

# Observatoire du documentaire Documentary Network

## **FORUM 2005**

THE DISTRIBUTION OF DOCUMENTARY FILMS : REACHING AUDIENCES

## **REPORT**

February 2006

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## FORUM 2005

### THE DISTRIBUTION OF DOCUMENTARY FILMS : REACHING AUDIENCES

Friday, November 18, 2005, from 9:00 am to 5:00 pm  
NFB Cinema, 1564 Saint-Denis St., Montréal  
Register in advance or on site on November 18 at 8:30 am  
Fee: \$20 including lunch and RIDM kit; \$12 students  
Information and registration: [invit@ridm.qc.ca](mailto:invit@ridm.qc.ca)

In French and English (simultaneous translation)

This year—following up on Forum 2004, “Filming Reality: What Training for What Skill?”—the Documentary Network invites the film community to share ideas on the distribution of documentaries.

Television is the primary means of disseminating the documentary. But the broadcast date comes and goes, and then what? Is there life after broadcast? We will take a look at various paths to reach audiences that have been opened up by digital distribution. We will also report on the new funding programs for theatrical distribution of feature documentaries.

The results of Forum 2005 are available on the Documentary Network Web site and will contribute to keeping the community’s thinking on the issue up to date. The Documentary Network is taking part in the *Advisory Group on Documentary Policy*, which aims to standardize the funding agencies’ guidelines in order to facilitate efforts to fund documentaries. In 2006-2007, the Group intends to propose a comprehensive Canadian documentary assistance policy to the Department of Canadian Heritage.

## REPORT

The Forum 2005 Report, written by André Pâquet, includes

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- Panellist Biographies

## PROGRAM

### 9:00 am WELCOMING REMARKS

**Manon Barbeau**, filmmaker (*Les Enfants de Refus Global*, *L'Armée de l'Ombre*, *L'Amour en pen*), founder and director of Vidéo Paradiso and Wapikoni Mobile, and chair of the Documentary Network.

### 9:30 PANEL 1 – Is there life after broadcast?

Distribution on the non-broadcast markets is particularly challenging these days, especially in Quebec. After the disappearance of Cinéma Libre, several new distribution groups are emerging. Will they be able to meet the distribution needs of documentary cinema, through such approaches as targeting core audiences, non-theatrical distribution, and on-demand distribution using the Internet or other outlets? What tools might be required to carry out these strategies?

The panellists include **Katherine Dodds**<sup>1</sup>, Head of Marketing for *The Corporation*, the most successful documentary in Canadian history (in theatres and on the Internet); **Paul Lapointe**, Producer, *Érézi (Pendant que court l'assassin, Édith et Michel)*, who is interested in new forms of distribution for point-of-view documentary; **Joanne Leduc**, Head of Business Development, National Film Board of Canada, who has extensive experience in the institutional distribution of documentaries at the NFB; and **Howard Krosnick**, Consultant, who prepared the study "Distribution of Artist-Driven Film and Video" for the Canada Council for the Arts in 2004.

Moderator: **Ségolène Roederer**, Executive Director, Rendez-vous du cinéma québécois

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### 12h:30 pm Networking lunch

### 1:30 PANEL 2 – Theatrical distribution of documentaries: what has been achieved?

The panellists will describe the future prospects for screening feature documentaries in theatres, the funding agencies will provide a progress report on the recently established programs, and distributors will give us an idea of the type of marketing required for theatrical distribution.

On the panel will be **Joëlle Levie**, Director General of Film and Television Production, SODEC; **Michel Pradier**, Director – French Operations and Quebec Office, Telefilm Canada; **Johanne St-Arnauld**, Director General, Distribution, National Film Board of Canada; **Louis Dussault**, Distributor, K-Films Amérique (*Mon cher Fidel*, *Mon ami Machuca*, *Tabous*, etc), who is involved in distributing documentaries theatrically in Quebec, Canada and around the world; **Jeannine Gagné**, Producer, Amazone Films (*Gilles Carle ou l'indomptable imaginaire*, etc), who is presently preparing to distribute feature documentaries; and **Benoit Pilon**, Filmmaker (*Rosaire et la Petite-Nation*, *Roger Toupin, épicier variété*), who had great success with the theatrical distribution of his most recent feature documentary and who, as an independent filmmaker, is aware of the potential pitfalls.

Moderator: **Michel Coulombe**, Programmer, *Silence, on court!*

### 5:00 Closing reception

<sup>1</sup> Panellist biographies are listed in appendix.

## SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS AND REMARKS

- In budgeting for a film, include strategic items such as: setting up a Web site at the start of production, and even at the research stage (to do audience research); creating promotional tools and materials (which could be adjusted at the first edit); producing a DVD (including value-added material such as unreleased footage, material on the making of the film, interviews with the filmmaker, quotes from the research, photos, etc.); and developing materials to support online DVD sales.
- Encourage broadcasters to offer financial support for documentary distribution beyond TV. Since the network's name would be associated with the final "product," it would enjoy increased exposure with the film's release in theatres.
- Adapt assistance programs for distributors interested not only in theatrical release but also in the life of a film over the long term.
- Coordinate the "window chronology" of a film's distribution: when and how the partners release a film in theatres, on television, and on DVD. Set a minimum time period for theatrical runs.
- Improve the organizational and financial health of independent distributors by recognizing the need to hire skilled professional staff for key positions tied to marketing.
- Adapt film marketing assistance programs for festivals and for clients in educational, cultural, and community milieux (e.g., libraries), niche clients online, and so on.
- Coordinate the programs at the various institutions and recognize the entire set of linkages involved at the production and distribution levels before, during and after the film's theatrical or TV release.
- Ensure that the programs established by SODEC and Telefilm Canada for the production and marketing of theatrical feature-length documentary films are renewed. This is a matter of ensuring the carry-over of the essential work done by all the actors involved in theatrical feature-length film in past years, which has contributed to the genre's enormous growth.
- Emphasize the flexibility and variety of the leverage we already have in distribution channels—access to digital venues, community efforts, independent distributors—in order to make best possible use of the places where documentaries can be seen.
- Increase program flexibility. There seems to be a tendency to lock creativity into an administrative straitjacket, which limits innovation, and to forget the cultural return on investment in these films. Budgets to support films after their television or theatrical release have been cut.
- Recognize the importance for the documentary community of acquiring the tools necessary to build audiences prior to making a film. Do a feasibility study on the creation of a gateway to support the circulation and distribution of documentary films.
- That SODEC make its documentary assistance programs better known: support for 35mm blow-up processing, theatres outside Montréal and repertory theatres, and film promotion at the production stage (developing Web sites and online promotion).
- That Telefilm Canada too make its marketing programs better known, and that it commit to renewing its Theatrical Feature-Length Documentary Program.

- That the Documentary Network adopt a *holistic* vision of the question of documentary distribution and intervene at all levels necessary.

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## SUMMARY OF INTERVENTIONS

### **Katherine Dodds<sup>2</sup>**

It was the work of promoting *Manufacturing Consent* and the ideas of Noam Chomsky that first made her aware that for the desire to change society to have an impact, there has to be a presence in the media and in those places that foster the circulation of ideas, along with an understanding of how ideas circulate and how documentaries become part of that movement. For *The Corporation*, her first concern was to build an audience for the film, even before it received funding. From the moment the film went into production, she began to set up a network, gathering information, data, contacts, and so on. When production began, once the distribution contacts had been set up, there were only five weeks left to organize the promotional campaign for the film. If it hadn't been for this prior network, it would have been impossible to promote the film properly. Moreover, this is not the kind of work that ever receives institutional funding, as evidenced by the striking absence of programs available to support it.

The director's networking ability was also crucial, as was his ability to work with distributors and multipliers. This ability made it possible to create a reference and data base for other films, by continually adding to the data base created for the film. Documentaries have a long life, which means they require intensive efforts to ensure they are distributed, sharing resources allocated for promotion across various markets. This kind of approach works because the site then becomes THE reference point for the film, and allows more information to be fed into the data base linked to it. As a result, its value appreciates enormously in terms of promotional impact, which can be calculated in the millions of dollars. Since it is being updated constantly, the site makes audience development for other films more interactive. Set-up costs for this kind of site fall somewhere between \$5,000 and \$20,000.

### **Howard Krosnick<sup>3</sup>**

There is an entire world of activity on the edges of film and video production and distribution that defies all our categories, and which offers some extremely valuable lessons. It is a world in which the first criterion is not that the work achieves commercial success. Within this network, filmmakers and writers do not consider what they do as a springboard to making films within the traditional industry framework, in either fiction or documentary. They find other means to survive: they teach, they work at their craft, they receive arts council funding, they write, and so on. Innovation is the key here, either in the subject matter, the treatment, or the point of view. This is the domain of pure creativity. Most of these works can never aspire to a television release. Yet some of their strategies can be useful to us or, at least, could improve on existing conditions and be applied in other sectors. In this circuit, filmmakers retain complete control over the artistic aspects of their work. They hold the copyright on all original material (negatives or master copies).

What we are talking about here is a structure designed to encourage and financially support artists. There is an active network at the institutional level involving festivals, libraries, cinemathèques, art galleries, museums, and educators that lies well outside the usual network of theatres and general and special interest television (although some documentary and experimental films may end up there), where films are acquired by curators, professionals, collectors and individuals. In this network, more than 65% of distribution

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.hellocoolworld.com>; <http://www.thecorporation.com>

<sup>3</sup> Howard Krosnick, *Distribution of Artist-Driven Film and Video*, Canada Council for the Arts, 2004. [http://www.canadacouncil.ca/publications\\_e/research/kq127754367519785010.htm](http://www.canadacouncil.ca/publications_e/research/kq127754367519785010.htm)

revenues are reinvested in the artists, unlike what happens on the commercial circuit where, in the best case scenario, we're talking 50%. In addition, this network provides significant economic impacts for the people operating within it. In 2002 and 2003, the ten leading distributors supported by the Canada Council for the Arts<sup>4</sup> distributed a total of \$1,233,858 in salaries and benefits to 55 people, 73% of whom were full-time employees.

*The television market:*

The explosion of new specialty channels and, more recently, digital channels, should have afforded better opportunities to program these films. Driven primarily by their need to acquire hundreds of hours of audiovisual material over the first year, most of the new channels are now preoccupied by the need to draw audiences, which means taking fewer risks and leaving room for fewer short films and one-off documentaries.

*Non-commercial distribution:*

Two big Canadian distributors hold the bulk of this market. One—Magic Lantern—is private, and one—the NFB—is a not-for-profit organization. Both offer significant film lists with prices at the lower end of the scale and both have significant human resources and promotions budgets to help them do that.

### **Paul Lapointe**

There is an absence of logic and continuity in the documentary world. Production, distribution, marketing, festivals, distribution at the community and institutional levels, and establishing an international presence, seem to be disconnected from each other. When there *is* an effort at continuity, it is organized exclusively around a television or theatrical release. Then, nothing! It's as though the purpose of documentary were to wind up on television for the one-time-only audience ratings. Why do we still accept that films die a premature death after all the money invested in them because there is no support for the life of the film beyond TV? It's as though we abandon these films by the wayside.

Documentary is supposed to encourage public debate and the practice of democracy. It *should* have a life after TV! Some of the crucial components are still not taken into account in the funding of a film, tools that should be there throughout the production process and that should determine its strategy, a little like what Katherine Dodds was advocating. These steps should be recognized by institutions as an integral part of funding.

### **Joanne Leduc**

The institutional market is crucial for the NFB, accounting for 53% of its revenues. Sales are divided among institutions, consumers, archives, and television. But the market is fragmented into several small niches that are always dependent on serious marketing and follow-through. Twelve percent of those revenues are generated by online consumer purchasing, especially in the case of films like ***Bacon, the Film***, where the television release was well covered. At the level of post-television or post-theatrical distribution, the NFB is very active in educational and institutional networks. The NFB devotes some \$7 million a year towards distribution and marketing in Canadian and foreign markets, archival prints, and customer service.

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<sup>4</sup> Ten distributors receive annual grants of between \$40,000 and \$121,000 from the Canada Council for the Arts:

**In Montréal:** Groupe d'Intervention Vidéo, Cinéma Libre (fermé), Vidéographe

**In Québec City :** Vidéo Femmes

**In Toronto :** Canadian Filmmaker Distribution Centre (CFMDC), VTape

**In Winnipeg :** Video Pool, Winnipeg Film Group

**In Vancouver :** Moving Images, Video Out

### **Pascale Ferland**

*The Corporation* is a case in point that offers some good lessons, but the funds allocated for production do not recognize that artistic films also account for much of the activity in Québec. The failure of Cinéma Libre can be attributed at least in part to this lack of support. Performance envelopes for distribution have often gone towards launching other films instead of being invested in follow-up and support for the kind of infrastructure and mechanisms that we see at the NFB, for example. Their elimination has been disastrous for independent filmmaking.

### **Denis Langlois**

In light of this situation, and with the bankruptcy of Cinéma Libre in November 2004, a group of filmmakers have just created *Les Films du 3 mars*.<sup>5</sup> This is a working group that wanted to sound out the community and see what the needs were in the distribution and broadcasting of independent film. After a series of meetings, it was decided to set up a not-for-profit association, and a mission statement was drawn up. A steering committee was struck to work on societal goals, defining principles, orientation, statutes and by-laws for the association. At a subsequent meeting with representatives from the documentary community, investors, arts councils and other independent distributors, it was decided there was a specific gap that needed filling and that there was room for a new player in the distribution field. The not-for-profit association will have as its primary mission the distribution, broadcasting and promotion of independent and auteur films, in all genres (fiction, documentary and experimental) and lengths (shorts, medium-length and feature films), mainly from Québec followed by Canadian and foreign films, which use first and foremost a cinematographic approach, in any production or distribution format.

### **Nicole Hubert**

There needs to be funding to build a network to suit each film being made. The door-to-door approach required is not funded. A film's success and how well it does after theatre or TV are dependent on this network, which grows out of audience reaction to the film. Seeing the film through its various stages is crucial, for example. You have to take funds allocated for the commercial or television release and pay for the director to attend screenings, and sometimes some of the main participants as well, because that guarantees there will be a discussion and encounter with audiences.

### **Philippe Baylaucq**

When filmmakers are promoting their films, for example, they often have to travel and/or be available for days at a time. Those days are never factored into the film budget, and neither are the travel expenses involved. It's the same thing even if the film is invited to a foreign festival, so you have to go back to the funding institutions to pay for the trip, which involves extra travel costs that are never covered.

### **Joëlle Levie**

SODEC's program to support theatrical releases for documentary has been in place for two years. It is not a separate envelope: funds come out of the television documentary fund, and we do not foresee any increase in that envelope in the short term. The result is that 30% of the budget allocated to documentary has been assigned to theatrical projects. As of now, only one film, *Voleurs d'enfance (Thieves of Innocence)*, has had a theatrical release. The difficulty lies in the fact that projects admissible under this program cannot rely on the television fund. In commercial terms it is even more difficult to measure since only one film has been released and it is unique in its genre, completely unrelated to the other films that have been funded.

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.f3m.ca/>



## **Theatrical feature-length documentary projects supported by SODEC:**

***Bric-à-brac*** by Serge Giguère

***USA*** by Pierre Guimond

***L'esprit des lieux*** by Catherine Martin

***Termites : la tour infernale*** by Philippe Calderon (co-production with France)

***Le dernier continent*** by Jean Lemire

***Des nouvelles du Nord*** by Benoit Pilon

***Voleurs d'enfance (Thieves of Innocence)*** by Paul Arcand

SODEC has also established other supporting grants programs,<sup>6</sup> for blow-up processing and to assist repertory theatres and theatres outside Montréal, as well as a fund to support publicity and promotion at the shooting stage that could be done on Web sites or online. There are also programs to supply theatres with digital media equipment.

Contact with audiences is fundamental. We have to get people out of their homes. Going to see a film is a social act that creates community. Right now, theatrical films have to be shown in 35mm formats, but more and more work is being done in digital media. Unfortunately, only ten or so theatres are able to accommodate them.

### *About the digital network:*

For the past two or three years, we have had to face the fact that technical standards are set by theatre operators who are looking for value appreciation, and equipping theatres to handle digital media has proven to be extremely complicated. Buying digital equipment is very costly—somewhere between \$50,000 and \$150,000. And if we set up a digital network, there has to be content! At the moment, relatively few films are available in digital formats. The investment in equipment has to be feasible, and that won't happen with only the occasional documentary. So we need access to other content. Right now in Québec there are not enough films to supply a digital network. So we need to ask ourselves: what defines a theatrical feature-length film? What is the role of the distributor in the launch of a feature-length documentary? Are the subjects more specific? What does a theatrical release mean? What does a major commitment from a distributor involve? Where does television fit in all this? What are the costs of marketing a theatrical feature-length documentary?

So, there will need to be funding, but others besides SODEC will be able to provide it.

In early 2006, keeping existing programs in mind, SODEC plans to organize a feature-length documentary consulting group to do an in-depth analysis of all the issues we have looked at today.

### **Michel Pradier**

At Telefilm Canada, we have set up a pilot project to support theatrical feature-length films. A request has been made to Canadian Heritage to support the continuation of the program.

The program stipulates that a film must be released on a minimum of three theatre screens. The standard will not be ***Les Voleurs d'enfance (Thieves of Innocence)***. At the same time, we need to see the parallel here with what happened with the fiction feature ***Les Boys*** two or three years ago. We still do need something to motivate audiences to go see these

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<sup>6</sup> : [http://www.sodec.gouv.qc.ca/domaines/cinema/cine\\_promo/f\\_cinepromo.htm](http://www.sodec.gouv.qc.ca/domaines/cinema/cine_promo/f_cinepromo.htm)

films, and to make theatre owners willing to take a risk, once the films have been properly promoted.

It is mainly on the English-language side that you see this kind of documentary release. Right now, we are seeing minimum guarantees of as much as \$350,000 for some of the large- and medium-scale documentary projects submitted. Huge promotional campaigns are planned for these films. The distributors are taking a risk because they need to convince theatre owners to go along with them.

As far as distribution is concerned, Telefilm Canada has an alternative fund for promotion as well as a fund for 35mm blow-up processing and for making film prints for distribution outside Montréal.

#### **Theatrical feature-length documentary projects supported by Telefilm Canada:**

In development:

*La dernière planète*, Sylvie Van Brabant. Production: Films du Rapide-blanc.

*Les Oiseaux et l'amour*, Jacques Laberge. Production: Cité-Amérique.

In production:

*Le dernier continent*, Jean Lemire. Co-production: Glacialis (Canada), 13 Productions (France).

*Voyage au bout de la torture*, Patricio Henriquez. Production: Macumba Doc.

*USA*, Pierre Guimond. Production: Isle Principia (USA).

In post-production:

*Bric à brac*, Serge Giguère. Production: Films du Rapide-blanc.

*Les Voleurs d'enfance (Thieves of Innocence)*, Paul Arcand. Production: Cinémaginaire.

#### **Benoit Pilon**

In the case of *Roger Toupin, épicier variété*, my original idea was to make a feature-length documentary for theatres, but the only way to get the project off the ground was to have television onside. That approach had a significant impact on our subsequent negotiations with TV because we wanted to release the film in theatres before it was seen on TV. We were required to make a TV version with the same title, cutting the length of the film almost by half. So it's not some funding program being available that is going to automatically solve these problems. It is regrettable, for example, that the requirement that a film be released in three commercial theatres excludes theatres like the Cinéma Parallèle, whose work and achievements have been exemplary.

Why is it, for example, that Radio-Canada has no specific slot for feature-length documentary? Clearly, no one institution can provide all the funding needed for this kind of film. Right now, with the requirement to release the film on television in a shortened version, as was the case for *Roger Toupin*, we feel as though we are lying to people, given that we proposed the film as a feature-length work. That may be why people wanted to see the long version in theatres. So we need to coordinate the programs at the various institutions and above all to recognize the ENTIRE set of linkages that that involves, at the production level as much as at the promotions level before, during and after the film's theatrical or TV release.

Looking around at the state of things, we have to wonder whether documentary won't be submitted to the same kind of pressure to perform that we see on the fiction side. Will the programs in place now end up favouring the more sensational documentaries?

### **Jeannine Gagné**

Even though we give pride of place to big-screen films, we still have to preserve support for documentaries no matter how long they are or where they get their funding. We have to believe in artistic work and the originality of this kind of film, as we do for fiction. Unlike fiction, documentary does not have the ingredients that can sell a distributor, like a screenplay or stars. In many documentaires, what is being promoted is an approach and the intrinsic worth of the subject. So there is much more effort involved in demonstrating the commercial potential of the project. To convince distribution networks or theatres to support a promotional campaign that is worthy of the films, we absolutely must have assistance that is in keeping with the most difficult films. They need guaranteed support over the long term since the life of documentaries goes beyond mere theatrical or television release.

### **Louis Dussault**

With the requirement for a high minimum guarantee, a kind of film is being imposed that cannot achieve the quality of a fiction film. The conditions imposed have a tendency to change the product; and that compromises the freedom of the approach. After which, a television exclusive should not get in the way of a DVD release. The DVD release reaches audiences other than those in theatres or for TV. The DVD completes the marketing cycle essential to the distributors' long-range efforts.

### **Johanne St-Arnauld**

The NFB produces, co-produces and buys some ten documentary films a year. About 50% of those are co-productions. In 2005, the film ***Ce qu'il reste de nous (What Remains of Us)*** enjoyed enormous audience success, with 41 weeks at the Beaubien Cinema and the Ex-Centris, and in Québec City. This kind of distribution is always included in specific agreements with theatrical distributors. As we have seen, documentary does better in English Canada than it does in Québec. The program set up in cooperation with the Documentary Channel is working very well. But the NFB is still looking for a French-language distributor for documentaries. A heads-up for anyone interested!

### **Sylvie Groulx**

Sylvie Groulx spoke about her seven years' working at Cinéma Libre between 1970 and 1980. She feels as though she is hearing the same laments she heard 25 years ago! In 1978, there were four distribution houses working with independent or non-commercial films. None of those companies is still in operation: they all went bankrupt. So there seems to be a continuing kind of disconnect. If you opt for the theatrical documentary fund, you don't have a television broadcaster. And it is always the broadcaster who is the key to funding a film. Even though we recognize that a theatrical release is useful and necessary—we've seen that in the recent success of numerous films—we realize that the process is scattered. Really, after TV and theatres, what *happens* to a documentary?! Several films have shown that for documentary, life begins *after* those types of releases. Documentaries can find audiences for ten, fifteen, even twenty years. How can we put so much money into producing and launching a film, when the real market for these films is a more cultural or social one, another audience entirely? Only the NFB has the means to operate for the long term. Independent producers are increasingly being left by the wayside.

There should be assistance for more than just the launch of a film: we also need support for the companies that are keen on these films, companies that believe in them but don't have the means to provide this kind of follow-through. There are not enough decently paid staff,

which means companies are forced to survive on government employment programs that can run out or simply disappear when policies change. How can so much money be invested in documentary without ensuring that the films are reaching the audiences that want to see them, at times and in places other than those dictated by TV and theatres?

### **Lucille Veilleux**

There is all kinds of work out in the community that seems to be undermined or underfunded, when that is what determines the LIFE of a film after TV and theatres. We have to adapt the distribution mode to the subject of the film, build networks, and ensure the feasibility of the film *over the long term*. The commercial model that dominates documentary distribution right now is not the answer to all our ills. We have to invent something new. The tools are there to make this longer life a reality. **Réseau Plus**,<sup>7</sup> for example, offers opportunities that are under-utilized at the moment.

### **Sylvie Van Brabant**

Having a theatrical release is the key. The time and energy that are monopolized to hit all the right buttons to guarantee a film's distribution seem to fall off once that work is done. The film is left to its own devices or just shelved.

### **Lucette Lupien**

She reminded the group that the Documentary Network has intervened at many levels to obtain the creation of an assistance program at Telefilm Canada supporting theatrical feature-length documentary, with the aim of allowing filmmakers to work outside broadcasters' formulas and agendas. Because that program requires that a broadcaster be part of the funding structure and gives that broadcaster a say in the film, the Documentary Network has not been totally successful in achieving its goal, yet. Could we not adopt a holistic vision of the issue and intervene at all the levels necessary???

### **Note from André Pâquet, Forum Secretary**

*The sheer scale of the English-speaking market and the kinds of subjects it deals with constitute a privileged context which the community in Québec cannot count on in any systematic way. We work much more with PROTOTYPES that differ in their approach, subjects, treatments, and so on. Once a film has been released in theatres or on TV, we have to base our efforts on a variety of different production and distribution models. There is a general lack of support for distribution and when the resources do exist, they seem to be fragmented or too widely dispersed.*

*It is important to note here that the institutional participants have all told us that their agencies have done as much as they can in terms of financial support for this new approach. It seems essential then, and urgent, that we work towards broadening public support for documentary, and try to bring attention to it wherever possible. Perhaps that approach will exert pressure on the TV networks to change their programming schedules, selection criteria, and the kinds of documentary productions they fund. Having documentaries in theatres and on television on a regular basis can only help it grow and achieve the desired impact in the community. It is crucial that all participants assume responsibility in this area.*

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<sup>7</sup> : <http://www.cinemasparalleles.qc.ca/reseau.htm>

## REMARKS

### By André Pâquet, Forum Secretary

*In response to the crisis of humanist values and the end of utopian thinking—which we have had to grieve—documentary has now become the place where human beings ask questions about humanity, not to offer certainties but to reformulate, at the level of human microcosms, the basic questions of existence.” Thierry Garrel, *Juste une image* (Paris: Jeu de Paume, 2000).*

### THE EXPLOSION OF A GENRE

In Québec, the recent success of a number of documentary films in theatres as well as on TV (***Roger Toupin, épicier variété; À hauteur d'homme; Ce qu'il reste de nous (What Remains of Us); Soraida, une femme de Palestine***, etc.), as well as the burgeoning of cultural events and associations related to the genre (the RIDM, the Documentary Network, the annual Forum, FIFA), demonstrate the vitality of this kind of cinema. Various theories have been thrown out to try to explain why audiences, and people in the professional milieu, are so interested. The arrival of digital equipment, which makes child's play of image-making and which at the same time significantly lowers the costs of filmmaking, is one. The emergence of a few festivals, however, and positive response to a few films, should not make us forget that, for the many hours of documentary produced here every year, less than half are ever shown on TV, let alone in theatres. The gaps in distribution and, even more importantly, the absence of any way to ensure a continued effort at distribution, means that these films are not circulated. Forum participants already know that documentary can be much longer lived than some fiction films.

There are many reasons for this situation, as we have seen during this meeting. Sometimes it is the subject matter or the director's perspective on an issue that makes decision-makers unhappy; or it may be the format, the style, the way the narrative unfolds, the length of a shot, the silences.... Any one of those things may bother a distributor or broadcaster who thinks a 30-second shot with no sound, for instance, might make their viewers switch to another channel, or represents too great a risk with a theatre audience. And so, despite evidence of enormous growth in the genre, it has become very difficult to distribute a film whose format, rhythm, or narrative strays from the standard fare.

*Because television is largely responsible for funding and distributing documentary film, it has changed the way filmmakers work as well as audience expectations of the genre in major ways. Because one of the stated aims of television is to inform, documentary has been forced to be informative, contributing to the confusion between documentary in all its various traditions—Vertov, Perrault, Flaherty, Grierson, etc.—and what is known as “feature reporting.”*

Frédéric Pelletier, “À propos d'un malentendu,” in *Hors Champ* (September 2003).

Certainly, SODEC's feature-length documentary program, which has been running for the past two years, has broadened the funding opportunities. Filmmakers dream of releasing their film in a theatre because audience engagement with the film is so high, but also because they tell themselves that the least audience there will give them enough revenue to fund more films. In short, they will be able to continue to exercise their craft. But there is a debate underway as to whether it would be useful to open up those funds to TV participation, which is currently excluded. One side argues that giving producers access to combined funding would be a way to secure more diversified funding for some projects. For now, most films are made, produced and distributed in conditions well below poverty level.

Auteur documentary as a whole is in a precarious financial situation that makes it difficult to work as a paid professional in the field, which does nothing to prolong the life of the genre, though the artists involved all know it is meant for a longer life. Television allows documentary to exist and has been its salvation in industry terms but is doing a poor job because the emphasis on communication is winning out over creativity. And television, including and especially public television, is no longer playing its role as a mediating presence in society.

## THE TV AND/OR THEATRE DEBATE

The theatrical release of some documentaries has shown, however, that from now on they may become an event in themselves, in the way that fiction films are. People are talking about the success of films like *Roger Toupin, épicier variété* but blockbuster documentaries on nature offer just as much in the way of cinematic appeal, for family as well as international audiences. *La Marche de l'empereur (March of the Penguins)*, for example, is a *cinematic* experience as much as a wildlife film. By definition, the subject is made for the big screen. The script is as strong as that of any fiction feature. We could also cite the case of *Les Voleurs d'enfance (Thieves of Innocence)*, which despite its difficult subject matter has also managed to attract audiences who can now see the range of trends in the genre.

On the other hand, some people are skeptical about made-for-television films which are then released in theatres, or about feature-length films based on thrilling nature shots or a "hot" topic. Generally speaking, documentary cinema does not originate from television any more than fiction does. **But couldn't some room be made for documentary in television FILM slots?**

In the past, TV networks were more involved in feature documentary. Bit by bit, however, in response to rules and programs, the preference in film slots went to fiction films, and documentaries were programmed exclusively in prime time slots for better exposure.

On the business side, while some documentaries do enjoy wide distribution, the vast majority depend on repertory and alternative theatres, which show them over a longer period of time than is the case for fiction films. According to a study by France's Centre national de la cinématographie (CNC), it takes documentaries six weeks on average to reach 60% of their total ticket sales and six months to reach 90% of their audience. If the director is willing to attend the screenings, audiences come out in force. Because a film is as good as dead once it is shown on TV, even if the ratings are high, it is the theatrical release that gives it a new lease on life.

This is important because we cannot compare the attention level of a person who goes to see a film in a theatre with that of a television viewer who stations himself with a remote in front of the TV. It might be better for a film to be seen by 200,000 viewers in a theatre than to give it a guaranteed audience four or five times larger by putting it on TV.

To me it also means we have to support those networks that do distribute this new kind of questioning that lies at the heart of democracy.

### **What About Digital?**

Ever since the 2002 Cannes Festival, an increasing number of films have been screened in digital formats, even at the most prestigious Palais des Festivals venues. Of 163,000 theatres surveyed around the world since then, more than 350 are equipped for digital screening. Based on a simulation model set up by the CNC in France, the costs of producing and distributing digital versions of the 539 films distributed in France in 2000 would have been 22 million Euros, compared to the 82 million Euros they cost under the current system.

Besides the significant capital outlay required, digitally equipped venues also suffer from a lack of standards. In France as in the rest of Europe, the community is asking itself why a theatre operator should invest 100,000 Euros in digital equipment to screen two or three films a year. As long as studios are not putting out a third of their product in digital formats, owners won't buy in.

Digital is also bringing new players onto the scene who may upset the sector's already fragile economy. It may not be long before the major studios are distributing their films via satellite. Here at home, distribution projects running on shared servers already exist (Digiscreen). Does the possibility that the same service providers will be distributing films and equipping theatres pose a threat to independent theatre owners? The danger that many of them will lose their programming freedom is very real. Eventually, documentary will also have to find its way in that market. The debates and issues discussed at the most recent Forum are important if we do not want to keep producing "orphan" films that get left by the wayside.

**André Pâquet**  
**December 2005**

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