

Festival Review

Coming Out Journeys: Highlights from the 31st Hot Docs Film Festival

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At the 31st edition of the Hot Docs International Film Festival, held April 25 to May 5, 2024, I was particularly eager to watch films that, according to their descriptions, utilized home movies and personal archival material. This method of selecting films not only aligns with my personal interests and studies but also allows me to compile a collection that fits within a specific category for this report. However, upon watching the films, I discovered more similarities than I had anticipated. The films seemed to converge in a unique way, collectively creating a vision of our contemporary era. Initially, the connections and lines we perceive between these films might be attributed to the experience of watching them consecutively. Indeed, when films are viewed in quick succession, the impact of the previous one lingers, potentially influencing our perception of the next. In the following review, I will strive to trace a coherent path, identifying points of connection among the films while also acknowledging their distinctiveness and individuality.

As its title suggests, *My Dad's Tapes* (Kurtis Watson, 2024) prominently features home movies as one of its primary materials. Before the story begins, we see clips from these videos, all of which reflect a very intimate and pleasant atmosphere. Like any home movie, they evoke feelings of happiness and a zest for life. These films were taken by a father who appears to be cheerful, a family man, and full of energy. Shortly thereafter, the film delivers a shock: the father has been dead for years. Just as we start to grasp the magnitude of this loss for his wife and children, another, even more shocking revelation is made—the father died by suicide. This turn of events is both unexpected and startling. How could this man have done such a thing?

The film's director and narrator is the man's son, who, after watching his father's tapes, decided to confront the topic of suicide—a subject that had been avoid-

ed by those around him for years. It seems that the passage of time has finally made the family members ready to address this traumatic issue. The director interviews his mother and sisters, neither of whom observed any indications of dissatisfaction or depression from their husband and father. This not only transforms the suicide into a perplexing mystery but raises questions about the very nature of home movies. It may seem that home movies, having penetrated the private and intimate spaces of homes, often reflect reality without interference or distortion. However, this documentary challenges that assumption. How could a man so depressed and unhappy that he ultimately died by suicide present such a pleasant image of himself and his family on camera? It appears that the patriarchal ideology, which views the family as a sacred institution and family life as conventional and normal, governs the camera capturing these images.

No matter how harmless, intimate, and real these images appear, they remain under the influence of this ideology. There exists an unwritten law compelling the cameraman and those in front of the camera to appear satisfied and happy. Thus, even in the realm of home movies, which are typically meant for the family's eyes only, are people not still acting? From this angle, the final coming out of the director suddenly takes on thematic importance. At the film's conclusion, the director confesses to his sisters that he is gay. This moment prompted a thought: could the father's suicide have been the result of living in a more veiled and secretive era, essentially leading a double life? One of the director's effective techniques is aligning the visual texture of contemporary moments with that of his father's videos. During these scenes, it is as if we are seeing the world through his father's eyes or the lens of his camera. This technique evokes the feeling that the father's spirit is present, witnessing the family's reflections and judgments about him.

The movie *Seguridad* (Tamara Segura, 2024) follows a similar theme. Here, too, the focus revolves around the figure of the father. Once again, photos taken by a father, who seems to possess artistic sensibilities, are used by his daughter, a filmmaker, as material for her work. However, unlike the father in *My Dad's Tapes*, this father does not come across as family friendly. On the contrary, his alcohol addiction and extremely violent and erratic behaviour at home were traumatic for his family. Now, ten years after his death, his daughter has begun to narrate the wounds inflicted on three generations of the family—her grandmother, mother, and herself—by her father's violence. The film's formal and narrative strategy closely resembles that of *My Dad's Tapes*, relying on archival footage and interviews. The director mentioned in an interview that her greatest challenge was convincing family members to discuss their secrets on camera. Additionally, she had to ensure that her vulnerable, elderly loved ones would not suffer further by revisiting the deeply traumatic events that have profoundly scarred their souls.

However, the challenge the filmmaker faces in giving the film an interpretable dimension and transcending the personal-family theme lies in creating a blurred link between the trauma of this family and the socio-political system of Cuban patriarchy. She openly admitted that her goal was to present a different image of Cuba—one that highlights the darker side of a country often romanticized through tourism

and the commodification of its political ideology. This is a place where visitors will even buy T-shirts with Castro's face and wear them during their stay! In this regard, the use of footage related to military activities in Cuba, and especially images of Castro, serve an implicit function—to transform this small family narrative into a metaphor for larger Cuban society's relationship with Castro, the spiritual father of the nation. In other words, the film endeavours to extrapolate the story of this family to reflect the history of a nation. Perhaps this is why the daughter, the filmmaker, not only distances herself from this household but also feels as if she is escaping from her homeland by immigrating to Canada.

Continuing to explore parent-child dynamics within this festival, we encounter *A Mother Apart* (Laurie Townshend, 2024), which examines an unconventional mother-daughter relationship. The film's main character, Staceyann Chin, is an LGBTQ activist poet whose mother abandoned her during childhood, leaving a lasting impact on her life. It is as if Chin has spent her entire life searching for her mother, only to be disappointed each time she finds her, never receiving the love she deserves. At one point, the mother remarks about Chin: "She always finds me." Through Townshend's camera, which maintains a close intimacy with Chin, we gradually observe the lingering effects of this trauma on both her outward demeanour and inner psyche, exploring the intricacies of her mind. We can even discern the shadow of Chin's mother in her warm demeanour toward her own daughter, the unconditional love she readily gives, and the profound closeness between them, as if they have merged into one being. This warmth and closeness stand in stark contrast to the love Chin's mother always withheld from her, leaving a lingering regret in her heart.

At one point in the film, Chin mentions that she holds onto her exes because she has no family. But could this act of "holding on" be a consequence of that "being left"? In chasing her mother, Chin and the film transcend borders, taking us on a journey to America, Canada, Germany, and Jamaica. *A Mother Apart* and *Seguridad* serve as exemplary Canadian documentaries, portraying individuals who have ties to Canada but remain connected to their ancestral lands elsewhere, compelling them to explore another country to understand their past, identity, and roots.

In *A Mother Apart*, home videos are effectively utilized to offer poignant insights into the dynamics of the family. One such video, dating back several years, captures a moment where Chin's mother is seen scolding Laura, Chin's half-sister. This footage provides a revealing glimpse into the complex nature of their relationship, particularly the mother's demeanour. What is striking is that the mother's verbal violence is directed toward the camera, as Laura is the one filming her. Consequently, the audience, through the lens of the camera, becomes unwitting participants in this emotional exchange, experiencing the weight of the mother's harshness. In another scene from a home movie, we witness the two sisters seated at the dinner table alongside their mother. Despite their attempts to elicit a kind word from her, the mother, unlike the father in *My Dad's Tapes*, refuses to feign happiness or affection for the camera. There is no pretence or showmanship here—just raw, unfiltered emotion.

During the reunion between Chin and her mother, reminiscent of Abbas

Kiarostami's *Close-Up* (1990), the director chose to capture the moment with a hidden camera. This approach ensured that the mother was unaware of the camera's presence, allowing the meeting to be recorded as naturally as possible. In this special and highly anticipated moment, we observe with a mix of excitement and curiosity that the mother does not insist on hugging her daughter, despite their long separation. Another striking instance occurs when Chin visits her mother's old neighbour during a trip to Jamaica and connects the neighbour and her mother through a phone call. Unexpectedly, we witness the typically stoic and distant mother become emotional and begin to cry. This sentimentality suggests that the neighbour's presence rekindles memories from before the mother had children. However, Chin's tears, shed moments later as she recalls this interaction, are even more poignant. Throughout her journey, Chin speaks with many of her mother's acquaintances, all of whom recall the mother with fondness and speak of her kindness. Yet, strikingly, many are unaware of Chin's existence. Each time she hears about her mother's kindness, one can sense Chin's painful and regretful internal question: where was this kindness in her own life?

The movie *Fragments of a Life Loved* (Chloe Barreau, 2023) shares several similarities with *My Dad's Tapes*. Both films rely heavily on personal video archives and feature people speaking in front of the camera about someone absent from the film—in this case, the director herself. Throughout the film, we catch only glimpses of her in personal videos, and we largely form our image of her based on the descriptions provided by others. This image resembles that of a seductive woman living a bohemian lifestyle filled with weed, alcohol, travel, and sex. She had numerous lovers, both male and female, and many describe her as unfaithful, having betrayed most of them and broken many hearts. Yet, all these former lovers seem to remember their time with her as a unique and memorable experience. Interestingly, it appears that the director was not present during the interviews. She entrusted someone else to conduct them, allowing her former lovers to speak more freely about her without the burden of her presence.

Since her teenage years, she has always had a camera in her hand, capturing moments with her boyfriends and girlfriends. Now, as these relationships have all ended, watching these films takes on a peculiar and poignant quality—they are chronicles of lost youth. Revisiting these intimate moments, captured in amateur yet sensual footage, contrasts sharply with the present-day interviews conducted with her now visibly older ex-lovers. As the director explores the memories and past relationships, the range of emotions expressed is captivating: some become emotional and reflective, others angry; some sigh, some shed tears, and others laugh. It appears that relationships are over for some but not for others. Some individuals still hold a grudge against her and have not been able to forgive her.

Capturing the profound emotions on the faces of the interviewees is truly spectacular on camera, showcasing the bravery of the director. She allowed her ex-lovers' candid words to be openly recorded, even when some of those words were negative and, at times, cruel judgments about her. Despite the film's apparent focus on deeply personal matters, it unfolds with as many narratives as there are characters

in front of the camera. Each story engages the audience, likely evoking memories of similar relationships in their own lives. Another notable aspect, echoing a thematic commonality with *My Dad's Tapes*, is the increasing openness of the participants. Many who once concealed their homosexual relationships now sit before the camera, readily sharing the details of these past connections.

In *The Big Move* (Sarah Grant, 2023), the protagonist grapples with the challenge of confronting her true self and embracing frank expression, utilizing this struggle as a lens to examine the influence of media on body image. Through its portrayal of the body, the film endeavours to critique pop culture and illustrate how media mechanisms can render individuals passive. Director Sarah Grant, who is a plus-size woman, reflects on her lifelong passion for cinema and her struggle to find representation of her own body within it. During the COVID-19 pandemic, while confined to home and engaging in online dance classes, Grant rediscovers her body's capabilities. As she participates in these classes, she gradually gains confidence and ultimately decides to centre her film around the portrayal of herself dancing—an image conspicuously absent from mainstream media: that of a plus-size dancer. Her film takes an intriguing approach, eschewing conventional narratives and instead filling the camera frame with her own body, inviting viewers to scrutinize its details. Even when discussing the weight gain of celebrities like Britney Spears, Grant refrains from displaying images of Spears, rejecting the incorporation of visual references that evoke advertising, stereotypes, and media norms. *The Big Move* serves as a voice for individuals whose images have been marginalized by the dictates of market-driven media. Is this not a kind of “coming out” of the margins?

In *Am I the Skinniest Person You've Ever Seen?* (Isha Marajana, 2024), the main character boldly contrasts her slim physique with an image. She endeavours to conform to the standards championed by the fashion industry, seeking to distinguish herself from her mother, whose body was shaped by a lifetime of household and kitchen responsibilities. However, her obsession with media images leads her to extreme measures in weight reduction, pushing her perilously close to self-destruction. The film serves as a form of self-expression, weaving together home videos, photos, and media advertising images through creative and dynamic editing. It examines themes of identity crisis and the generation gap in an era dominated by media influence. Moreover, the narrative touches upon the immigrant experience in Canada, portraying the conflict between traditional values upheld by Isha's Punjabi mother and the media's narrow definition of “beauty” and “perfection” through the body.

The pivotal role of smartphones is a recurring theme in many of these films. For instance, in *The Big Move*, the smartphone serves as a tool enabling the director's virtual presence in an online dance class and capturing intimate moments, thereby providing both dramatic material and archival footage for the film. Similarly, in *A Mother Apart*, the smartphone plays a crucial role in Chin's journey, facilitating her connection with distant loved ones and serving as a conduit for her narrative. Beyond these specific instances, the pervasive influence of smartphones signifies a broader societal trend. This powerful audiovisual tool has seamlessly integrated into our lives, almost becoming an extension of our bodies. Consequently, we express

our innermost selves more openly than ever before. While traditional home video cameras, exemplified in *My Dad's Tapes* or *Fragments of a Life Loved*, were primarily used to capture moments of joy, smartphones now archive our daily interactions and conversations, serving as a treasure trove for personal narratives and storytelling.

The movie *My Sextortion Diary* (Patricia Franquesa, 2024) is a testament to the power of creativity in filmmaking, demonstrating that engaging and captivating cinema can be crafted with minimal resources and at a low cost. This film ingeniously utilizes smartphones and laptops as its primary tools, extracting nearly all its material from these everyday devices. The narrative unfolds around a director whose laptop is stolen on the eve of her film screening at the Locarno festival. Subsequently, she receives a call from a hacker intent on extortion, threatening to release her nude photos online. What ensues is a gripping crime and mystery drama, with an elusive antagonist whose identity remains shrouded in mystery, his voice only heard through manipulated voice messages. *My Sextortion Diary* employs elements familiar to our daily lives—SMS, email, Google searches—to weave its intricate plot and deliver its dramatic punches. Few films can be remembered that rely so much on textual elements integrated into the narrative.

While watching, we are constantly immersed in a world of text: the director's SMS messages, emails, Google searches, and the contents of the websites she visits. This experience can be likened to a form of voyeurism rarely encountered in cinema. It is as though we are assuming the role of a hacker, peering into the director's personal information. Moreover, the film's auditory environment is layered with an array of sounds: the rhythmic scrolling, crisp clicks, rapid typing, alerting notification pings, sudden screenshot captures, and the familiar chimes of mobile alarms. Complementing this, the visual presentation of the film reflects the static layout of mobile phone screens, seamlessly transitioning between vertical and horizontal orientations, embellished with playful stickers and dynamic elements. Beyond its captivating narrative and audiovisual elements, thematically, the film also navigates the territory we initially explored in this article: the act of unmasking oneself and embracing transparency. Ultimately, it poses a timely question: Should the director yield to the hacker's demands to evade public scrutiny? Or should she reject the notion of shame associated with nudity, opting instead to challenge societal judgment?

While it is true that the prevalence of films addressing issues such as media, immigration, LGBTQ rights, and other marginalized communities can be partly attributed to the preferences of film festivals—where such themes often attract funding and entry into prestigious festivals and awards ceremonies—there is more to consider. Despite a certain repetitiveness in the themes presented at these festivals, the films discussed here stand out by allowing us to trace intergenerational differences, highlighting a world that increasingly fosters avenues for expression and representation. This, in turn, encourages courage and candour in sharing diverse perspectives. This cultural shift has created a noticeable divide between our generation and those preceding us, who often conformed to societal norms and led double lives. Many of the struggles depicted in these films stem from taboos that were once deeply entrenched but have since become more fragile in our evolving society.