening, infusing an otherwise polite, agreeable, apolitical sociability around the Hot Docs space with radical politics, direct action discourse, confrontational perspectives and diverse solidarity tactics and ideas. The impact on the space was perceptible: the comments and questions from audience members became politically elevated and more aggressive as individuals undoubtedly felt included and emboldened by a politicized space immediately following the screening of a very political

[35] Walsh has allowed the film to be accessed by scores of radical and progressive activist groups and organizations for free, as an organizational tool or for community education and activation outreach. From its initial release following the Hot Docs festival, Walsh and *H2OIL* have circulated between mainstream and grassroots/alternative spheres, injecting a critical perspective against the continued operation of the tar sands.

[36] Including, but not limited to divesting from the operations, starting by "closing your RBC bank accounts and telling them why you are: because they are the biggest financial backer of the tar sands."

documentary. With opposing views aired in a rare moment of debate without closure or consensus, the screening took on the air of agonistic pluralism for one brief moment in Hot Docs festival time. The commercialized notion that "neutralizing" (to use Mouffe's phrase) the space of confrontational politics is simply what the audience wants was thus laid bare as an assumption not entirely in line with what was actually possible.

This connects to the gap between Hot Docs' marketing and management strategies and the communities they serve in other ways, reminiscent of the festival's response to the dissent caused by the Cadillac commercial shown before *An Unreasonable Man* in 2006. This is in direct contrast to more community-oriented festivals that "community program" (Loist 2012), that is, respond to community programming needs in a spirit of collaboration.[37] At Hot Docs that community (judging from my own observations having attended for years) is not only industry, business and a perceived "middle class" liberal audience, but activists and marginalized groups as well. Loist recalls that "lesbian riots" broke out at a 1986 Frameline Festival screening of *Ten Cents a Dance: Parallax* when lesbian members of the audience, "frustrated with unequal representation for years [who] were not willing to take it any longer" (Loist 2012, 162) upset the proceedings. The festival was sensitive to the cultural politics around the issue, however, and unlike Hot Docs, took their activist-minded constituency into account: "Frameline took this incident very seriously" Loist writes, "The board of directors ordered parity in gay and lesbian content and specifically created the post of 'women's guest curator' to find enough appropriate material" (Ibid, 163). When Hot Docs community/audience members lodged their own protest over pre-show content and sponsorship, no structural changes were

[37] In stark contrast, Hot Docs preselects from industry and festival offerings, between 85 and 90 percent of its annual program, according to Sean Farnel (Farnel, Interview).

made and no attempts to dialogue with the community were staged. Instead, management made a note to be more aware of which adverts were shown before which films, missing the larger issue of the disconnect between corporate sponsorship and promotion with political, activist programming. Similarly, when documentary community members petitioned the festival to honour activist filmmaker Magnus Isacsson, Hot Docs' management was unresponsive.[38]

Given all this then, it may come as a surprise to anyone who was at the *H2Oil* screening that Walsh and her colleagues made this intervention, which politicized the liberal space with progressive and radical ideas and actions, in spite of rather than in collusion with the festival. Evidence of this could be seen, if one paid attention, to the fact that there were no activist flyers or other such materials in the lobby of the theatre, or being distributed by activists on the way out. There were no handouts about the tar sands, about taking action, or about the announced tie-in events that were to follow the screening. The entire articulation of taking action following the film was verbal and done inside on stage. This 'Trojan horse' tactic may have been necessary given the festival's aversion to political activism at the festival, but surely as a documentary institution and major platform event, Hot Docs would encourage the cultures and communities associated with their films? Not quite, it seems.

In an interview with Walsh, she indicates that Hot Docs prohibited flyering or postering for related activist events and campaigns, citing the need for "efficiency" in

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[38] In another cultural politics flare up publicly ignored by the festival, 51 Canadian filmmakers issued a statement of protest against Hot Docs on May 4th, 2011, citing the festival's partnership with Israeli organization CoPro Documentary Marketing Foundation, in relation to a perceived normalization of Israel as a democratic country. Hot Docs offered no response, despite the list containing names of many long-time supporters and participants of the festival. Source: http://www.bdsmovement.net/2011/canadian-filmmakers-protest-6882 (Accessed 2013-08-24).

moving audiences between screening events. "Hot Docs management was completely against us using the screening as a platform for political activism, with regards to disseminating materials around ways to take action."[39] This was frustrating for a filmmaker who had made an activist documentary and wanted to use it as a tool for organizers and catalyst to provoke social change around the tar sands:

> There is so much mainstream media supporting the tar sands or neutralizing the negative impact of the project. With our film we wanted to make an intervention into the public sphere in this country and help activate audiences. At the screening, which we were thankful for, given the audience Hot Docs brings, we wanted to use the film as a jumping off point — where an audience not already active on the issue could become inspired from the screening experience then immediately plug in to various local campaigns, groups, actions, etc. (Walsh 2013)

But when Walsh spoke with festival organizers, they flat out prohibited extra-screening activities, including the set up of a table with campaign and activist event materials, or connecting related activist events with the festival itself. She found this not only disheartening and discouraging, but a proactive censoring of political activity:

> It's a way of managing their liberal space — where conversations around the films are sanitized, controlled by the festival, kept brief and to the point, and where a mood of congeniality seems to be strictly enforced. If a filmmaker has made a documentary that they want to use as a communication tool for social change, why would the festival prohibit us from using that screening space to those ends? Not only did Hot Docs prohibit us from disseminating activist materials on the grounds it would slow down the movement of audiences, but we were unable to set up a proper post-screening dialogue and debate after the film, where we would have liked to have had a panel of experts and local activists speak to the issues and interact with the audience. (Ibid)

According to Walsh, this was not the case at other festivals. She recalls that at the Vancouver International Film Festival (VIFF), for instance, it was a different scene:

> The festival welcomed our interpretative perspective on the screening space and respected our desire to politicize that space, as well as to facilitate a real, lengthy

[39] Shannon Walsh, interviewed by author, Montreal, QC, November, 2011.

> and heated debate around the tar sands. To these ends we organized a panel of activists and experts and had an amazing post-projecting discussion with a very engaged and enlivened audience for about an hour after the film ended. We were also permitted to hand out pamphlets and were generally encouraged to promote any tie-in events and campaigns around the tar sands. Between Hot Docs and VIFF and with regards to the politics of the screening spaces, it was like night and day. (Ibid)

Walsh's experience at Hot Docs is not an exception to the rule: attending other take action documentary screenings at the festival, including the odd radical committed documentary (such as *Dreamland,* 2010* or *Jai Bhim Comrade* 2012*) the scene has always been the apotheosis of the VIFF screening described above.[40] As Chris McDonald, the Executive Director, indicates: "It's not our job, the festival's job, to 'do' politics. We leave that up to the films. We're here to show the best and most provocative documentaries to audiences. We're not here to engage in the politics those films explore or endorse."[41] This interpretation of "doing politics" as one in which the festival facilitates a politicized, agonistic pluralism speaks to the managerial, bureaucratic and indeed liberal framework of Hot Docs' current code of operation.

The twin arguments against politicizing screening spaces—the need for efficiency and the idea that such considerations lie outside management's purview—uphold a mainstream and commercial status quo one finds in dominant media institutions (such as the Cineplex or large fiction-dominated festivals like TIFF). If flyering at events impedes the festival's ability to move audiences in and out on time for a jam-packed screening

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[40] At a 2013 screening of *Blackfish*, a film exposing the cruelty of the aquamarine parks in the US, a brief Q&A with the filmmaker ended with a question from the audience: "Yes, but what can *we* do?" The filmmaker responded that the audience should visit the film's site, but was nearly interrupted by an audience member intervening, who raised her voice and informed the sold-out crowd that Toronto has its own version of the animal abuse seen on the screen, at a local marine park. This intervention was quickly followed by Hot Docs staff asking everyone to leave. This is typical of the disconnect between films that inspire action and screening spaces that prefigure apolitical inaction.

[41] Chris McDonald, interviewed by Ezra Winton, Toronto, ON, March, 2010

schedule, then perhaps the priorities of the festival need to be reoriented away from volume and ticket sales toward the political and dialogic quality of the events. Hot Docs, as has been indicated elsewhere, is a festival very much concerned with accounting — the numbers (of ticket sales, films, audience members, etc.) take precedence over the experiential social space of the festival. This quantity over quality focus is evident in the festival's 2010 annual report where little attention is paid to quality of experience and data is focused on financial and audience gains. It is also evidenced by the festival's lack of cooperation with activist and political filmmakers who want a different screening experience than the standardized and efficient one-size-fits-all currently on offer at the festival.

Equally telling of the festival's liberal and commercial orientation is the argument that "it's not our job" to "do" politics. I've spoken to many filmmakers about Hot Docs and not one individual has expressed a desire or expectation that the festival "do" politics, but rather, that the festival diversify its standardized consensus-oriented screening space, and allows for multiple interpretations and perspectives, including those that are activist or political in nature. This would not only give the festival more credibility (and therefore strengthen ties) with civil society groups and a whole raft of filmmakers, but would develop relationships with local communities outside of an industry purview. That said, there is one caveat. Filmmakers and members of the documentary community (such as myself) do expect the festival to "do" advocacy, with regards to public funding and support for documentary in Canada, thus connecting somewhat to the festival's CIFC roots as a festival at least partially oriented toward advocacy.

This lack of desire to "do" advocacy in the current management was put in stark relief on May 4th, 2012, when around 100 members of the documentary community took action against recent cuts to the genre in Canada and demonstrated on Bloor street, near the Hot Docs headquarters. Disappointment with the festival's complete lack of comment or organized action on the very recent cuts, organizers told me that the festival was "not supporting the protest" nor helping in any way to raise attention about the funding crisis.[42] As mentioned in Chapter One, Hot Docs was started by, and has a board still half-composed of members of, the Documentary Organization of Canada, an advocacy and community group for documentary in Canada. In the spring of 2012 it was announced that the Conservative government was making major cuts to the arts, effecting documentary funding envelopes, and that more distribution windows, including at the CBC, were closing for the non-fiction form. The outlook for documentary in Canada was already bleak, given that in this country documentary filmmaking is largely supported through government grants, subsidies, tax rebates, broadcasting contracts and partnerships between the government and private interests.[43] Given this context of a publicly-subsidized and supported genre already marginalized by mainstream media configurations, when the policy backlash from the global economic downturn of 2008 became perceptible to the public in the form of austerity measures by state economy planners, documentary makers and supporters had reason to worry. Arts are always

[42] Kristyna Balaban, "Documentary Community Rallies During Hot Docs, Toronto Media Co-op, http://toronto.mediacoop.ca/fr/story/documentary-community-rallies-during-hot-docs/10791 (Accessed 2013-11-01).

[43] Whereas American documentary filmmakers access funds through foundations, Canadian filmmakers access through state funding institutions like Telefilm or SODEC, and state-regulated private envelopes like the Rogers Documentary Fund.

among the first programs to be cut by neoliberal governments, and these cuts tend to go deeper during times of economic instability and uncertainty.

With this backdrop – a global economic recession into its fourth year and the concomitant austerity policies slashing and cutting arts and public programs in Canada – Hot Docs organizers began the 2012 edition characteristically upbeat. Many festival attendees commented on the lack of critical discourse around funding, state policy and arts cuts at the festival: Where were the talks addressing these issues? The workshops? The events? Was there any action planned? Questions like these were on the minds of many DOC members attending the festival, including Sarah Spring, who was one of the organizers of the protest and is interviewed in the following excerpt:

> "It is an increasing trend by the federal government to suppress independent Canadian voices," said Sarah Spring, an organizer of the event along with the Documentary Organization of Canada. The National Film Board of Canada received a 10% cut to its budget while the CBC and Telefilm Canada's budgets were slashed as well. According to Spring, the rally was organized during Hot Docs to inform the international filmmakers about what is happening in Canada as well as to try and mobilize more Canadian filmmakers to form coalitions against the federal cuts.[44]

It is instructive to note that Spring indicates the rally was organized *during* Hot Docs, not *with* Hot Docs, a subtle indication that this action was carried out without any involvement of the festival. Also of note is that Spring and others wanted to connect with the larger documentary community and inform them about local arts issues – one would think at the very least, this would fall within the purview of the Hot Docs festival. Indeed, Hot Docs had no part in the small but fierce rally. If it had helped organize, offered space to prepare, and/or promoted and/or endorsed the rally at the festival through its many

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[44] Kristyna Balaban, "Documentary Community Rallies During Hot Docs, Toronto Media Co-op, http://toronto.mediacoop.ca/fr/story/documentary-community-rallies-during-hot-docs/10791 (Accessed 2013-11-01).

communication channels and social spaces, one could imagine a much larger turnout, and much better media coverage of the event. The economic downturn and eventual cuts were a long time coming, and many expected the festival, in knowing expectation of the impact on the community, industry and genre, would somehow acknowledge the situation, if not outright support actions raising awareness or contesting the crisis.

With reverberations of dried up funding pools and closed down distribution windows rippling across the Canadian documentary community, filmmakers and documentary supporters such as myself eagerly flipped through the 2012 program in search of events addressing what has become the worst hit to documentary since funding cuts took place in the 1980s. And there on page fifty-five of the 2012 program, peering back at anyone looking, was the answer. The four sidebar, non-screening presentation events of the festival are listed under "Doc Talks" and "In Conversation." Doc Talks is described as "…an exciting series of hour-long conversations with Festival filmmakers offering their insights into documentary filmmaking and storytelling" (Hot Docs Program 2012, 55). Three Doc Talk events are listed: *Doc Talk 1 - Visual Innovation*: "A discussion on how documentaries are utilizing craft and technology to push cinematic boundaries and further innovate storytelling;" *Doc Talk 2 - In Conversation with Stacy Peralta (Bones Brigade: An Autobiography)*: "Stacy will discuss his approach to a story than [sic] spans decades, from his award-winning film *Dogtown and Z-Boys to Bones Brigade: An Autobiography* (p.62), and that forms a definitive account of skateboarding and its subculture;" *Doc Talk 3 - Cinematic Impact*: "A discussion on how filmmakers are creating impact in the cinema and beyond through their filmmaking choices." Under "In Conversation," a recurring speaking series where special guests tackle documentary

topics in front of an audience made up of festival attendees and the general public, is the event "How to Entertain Audiences and Change the World" with Davis Guggenheim and Diane Weyermann. None of these four speaking events in 2012 addressed the issue of the documentary funding and distribution crisis facing the community and industry at the time.

Connecting back to the earlier discussed tenets of the liberal political philosophy and framework, especially as it relates to consensus-building concerning Hot Docs, there is a steady focus on individuality (rallies and actions are collective whereas Doc Talks and other Hot Docs speaking events are individual-personality-driven), market logic (extra-screening events tend to focus on the industry and money, but curiously in 2012 when it seemed so natural to contribute, do not address public funding and policy issues), and managed engagement/activism (where screenings are kept "efficient" and rallies are organized without festival support in any fashion).

CONCLUSION

This chapter has looked at the cultural politics of documentary at Hot Docs as an expression of Western liberal rights and diversity discourse. As the moral companion to neoliberalism, liberalism completes the twin set of philosophies, policies and practices that seek to organize social reality—including the troika of culture, politics and economics—with a particular order or balance that has at its core, individual rights and freedom, a market logic, a denial of political conflict, or what Mouffe calls "the political," and a culture of consensus. Liberal rights discourse's emphasis on the individual as arbiter of rights and freedoms and as the cornerstone of social change and

power fits with the logic of capitalism as it interfaces with one of expression of the culture of documentary (the lone filmmaker, the lone subject). In the constant tension between capital and culture, a liberal rights framework acts as a leveller by focusing power and meaning in subjectivity, on the individual. Each person is responsible for himself or herself, and each person must make the world as they wish to see it. Concomitantly, each person is free to accumulate capital and wealth for themselves. Collective considerations are unwelcome and threaten the market imperative (for consumer-friendly product), the sanctity of the consensus-defined space, and the rights of the individual (to be free from politics).

The political boundaries of a liberal rights discourse are revealed at Hot Docs, a festival that trades on documentary's left-wing and democratic impulses, but builds off the more mainstream elements of this tradition in the genre, framing debate around Western-defined universal rights, celebrating safe or distant dissent, welcoming small acts and incremental change, and providing a space for highly regulated and prefigured discussion and debate on important issues and topics. This chapter has attempted to show how the politics of liberal rights discourse have inflected the cultural politics of Hot Docs in certain ways with certain impact, and have linked this political constellation with the overarching process and articulation of commercialization. Indeed, central to the current structure of feeling as it relates to politics, culture and the arts is the fusing of liberal sensibilities around culture and politics, with the sensibilities around capitalism, such as consumption and commodification. Lastly, while liberal politics may not welcome radical right-wing and conservative viewpoints and expression, the liberal framework also makes no room for radical progressive and notably, anti-capitalist voices and perspectives. In

this way the festival fortifies to an existing status quo, articulated in mainstream civic politics and activism, and offers no respite or differentiation from the norm, despite its avowed claims of diversity and, to a lesser degree, dissent.

CONCLUSION

After sitting through the 2011 screening of *POM Wonderful Presents: The Greatest Movie Ever Sold*, followed by the half hour Q&A with the director,[1] Morgan Spurlock, I discovered that, along with the people I was with, we had developed an insatiable sense of thirst. We were all smacking our lips, admitting we were all very curious about pomegranate juice. As we exited the Winter Garden theatre, that craving was suddenly addressed by women in POM Wonderful uniforms handing out hundreds of the little round bottles of juice. As we spilled out on to the Toronto streets that night we all concluded unanimously that the experience had amounted to two words: it was, a "marketing coup." This kind of crass commercialism—from product placement to merchandise and handout marketing—might be the norm at Sundance, but many festivalgoers, especially long-term patrons and filmmakers, were surprised to see it at the 2011 edition of Hot Docs.

Contrast this with the denial of permission to hand out political and activist flyers and the picture that emerges is of a festival foregrounding the concerns and desires of commercial interests over those of local community and civic participation. While the POM Wonderful example is anecdotal, it seems likely such experiences will only continue to escalate at future editions until Hot Docs reaches the sticky infamy of Sundance: the hyper-commercialized "indie" film festival that industry can't afford to miss. It is this inevitability—the slow and plodding normalization of market forces and of mainstream commercial culture that I wish to trouble with this thesis. As an expression or reflection of a larger structure of feeling that valorizes commercial, mainstream media

[1] Opening night Q&As tend to last much longer than other Q&As at the festival.

and popular culture, Hot Docs is a fascinating case study of a cultural event and institution in transition, yet perhaps due to this seemingly normal march toward the mainstream commercial milieu, it remains uncritically celebrated in popular literature. And due to the fact that it is a Canadian documentary festival, it remains triply understudied in the academy.

As a festival that began with local community roots and advocated on its behalf, Hot Docs has grown in twenty years to become one the most important documentary events and markets globally. Yet Hot Docs is still characterized as an "audience festival" in most contemporary discourse. Intriguingly, this qualifier is deployed *either* pejoratively *or* as praise, depending on who is doing the describing. When Chris McDonald says it, the implication is that the festival is there to serve audiences, and to respond to audience demand, corresponding to the festival's focus on steady growth. When Amy Miller says the festival caters to audiences, she is describing a negative situation where Hot Docs has concentrated programming around feel-good, crowd-pleasing documentaries for "fence-sitters" as she calls liberal-minded audiences. From this latter equation, Miller feels excluded, and indeed, her films have been left out of the populist programming McDonald lauded on opening night at the 2012 edition.

The impact of this shifting framework, I hope to have shown, is twofold: the festival increasingly transitions into a global event by detaching itself from localized, community concerns, and the festival increasingly sets the terms and conditions for the popularization of documentary by excluding marginalized, radical works. The rise of liberal consensus docs and the decline of radical committed docs in programming is part of a larger constellation that extends beyond the festival. By privileging commercial

interests and strategies over local community and political considerations, the festival is developing a certain kind of program, as well as a certain kind of social space and a certain kind of institution. These three aspects of Hot Docs – the circulation of documentary, the mode of its consumption, and the management of contestation and dissent – are shaped by the commercial forces of the market and corporations interested in profit and PR, rather than in political values like public intervention (to use Zimmermann) or commitment (to use Waugh). Chantal Mouffe argues that we need to change institutions in order to move toward democratic pluralism, and that "radical politics can only be successful when it is envisaged on the mode of a 'war of position' aimed at transforming the existing institution and the creation of a new hegemony" (2009, 40). Like me, she sees art and its attendant institutions as playing a major role in confronting systems of oppression, including neoliberal capitalism, and as such I follow her lead in focusing on Hot Docs as a potential site for radical politics.

While political discourse and activism have not been completely glossed over by or bracketed out of Hot Docs, this thesis has argued that a certain kind of politics, that is one that is safe, accessible, consensus-based and embedded in larger structures of policy, culture, and media, is being nurtured and encouraged at the festival. This commercial/populist/liberal framework ensures that radical currents in politics and culture have no space or legitimacy in the films of Hot Docs, the spaces of the festival, or the agendas of the organization's BOD meetings. On the twentieth anniversary of the festival, Executive Director Chris McDonald summarized these currents by saying:

> As a community, we've built a world leading, international festival that truly celebrates the best virtues and unending diversity of non-fiction filmmaking. And, one year since the opening of the Bloor Hot Docs Cinema, we've seen, through robust and growing attendance, that documentaries are not just good for the mind

> and soul, but also good business. We're sure this all might be possible outside of Canada, too - but it hasn't happened anywhere else yet. (In Hot Docs Program 2013, 13)

All the elements are there: competition on a global scale, diversity in form and subject, growing audiences, the vitality of documentary as a business endeavour, and the distinctly *Canadianness* of the whole operation. This official festival discourse combines the best of both worlds by trading on documentary's unique public and educative qualities while also indicating the opportunities for expanding commerce.

The preceding pages have pointed to the ways in which this commercial turn has impacted the opportunities for dissent. Thomas Frank has observed that dissent is essentially "commodified" once it is co-opted and embedded in capitalist circulation (1997). Yet McDonald, in the above quote, vaunts this marriage of opportunity and productivity as a fertile space where docs can be outspoken (in certain ways) and outstanding (in certain others). Lastly, the Executive Director seems to address the notion of community and "the local" by situating the festival within the larger context of documentary's ties to Canada. McDonald leads his write-up by agreeing with Kevin McMahon's efforts to have documentary recognized as Canada's official art form, thus appealing to a sense of nationalist pride while pandering somewhat to critics who charge that the festival is moving away from localized, community connections.

McDonald's statement, along with the last ten years of programming and organizational policies and activities at Hot Docs, suggest the construction of a slick, professional, and audience-oriented image that is nevertheless connected to a national Canadian imaginary. Yet a disjuncture is perceptible in these spaces, where the head of the festival conjures the *Canadianness* of the festival while at the same time Canadian

programming has been in steady decline. At the same time, the festival has charted a meteoric rise in success, while the Canadian documentary industry as a whole has been in steady crisis. The discourse associated with the festival therefore takes on more of a PR or marketing orientation than a critical engagement with the documentary community, papering over such discrepancies with figures of positive growth and international/national outreach discourse.

Community is as loaded a term as any, and how we define it is largely based on ideas of collective subjectivities (Zielinski 2008, 171), whether that be identity-based, behaviour-based or consumption-based. In the case of the community that Hot Docs serves and is engaged with, this too is changing with significant consequences. Where the festival was started by a community of filmmakers and documentary advocates, there are now several overlapping and interrelated communities that converge at and benefit from Hot Docs. Among these loosely connected groups of individuals (from industry producers to journalists to the filmmakers themselves) one is hard pressed to find radical documentary filmmakers and political activists - at least outside of sidebars and other less-visible margins of the festival. Also in decline is the Canadian filmmaker who has had their film featured at the festival. The Hot Docs "community" is thus now oriented (or managed) around mainstream and commercial interests, a point perhaps most crudely expressed by Patricia Finneran of the Sundance Institute at last year's Hot Docs, who during a panel presentation entitled "Impact Stories - Building and Measuring Engagement"[2] told the audience that to have a real social impact with your film, you needed to "Sell it to as large an audience as possible. But you also need the right people

[2] See: http://www.hotdocs.ca/schedule/event/impact_stories_building_and_measuring_engagement/ (Accessed 202-09-22).

to see it, you need to get it into Congress for a screening on the Hill." Perhaps jet lag led Finneran to forget that she was not addressing a group of American filmmakers, nor was she in America. And perhaps, to give her credit, her work focuses on documentary impact at commercial sites and policymaking levels. However, for some of the activist-oriented filmmakers in the room, who later complained about the "corporate tone" of the event, her speech reflected a larger discernible pattern at Hot Docs, where the festival is fomenting a community that is not only breaking its local roots, but is drawing lines around a new community that purports to advance and celebrate the subversive and dissenting qualities of documentary, yet carries out its activities and programming in ways that suggest otherwise.

In closing, there are three areas to consider when deliberating on why these changes and developments at Hot Docs should matter to more than just the diminutive group of filmmakers and industry actors who circle the globe following the festival trail each year. They are, in no particular order: pluralism, publicness (or access), and participation and each one is linked back to the principal concerns of community, consumption and contestation. That these three concepts all happen to be mainstays of alternative media theory is no accident, as my thesis has aimed to make a contribution to alternative media literature, and also to stake claims on documentary as an alternative media form. As such, this conclusion closes with brief remarks on these three aspects.

PLURALISM AND INCLUSION

I agree with Mouffe that the idea of deliberative democracy, founded on the liberal principle of dialogue and diversity, does not advance the goal of a just and equal society.

We need to acknowledge and work with difference, and not just in the Multicultural aspects of food, music and clothing: difference needs to be given space in public fora where agonistic pluralism can foster the kind of dialogue and debate that doesn't always lead to the liberal ideal of consensus. With so many issues and topics dividing society, especially a diverse society like Canada, a truly democratic process would allow for the airing of those differences, and not measured against a hegemonic and elite standard (in Canada's case, the white Anglo-European standard). Cultural institutions like Hot Docs have an important role to play, and one that is facilitated at least in part through public financing, in contributing to a pluralistic public sphere that is inclusive and welcoming to all, even those with radically opposed perspectives. Hot Docs, as a world leader in documentary, should diversify its program, social spaces, and organizational policies and practices to include radical, political and activist voices and perspectives at the festival. In this way the festival would live up to its own discourse as a facilitator of a democratic medium and provide a heterotopic space for filmmakers, activists, and the public that isn't measured against a liberal ideal.

PUBLICNESS AND NOT-FOR-PROFIT

In line with Zimmermann, who upholds documentary's virtues and potential as a public cinema made and disseminated with the public's interest in mind, Hot Docs continues to drift into privatized, commercial and elite-interest territory, mitigating the festival's potential to serve the public as a forum of ideas and actions. As festivals grow larger they need more resources, and they tend to organize their symbolic resources in such a manor that is attractive to the entities providing the funding for growth. In this endless cycle of growth, festivals make compromises in order to receive funding, they

manage spaces in order to facilitate corporate marketing, and they program in order to appeal to mass audience pleasure, thus, the theory goes, increasing ticket sales. Yet audiences are not synonymous with "the public," and festivals that are highly structured around inclusive and exclusive regimes prioritize various stakeholder groups over others. At Hot Docs, the favoured groups are those that fit in with the larger commercial, mainstream paradigm and who are not representative of the documentary community or the Canadian (or Toronto) public at large. If the festival becomes a commercial enterprise mainly interested in selling tickets to audiences and audiences to corporations, Hot Docs risks becoming like any other large for-profit media organization. Including a diverse range of the public and their activities in the festival is at least part of the antidote to this trend, and there are several ways to achieve this, notably on display at the True/False festival (Columbia, MO) and its aggressive local-community orientation each year.

PARTICIPATION AS ACTIVISM

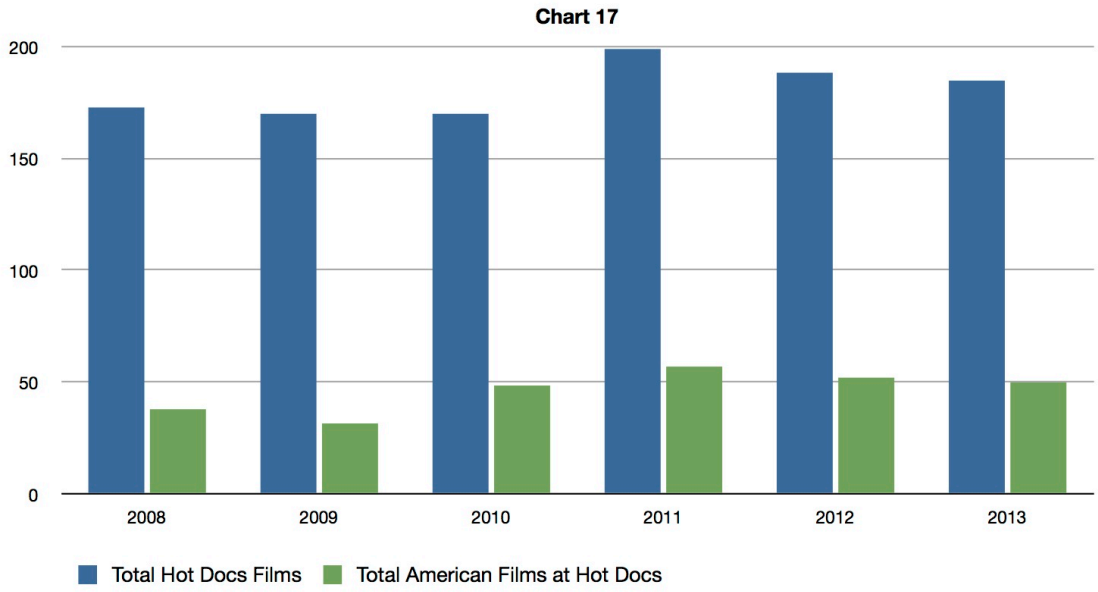
Deeply connected to publicness is the argument that participation involves more than sitting in movie theatre seats watching and listening to compelling documentaries. Participation is indelibly linked to documentary. As a signature quality of a media form interested in changing people's minds and inspiring social change, documentary culture has long been oriented around the active participation of audiences and publics around documentary media texts. At Hot Docs this aspect is not only invisible, it is discouraged and in some cases forbidden. As a festival moving toward the mainstream, commercial realm, Hot Docs seems destined to become the documentary version of TIFF, where critical engagement and active participation are supplanted for regimes of consumption

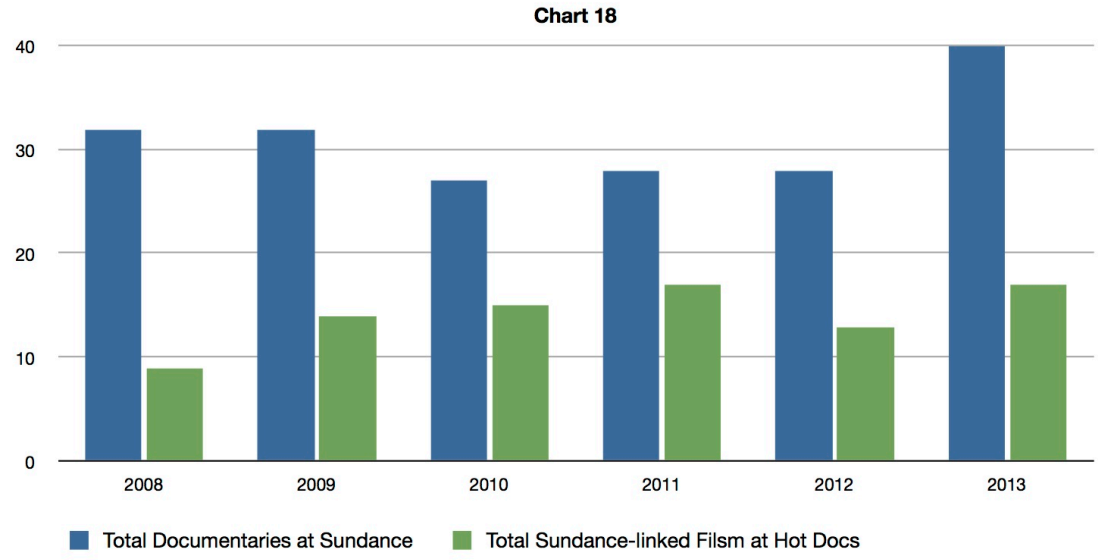
and spectacle. Organizing the festival each year so that there is less and less time for post-screening discussions, disallowing filmmakers and allies the opportunity to help audiences 'plug-in' after screenings by providing handouts, sign up sheets and other activist paraphernalia not only creates a sterile, apolitical and professional atmosphere, it negatively impacts the political potential of the platform: the opportunity to network around action, to engage in civil society, and to become or continue to be politically active. In the current iteration of the festival, this aspect is rendered inert while participation is relegated to highly structured and managed social spaces centred on the consumption of either films or alcohol and food. If Hot Docs is interested in becoming a megaplex for documentary, than it need only follow this path. If it is interested in contributing to the active participation of individuals and groups in and around the issues and topics explored in documentary cinema, it needs to reorient and reconsider the role of public and audience participation at the festival.

These are but three aspects of Hot Docs in which I see problems and where I see potential for improvement and change. Hot Docs is currently at the top of the mainstream, commercial game for documentary industry and business in Canada, and is buoyed by large audiences each year as well. It has achieved this by following a path of commercialization that continues to favour mainstream, liberal films and spaces while marginalizing the already marginalized. If it is to become a festival that is not only important to the business of documentary, but the culture and politics of documentary and its connected public, democratic, and civil society considerations, its managers might consider resisting the temptation to embody and reflect a structure of feeling that

champions consumerism and buying in, lest Hot Docs does what many in the documentary and activist communities fear, and completely sells out.

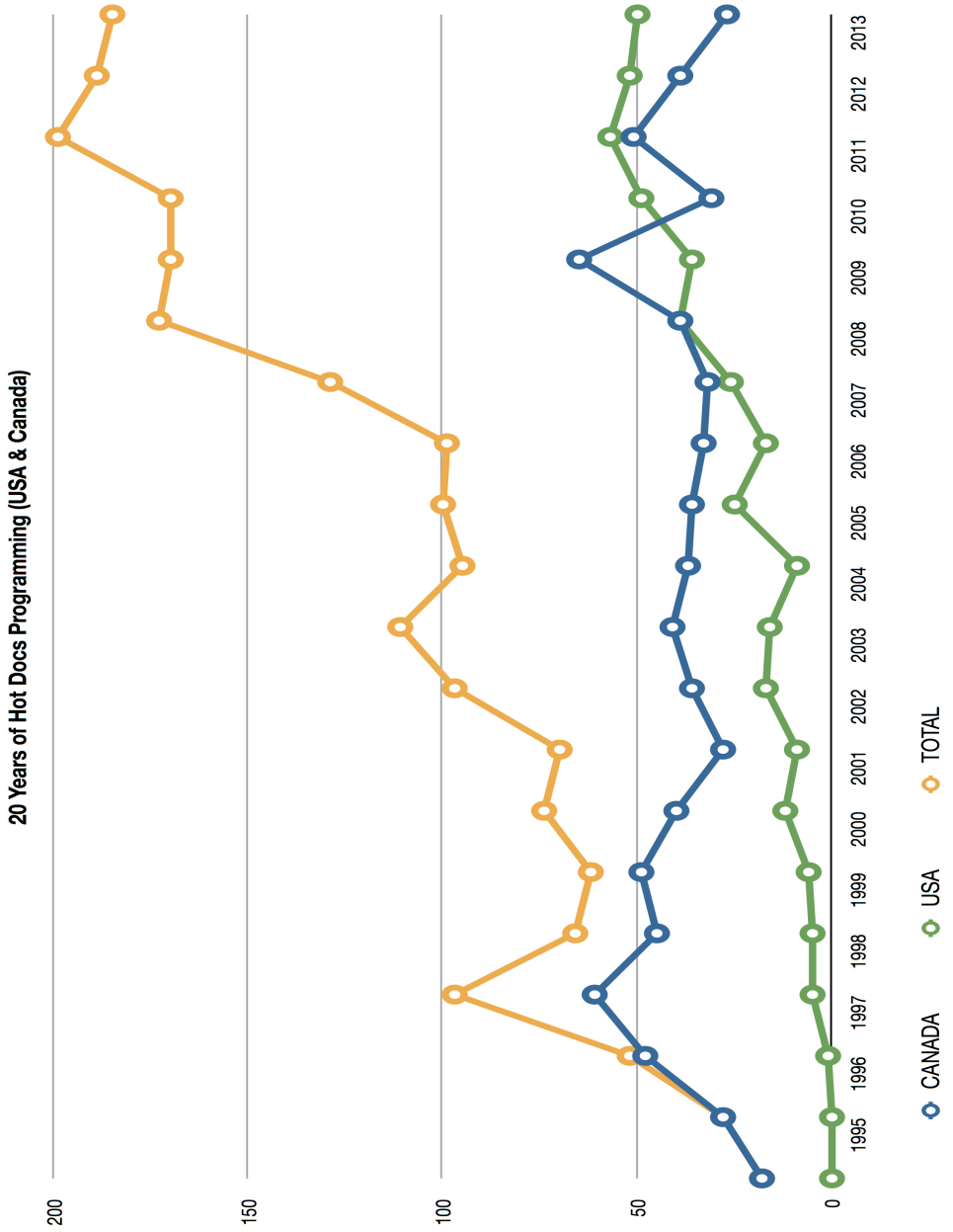
Appendix A – Programming at Hot Docs and Sundance, Last Five Years





On the chart above the numbers in the left vertical row indicate film festival year numbers of films and the coloured columns represent: total documentaries programmed at Hot Docs, at Sundance and total number of documentaries from Sundance programmed at Hot Docs, as well as total number of American documentaries.

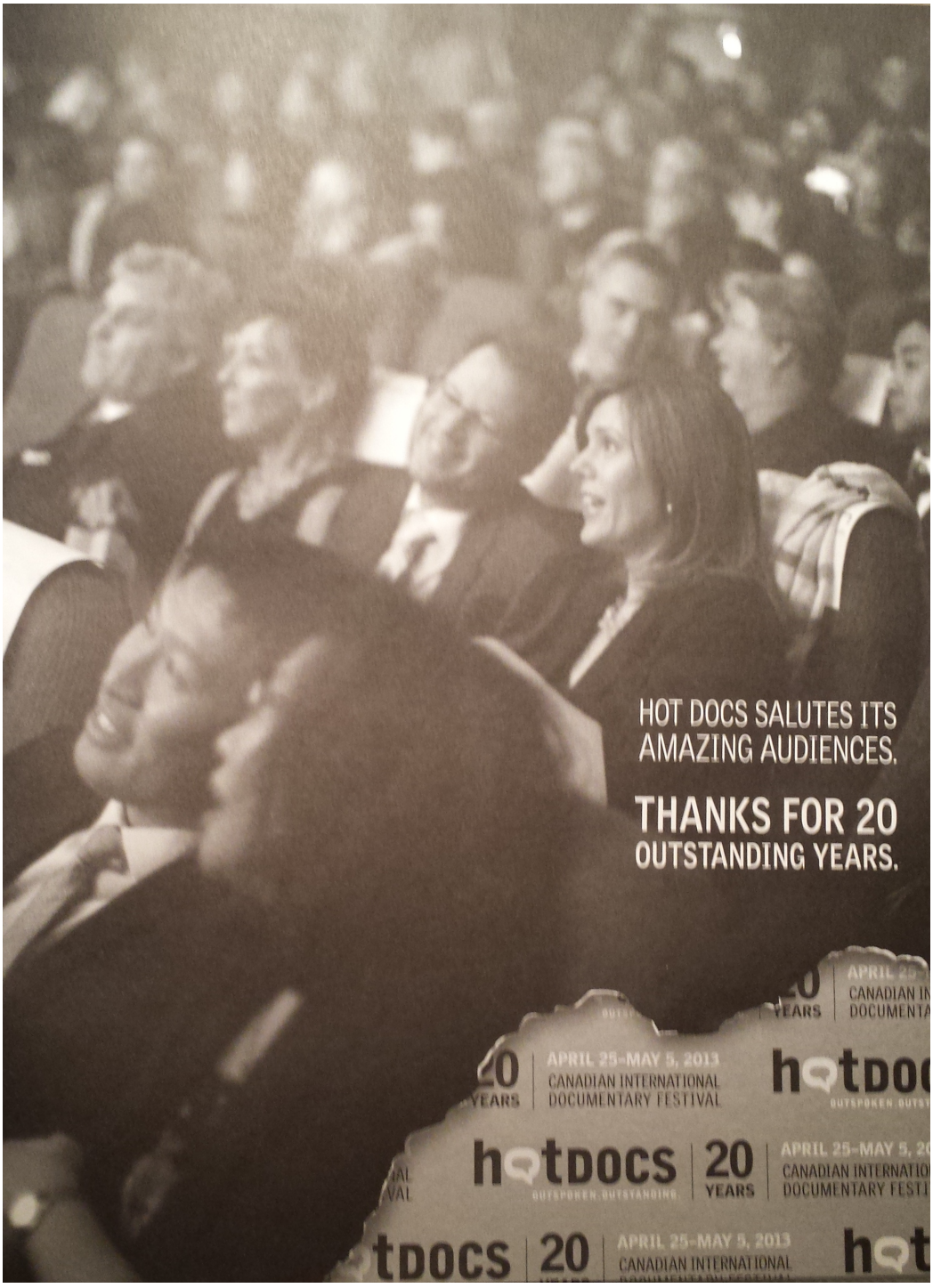
Appendix B – Last 20 Years of Programming at Hot Docs



The chart above shows trends in American and Canadian programming at Hot Docs, over the entire duration of the festival (20 years).

Appendix C – Promotional Program Page

Image taken by author, of page 59 promotional graphic for Hot Docs in the Hot Docs 2013 Program showing audiences at Hot Docs.



Appendix D – Coca-Cola Advert

Image taken by author of screen advert for Coca-Cola, at Hot Docs 2011.

Appendix E – Ai Weiwei Opening Night

Image taken by author of opening night screening of Ai Weiwei: Never Sorry, at Hot Docs 2012. In the picture: Executive Director Chris McDonald (left) and Business Manager Brett Hendrie at the Bloor Hot Docs Cinema.

Filmography

The Act of Killing. Anonymous, Christine Cynn and Joshua Oppenheimer. Denmark-Norway-UK. 115 min.

A Small Act. Jennifer Arnold. Sweden. 2010. 88 min.

Ai Weiwei: Never Sorry. Alison Klayman. USA. 2012. 91 min.

American: The Bill Hicks Story. Matt Harlock and Paul Thomas. UK. 2009. 102 min.

An Inconvenient Truth. Davis Guggenheim. USA. 2006. 100 min.

An Unreasonable Man. Henriette Mantel and Steve Skrovan. USA. 2006. 122 min.

Babies. Thomas Balmès. France. 2010. 79 min.

Battle for the Trees. John Edgington. Canada. 1994. 57 min.

Becoming Chaz. Fenton Bailey and Randy Barbato. USA. 2011. 80 min.

Bhutto. Duane Baughman and Johnny O'hara. USA. 2010. 111 min.

Blackfish. Gabriela Cowperthwaite. USA. 2013. 83 min.

Bowl of Bone. Jan-Marue Martell. Canada. 1994.

Bowling for Columbine. Michael Moore. USA. 2002. 120 min.

Breaking the Frame. Marielle Nitolsawska. Canada. 2012. 100 min.

Carbon for Water. Evan Abramson and Carmen Elsa López. USA-Kenya. 2011. 23 min.

The Black Sheep. Jacques Godbout. Canada. 1994. 232 min. 114 min.

The Carbon Rush. Amy Miller. Canada. 2012. 84 min.

The Choir Boys. Magnus Isacsson. Canada. 1999. 78 min.

Citizen Architect: Samuel Mockbee and the Spirit of the Rural Studio. Sam Wainwright. USA. 2010. 57 min.

The Corporation. Mark Achbar and Jennifer Abbott. 2003. Canada. 145 min.

The Cove. Louie Psihoyos. USA. 2009. 92 min.

The Coca-Cola Case. Carmen Garcia and German Gutierrez. 2009. Canada. 90 min.

The Defector: Escape from North Korea. Ann Shin. 2012. Canada. 71 min.

Dragonslayer. Tristan Patterson. USA. 2011. 74 min.

The Fog of War. Errol Morris. USA. 2003. 107 min.

Dreamland. Porfinnur Gudnason and Andri Snaer Magnason. Iceland. 2009. 89 min.

English 4 Yu. Radmilo Sarenac. Canada. 1994. 28 min.

Fuck For Forest. Michal Marczak. Poland. 2013. 85 min.

Garden State. Zach Braff. USA. 2004. 102 min.

Gasland. Josh Fox. USA. 2010. 107 min.

Goodbye, How Are You? Boris Mitic. Serbia. 2009. 60 min.

The Great North Korean Picture Show. Lynn Lee and James Long. Singapore. 2012. 94 min.

H2Oil. Shannon Walsh. Canada. 2009. 76 min.

Heart of Sky, Heart of Earth. Eric Black and Frauke Sandig. Germany. 2011. 98 min.

Housing Problems. Edgar Anstey and Arthur Elton. UK. 1935. 16 min.

I Bought A Rainforest. Helena Nygren and Jacob Andrén. Sweden. 2010. 58 min.

The Imposter. Bart Layton. UK. 2012. 99 min.

In the Gutter and Other Good Places. Christine Richey. Canada. 1994. 53 min.

Interior. Leather. Bar. James Franco and Travis Mathews. USA. 2013. 60 min.

Iron Man. Jon Faverau. USA. 2008. 126 min.

Jai Bhim Comrade. Anand Patwardhan. India. 2012. 182 min.

Joan Rivers: A Piece of Work. Ricki Stern and Anne Sundberg. USA. 2010. 84 min.

Kanehsatake: 270 Years of Resistance. Alanis Obomsawin. Canada. 1993. 119 min.

Kony 2012. Jason Russell. USA. 2012. 30 min.

Les Fiances de la Tour Eiffel. Gilles Blais. Canada. 1994. 71min.

Little Miss Sunshine. Jonathan Dayton and Valerie Faris. USA. 2006. 101 min.

Ma Vie Rélle. Magnus Isacsson. Canada. 2012. 90 min.

Manufacturing Conesnt: Noam Chomsky and the Media. Mark Achbar and Peter Wintonick. Canada. 1992. 167 min.

March of the Penguins. Luc Jacquet. France. 2005. 80 min.

Maximum Tolerated Dose. Karol Orzechowski. Canada. 2012. 90 min.

Minori: Memory of Exile. Michael Fukushima. Canada. 1994.

Moving the Mountain. W. Ging Wee Dere and Malcolm Guy. Canada. 1994. 19 min. 85 min.

Nanook of the North. Robert J. Flaherty. USA. 1922. 79 min.

No Impact Man. Laura Gabbert and Justin Schein. USA. 2009. 93 min.

One Direction: This is Us. Morgan Spurlock. USA. 2013. 92 min.

Outfoxed: Rupert Murdoch's War on Journalism. Robert Greenwald. USA. 2004. 75 min.

Petropolis: Aerial Perspectives on the Alberta Tar Sands. Peter Mettler. Canada. 43 min.

Pierrot le four. Jean-Luc Godard. France. 1965. 110 min.

POM Wonderful Presents: The Greatest Movie Ever Sold. Morgan Spurlock. USA. 2011. 90 min.

Pussy Riot: A Punk Prayer. Mike Lerner and Maxim Pozdorovkin. Russia-UK. 88 min.

The Queen of Versailles. Lauren Greenfield. USA. 2012. 100 min.

The Red Chapel. Mads Brugger. Denmark. 2009. 88 min.

Reporter. Eric Daniel Metzgar. USA. 2008. 92 min.

Rush: Beyond the Lighted Stage. Scot McFayden and Sam Dunn. Canada. 2010. 107 min.

Soundtracker. Nicholas Sherman. USA. 2010. 88 min.

Stories We Tell. Sarah Polley. Canada. 2012. 109 min.

Super Size Me. Morgan Spurlock. USA. 2004. 100 min.

Tales from the Organ Trade. Ric Esther Bienstock. Canada. 2013. 82 min.

Tears of Gaza. Vibeke Lokkeberg. Norway. 2010. 90 min.

Teenage Paparazzo. Adrian Grenier. USA. 2010. 94 min.

Ten Cents a Dance (Parallax). Midi Onodera. Canada. 1986. 30 min.

Waterlife. Kevin McMahon. Canada. 2009. 109 min.

Winnebago Man. Ben Steinbauer. USA. 2010. 87 min.

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