



## Interview with Deirdre Haj, Director of Full Frame Documentary Film Festival

by Papagena Robbins and Viviane Saglier

*Deirdre Haj serves as Director of the Full Frame Documentary Film Festival, the largest documentary only film festival in the United States. She joined the festival in 2010. Since then, Haj has expanded Full Frame's year-round screening series by creating the Full Frame Roadshow presented by PNC, and by overseeing the building of the Full Frame Theater and festival offices. She has also created new educational programming such as the TEACH the TEACHERS Program, the Full Frame Lending Library for public school teachers, THE SCHOOL OF DOC and the A&E IndieFilms Speakeasy, a sold out, filmed discussion venue at Full Frame where current issues vital to the documentary community can be discussed by filmmakers and the public in an intimate setting. She serves on the Board of the Chamber of Commerce, in Durham and the Durham Rotary Club Board, and chairs the Bull City Crowd Pleasers, a group of the most prominent entertainment venues in the city. She is a founding member and serves on the Executive Committee of the IFP Festival Forum (Chair of Advocacy), as well as, POV's 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Committee. She has spoken at numerous universities and film festivals. Last year, she moderated the panel "Documentaries that Shake the Power Structure" at Independent Film Week, and more recently, in September of 2014, she served on a panel at the International Documentary Association's GETTING REAL conference in Los Angeles.*

*Prior to beginning her tenure at Full Frame, Deirdre worked for over 25 years in and around the Los Angeles entertainment industry in production, business affairs and media advocacy, specifically consulting to MPAA (the Motion Picture Association of America) and CDC (Center for Documentary Studies) on public health depiction issues. She has also consulted on and produced numerous documentary and reality television projects via her company Ruffian Media. Her film, Scene Smoking (2001) won numerous awards and helped change the ratings system with regard to onscreen tobacco use. She is a member of SAG (Screen Actors Guild), IDA (International Documentary Association), Women in Film and the Academy of Television Arts & Sciences.*

**Papagena Robbins & Viviane Saglier:** Can you provide a short history of the Full Frame Documentary Film Festival? Who started the festival, and for what reasons? What is the mission of Full Frame?

**Deirdre Haj:** Each spring, for four days from morning until midnight, downtown Durham, North Carolina, becomes the hub of the documentary world. Six screening venues become communal campfires, and the diverse urban community leans in to learn about their world and one another. There is no red carpet: the documentarians and their subjects are our stars. As our mission states:

*the Full Frame Documentary Film Festival serves the documentary form and its community by showcasing the contemporary work of established and emerging filmmakers. The festival provides a space that nurtures conversation between artists, students, and the Full Frame audience. Full Frame is committed to enhancing public understanding and appreciation of the art form and its significance, while making films more accessible to a wider audience.*

The festival accomplishes this through the four-day event, free community screenings all year, and free educational programs, enabling documentarians to share their craft with students, educators, and the public, regardless of income.

Filmmaker Nancy Buirski, in association with the Center for Documentary Studies (CDS), a not-for-profit, 501 (c)(3), based at Duke University, founded what has become Full Frame as the DoubleTake Documentary Film Festival in 1998. Buirski, a Pulitzer Prize-winning photo editor for the *New York Times*, had relocated to Durham and thought its downtown landscape would be a good location for a film festival. One of the first of its kind, Full Frame came to be widely considered the pre-eminent documentary-only film festival in the US. Boasting an advisory board of documentary masters, such as DA Pennebaker, Martin Scorsese, and Barbara Kopple, the festival quickly established itself as a place where the documentary community gathers annually. In 2002, the festival entered a new phase. Having grown quickly, it took a new name, the Full Frame Documentary Film Festival, and formed its own nonprofit organization, Doc Arts, Inc. The festival returned to CDS as a program in 2011.

**PR & VS:** How has the mission evolved throughout the years? What makes Full Frame different from other documentary film festivals?

**DH:** My journey with Full Frame began in 2010 when I was hired as Festival Director. From the beginning it was clear to me that one of the most distinguishing, and important, attributes of Full Frame is its intimate, filmmaker-focused environment, where documentary artists come together for substantive discussion of their work and audiences can easily participate in these conversations (Figure 1). We have intentionally preserved the open, accessible nature of the landscape. Within a few blocks, the festival has six indoor screening venues and optional outdoor screening venues. This is an important part of what makes Full Frame unique: an entire festival is contained in one small, walkable area. Its reputation as one of the best-run festivals, plus the lack of shuttles and the mild climate, all contribute to a stress-free experience for filmmakers and festivalgoers.



Figure 1 Q & A with filmmakers

In the past few years our mission has evolved: we screen not only established artists' work but also emerging talent, and we are more involved with a broader range of audiences in the region. We have worked hard to connect to local communities to establish better ties and create a better understanding of what the festival means for them, tackling assumptions that the four-day event is just a time when many New Yorkers come to Durham. We needed to prevent people from feeling the Festival just landed fully formed each spring without locals knowing why or what it meant for them. We wanted to make sure local residents felt that Full Frame belonged to them. We have

worked hard to shift from the impression of an inward-facing, privileged place to convene and converse to one that faces both inward and outward. The festival now embraces and attracts both the working filmmaker and the broad socioeconomic community of the Research Triangle Area. There is a strong focus on the conversations coveted by film professionals and the audience (Figure 2). In addition, Full Frame now screens films, free of charge, all year long, and there is at minimum one free screening each day of the four-day festival.



Figure 2 Festival environment

Another significant innovation we made was the creation of educational programs that focus not only on documentary filmmaking but also on documentary literacy. Arts programs depend on building the next generation of viewers (audience development), making work accessible to the layperson, and giving that work context. Believing this is vital to the festival's future, Full Frame pivots outward via educational programs and year-round screenings to build the next generation of audiences so that we might avoid a situation of curation without context, which would be deadly to the form. The very word "documentary" conjures images of dry educational films for the uninitiated. Introducing our audiences to the wide array of the documentary form and its rich history has created a documentary literate community.

*Teach the Teachers* and the *School of Doc*, two of our programs, are offered free of charge and serve a financially over-burdened local school system. *Teach the Teachers*

gives tools and guidance to public school educators on how best to use documentary film in the classroom. Without this support, teachers might show a film in class as a way to disconnect from students, to make time to grade papers, or to pacify a rambunctious class. Instead, following John Golden's work in *Reading in the Reel World: Teaching Documentaries and Other Nonfiction Texts* (2006), the instructors develop study guides and learn to use film to engage students, often reaching non-traditional learners in new ways. Our emphasis helps teachers develop tools to further students' non-fiction writing in the high school curriculum; many instructors find the program invaluable. We've made the training more accessible, making sure teachers receive educational credit for their work, are reimbursed for substitute teacher time, and are invited to attend our Free Youth Screening in the fall with their students. Beginning this year (2014-2015) we are adding a lending library of documentaries and study guides available to all teachers in the school system.

*School of Doc* is a free, five-week intensive documentary filmmaking school for teens. Taught by professional filmmakers, students crew-up, choose their topic, and cover all aspects of production. Week five is spent visiting professional work sites, such as post-production houses, production companies, newsrooms, and advertising agencies. They screen their finished work for the community. The following spring, they are invited to attend the festival, show their work to the public, meet filmmakers, and experience the festival as young professionals. We've created a network of mentors, so that teachers and the festival often hire older students as interns; this past year we sent a student to Kartemquin Films in Chicago for a two-week professional internship.

Full Frame's audience and its spirit are unpretentious and welcoming to all. The festival highlights that documentary filmmaking has become much more accessible and its tools democratized. So, just as we see more first-time filmmakers accepted into competition, we also are committed to enabling people of all backgrounds to experience documentaries behind the camera and in front of the screen. The addition of a lively discussion venue, the A&E IndieFilms Speakeasy, enables veterans and first-time filmmakers alike to speak, query, challenge, and share thoughts, ideas, and artistic memory from the field. This front-row seat to discussions among documentary legends

and decision makers creates the context for laypeople and younger artists to hear, understand, and question the documentary field's choices, struggles, ethics, and realities.

Full Frame's central mission is not commercial: we have no red carpet, and our awards ceremony is a BBQ. This down-home atmosphere allows filmmakers to be collaborative and supportive of one another, see each other's work, and discuss important issues confronting the field. Distributors and sales agents often drive larger film festivals, where filmmakers are busy selling their project. Though deals and press are an important aspect of Full Frame, it is this alternative, collaborative, democratic approach that draws the entire documentary community to Durham each year. As DA Pennebaker once remarked, "Writers have bars; we have Full Frame."

The vibe of the festival and the democratization of filmmaking are two essential components of the Full Frame brand's vision. The third component, equally vital, is the extremely high level of curation and quality of exhibition.

Unlike most other film festival settings, Durham is not necessarily a "destination location." There are no beaches or ski slopes. The Full Frame audience is here to see and experience documentary films, and only that. What draws people is a community deeply invested in investigation and discovery. This is also a place with a diverse population—53% White, 39% African American, and a rapidly growing Latino population of 17%—where the scars of segregation remain. Some of the Full Frame audience has memories of not being allowed to sit in the Carolina Theatre, our largest screening venue. To premiere *The Loving Story* (Nancy Buirski, 2011), a film about the case that legalized interracial marriage, in such a room is one of the most memorable moments of my professional career. The arts have invigorated, united, and helped heal Durham. The American Dance Festival, Full Frame, and the Durham Performing Arts Center have provided a meaningful return in tax revenue for the city, and former Jim Crow tobacco warehouses now boast integrated corporate offices, breweries, and farm-to-table restaurants. The city is a hip hangout, a documentary city in more ways than one.

**PR & VS:** How does Full Frame's affiliation with Duke University impact the mission, economics, and structure of your organization? How would you characterize the festival's past and present ties with Duke?

**DH:** Duke is our Presenting Sponsor, providing roughly 15% of our annual cash budget. The steadfast support of such a prestigious university stabilizes the festival. Institutions of higher learning can be great havens for freedom of speech, so Duke's support enables fearlessness in programming that other festivals might not have with private funding sources.

It energizes us to interact with so many prominent thought leaders at Duke and know that we represent an important face for the university to our city and nation. These relationships help situate Full Frame as a leader in the region. I currently serve on the board of the Greater Durham Chamber of Commerce, and chair a committee of the major attractions in the city, including the American Dance Festival, Durham Performing Arts Center, Durham Bulls Baseball Team, and Duke Athletics. These relationships are central to the success of the festival.

Perhaps the greatest testament to the relationship between Duke University and Full Frame is that the first Master of Fine Arts in the university's history was established just two years ago, in Experimental and Documentary Arts. This shows an enormous commitment by any institution to the field. In the future, we plan to engage with more academic units at the university and allow the festival to provide springboards for students to use in their work.

**PR & VS:** Does the festival host events throughout the year, and if so, what are the events and what are their goals? Are students encouraged to take part, and if so, in what capacity?

**DH:** The festival has grown its year-round programming and educational components considerably in the past four years. The mission encourages expansion beyond the four-day event itself by enhancing public understanding and appreciation of

documentary film as an art form. To do this year-round, the festival staff began free screenings at the American Tobacco Campus (ATC) in downtown Durham in 2009. This renovated factory serves now as corporate offices for start-ups and well-established companies, anchored with restaurants and creative workspaces, as well as outdoor venues. The screenings were met with limited success.

Then, in 2010, Burt's Bees, headquartered at ATC, provided funding to screen four environmentally themed films outdoors the following summer. A simple free screening became an event. Audiences brought lawn chairs and packed coolers, attending in the hundreds. The festival then planned screenings with the Nasher Museum and the Carolina Theatre, marking quarterly spots on the calendar: ATC in the summer, the Nasher in the Fall (branded the Full Frame Fix, at a six-month point post-festival) and The Winter Series at the Carolina, for which the director of programming chose films shortlisted for the Oscar to screen or re-screen. Spring, of course, is anchored by festival screenings, so, using the summer model, two outdoor free screenings were planned for the most populated days of the festival, Saturday and Sunday evenings. For these outdoor screenings, Durham Central Park became a partner, making it possible for everyone to enjoy documentary film for free regardless of economic background. Food trucks line up to serve the outdoor audience, and a social scene has emerged around the screenings. This is a great example of how our connection to the Center for Documentary Studies and Duke has benefited the festival. Stable infrastructure allowed us to buy rather than rent a portable outdoor screen for use by both CDS and the festival. Now Full Frame can easily travel with its screenings.

To continue to introduce stakeholders to the Carolina Theatre, wine and cheese was offered to donors prior to a screening and a mixer (called "The Mix") was held for local businesses to get to know the festival and to learn how they might get involved; this event also offered a chance for festival sponsors to meet other business owners. The Winter Series has been a great success, including a screening with more than 600 attendees during a snowstorm, dispelling the myth that something offered for free is left unattended. The summer series also continues to do well, with ATC restaurants sending servers out into the crowd to take orders for beer and appetizers from those who did not



bring their own food.

These year-round documentary screenings have become local economic drivers – mirroring the formula of the four-day festival. The year-round events also began to diversify our audience, both in age and racial/ethnic composition. They attracted goodwill from city and state officials, as well as local businesses. Recognizing the benefit to the city's economy, the Vice President of Real Estate for Capitol Broadcasting, Michael Goodmon (Full Frame's landlord at ATC), stepped up to sponsor conversion of an undeveloped space at ATC into new Full Frame offices and a 100-seat theater. Here again is where university affiliation proved an asset: as a major tenant of ATC, Duke signed the lease; Full Frame became responsible for its increased rent, while CDS was able to help manage and lease additional space.

With the Full Frame Theater, we have not only a new home for year-round programming, but also a marquee seen by 2.3 million visitors yearly, located in a prominent downtown location steps away from public transportation. A flexible classroom space, a conference room, and a kitchen, plus much needed storage, make for an environment where potential donors and sponsors can hold meetings with staff, where the brand is proudly displayed to the public, and where the festival offers consistent programming in quality of exhibition and scheduling. Our educational programs also finally have a home base.

Though of all of these changes were beneficial, we incurred costs and, once again illustrating the value of our institutional ties, CDS shared costs to make the move viable. Within the span of a year, this synergy attracted a major sponsor, PNC [Financial Services], to underwrite the entirety of year-round programming. Free programs are offered every day of the festival, both indoors and outdoors; free screenings join the open arts day in Durham called Third Fridays; and the Winter Series continues at the Carolina Theatre. In all, Full Frame screened 15 films at no cost to the community in 2013-2014, and will screen more in 2015.

The new locale allows CDS and Full Frame to reinforce and strengthen other local not-for-profits by lending the space at low or no cost. As part of the sponsorship, PNC also

encourages screenings in other parts of the Research Triangle area (Raleigh/Durham/Chapel Hill). Screenings this year have been planned in all three cities at new locations. For a small house like the Full Frame Theater, which only boasts 100 seats, the festival employs free software (EventBrite) and takes reservations, which sell out within hours of announcing which film will screen. In order to prevent confusion or disappointment, the festival employs the same tools used during the four-day event, reserving 90% of the house and leaving 10% for people who come to the venue without a reservation (or, in the case of the festival, a ticket). This way any no-shows are filled with remaining audience members who wait until all reserved seats are taken.

Beyond the programs mentioned earlier, students are encouraged to participate in a number of ways. The longest-running educational component of the festival is the Fellows Program. Over one hundred university students attend the festival at reduced cost, and the majority of these fellows are students at Duke University. Many also attend from UNC [University of North Carolina] School of the Arts, North Carolina State University, NCCU [North Carolina Central University], St. Augustine, and other universities from around the country. Students see films curated solely for them by the programming department, and they attend exclusive Master Classes with filmmakers.

The Youth Screening is an annual free screening for Durham students, in either middle school or high school, depending on the content of the film. A live component with the filmmaker and a subject of the film (when possible) allows many students to have a rich documentary experience for the first time. It provides a platform for teachers who have experienced our Teach the Teachers program to provide study guides and assignments built around the film and its subject matter. Promoting documentary literacy, we emphasize the simple differentiation between documentary film and reality programming—often new information for young people. The live component makes the film “come alive” before their eyes. From 600 to 1,000 students experience this event at the Carolina Theatre each November.

It’s worth noting that the Youth Screening used to be held the first morning of the festival, and was open to the public. It served as the only free screening during the four-day event. This screening was moved to the fall to enable more outreach to the schools

and a longer programming lead-time, and to avoid a busy testing season at the schools.

Other opportunities with local universities have energized Full Frame and expanded the capacity of both the festival and student learning, especially with business students interested in marketing. One class at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill used Full Frame as a model to pitch new methods of audience engagement to the staff, and this past year the Marketing Seminar class at North Carolina Central University, a historically black university, engaged MBA students to study demographics at the festival and advise how to increase diversity in the Full Frame audience.

Festival internships are offered at the college level (and at high school and early college for returning School of Doc students who work with the new group in the summer). The internships are highly competitive, but have yielded many opportunities. Sadie Tillery, the director of programming, began at Full Frame as an intern, as did Suzanne Spignesi, our development associate.

Finally, our robust social media presence is used to ensure that students know how to take advantage of the festival all year, via student passes (which are reduced in price and sell out annually) or free screenings. A younger audience is a more diverse audience, and this has served the festival well. All demographic surveys show that most free screenings are attended by younger and more diverse audiences, and we also know that 70% of people hear about the festival via word of mouth. Our non-white audience at the four-day event doubled last year, and we believe it is due to the year-round audience development I described earlier.

**PR & VS:** Full Frame certainly does provide quite an impressive range of events to engage the local community throughout the year. When it comes to engaging with your more extended community of film festival networks, we know that you are one of the founders of the IFP (Independent Filmmaker Project) Festival Forum, a non-profit, web-based, advocacy group for film festival organizers. What need does this project fill? How would you describe the film festival network this organization creates?

**DH:** Film festivals have no national association to serve them. In the United States, all major arts groups, theater, museums, opera, symphonies, have one or more national associations to advocate for the needs of their members, set and share best practices, and study the field.

A few for-profit entities have emerged in the last decade, created on the premise that they serve the needs of film festivals, and indeed, by providing a time and place for festival organizers to meet, this proved valuable. Film festivals require extensive travel, and while traveling there is little time to work on the business of running a festival more efficiently. The organizer is watching films, meeting with filmmakers and sponsors, and trying to program their annual event. These festival events showed that organizers want and need to meet, but were undermined by featured sponsors hawking their wares, and speakers who offered top-down advice that many attendees did not find valuable.

In 2010, IFP gathered a group of Festival Directors together during IFP Film Week to explore if such an association proved needed. The issues that emerged in that initial meeting were:

- A need for best practices to improve festivals' relationships with filmmakers
- Unity to encourage cooperation and lessen competition
- A need for salary surveys, advocacy, and sharing of knowledge
- A need to secure transparency from distributors over screening fees, an opportunity for collective bargaining, and a job database
- A need for an organization where festivals could speak as one voice

Additionally, no scholarly studies yet existed to demonstrate the role of festivals' economic impact on the life and distribution of a film. No infrastructure existed to collectively oppose or support federal measures regarding ADA [Americans with Disabilities Act] compliance in cinemas. There was no way for one festival director to effectively communicate with another, unless you happened to make their acquaintance on the circuit.

IFP intended this group to start as a program of IFP and eventually become its own 501(c)(3). Being a program of IFP gave the Forum a part-time administrator, a place to collect and pay fees, and an umbrella not-for-profit status. The transition to stand-alone

status is currently taking place.

The Forum began meeting at Sundance, creating break-out sessions devoted to membership (what should it provide?; should it be for individuals, festivals, or both?; should the cost be based on our cash budgets or cash and in-kind combined?), advocacy (what are the pressing needs that we as a community need to speak out on?), and best practices (should these be suggested or policed, and how do these get implemented at which budget levels?). And the Forum gathered at Film Week, reporting what progress had been made for the past year. Now, after an extensive landscape analysis of existing arts organizations that serve similar constituencies, the group has two meetings a year: one at Film Week and one at the Art House Convergence just prior to the Sundance Film Festival (though we still hold a brunch, courtesy of Sundance, at Sundance for new members to get to know the group).

The executive committee, which meets via phone monthly, has written a mission statement, bylaws, and a strategic plan. A vision statement, our core beliefs and values, and our goals are all clearly delineated and defined. As our mission statement reads:

*The IFP Festival Forum provides a collaborative platform for members to develop and share operational and curatorial efficiencies, set professional standards, and establish best practices. The Forum serves the collective priorities of its membership while leveraging its leadership, expertise, and vision within the international film community and the broader cultural landscape.*

This network of film festivals has created an open community, sharing knowledge unlike any ever created for film festivals before. Panel sessions occur not just at our two annual meetings but also via webinars. Sundance professionals share their expertise in wrapping a fest with festivals that have operating budgets in the thousands, not millions. Mid-sized festivals share their expertise in dealing with city officials. Collectively, we were able to advocate to an executive at The Weinstein Company about DCP [Digital Cinema Package] and how difficult the transition to this technology is for smaller festivals, effectively eliminating their films from being played at those events. And, finally, we shared concerns and support to the Art House Community that houses our events

over federal ADA compliance. In the two latter examples, if the Festival Forum did not exist, no exemptions or provisions for film festivals would be taken into account by large private and government entities making technological changes that smaller festivals—even mid-size events—would find difficult or impossible to implement.

This new collective of colleagues has been and will continue to be essential to the role of film festivals and the communities and artists they serve.

**PR & VS:** You are also a member of The D-word, a social networking site that facilitates discussion between documentary film professionals (filmmakers, producers, festival organizers, scholars, etc.). How do such Internet communities influence festival direction, in your experience? What have you learned from participating in this social network that has helped you understand the work you do with Full Frame better?

**DH:** Online collectives like the D-Word enable festival leaders to hear from a much larger base of documentary professionals at one time than we could otherwise. Many, in fact most, of the participants on the D-Word will not screen at Full Frame, however thousands of documentary professionals from all over the globe are actively participating in online discussions. They allow us to hear the concerns, needs, and wants of the field at any given time. It effectively breaks the wall between practitioner and curator.

In the case of the D-Word in particular, the louder, most well-funded filmmakers are somewhat absent. Of course [founder of The D-word and American documentary filmmaker] Doug Block and [American documentary filmmaker] James Longley are frequent voices, but many of the filmmakers work tirelessly, film after film, in a medium that keeps them a part of the global film community but not necessarily in the public eye. If we only heard from the filmmakers we see at other festivals or at Full Frame, how would we ever stay current with the entire filmmaking community? We would hear only the sound of our own, curated voice, echoing back to us.

Not only do we hear the collective voice on the current state of the industry (if one can

call documentary film an industry), we travel to festivals the world over via their shared experiences. What works well at a festival in Kosovo? What did not work well in Venice? How do the filmmakers feel about the new study on advocacy and documentary film? Can they afford DCP transfer fees demanded by other festivals?

Each January I become a more active voice, seeking feedback on subjects we might explore in our A&E IndieFilms Speakeasy. Highly volatile issues in the summer may no longer be current by April, when the festival happens. Which discussions have legs and pervade throughout this year, or even last year? There is simply no better way to hear from so many qualified professionals on so many aspects of the professional documentary film community.

Lastly, it allows those of us who choose to participate an avenue for the community to get to know us, and removes the wall between filmmaker and festival director. When the provocative [article](#) “Fair Trade for Filmmakers” by Sean Farnel appeared in *Indiewire* [in February of 2013] on filmmakers being paid by festivals (and was effectively [answered](#) by fellow Festival Forum founding member, Tom Hall), The D-Word became a place for me to answer questions point blank about our submission fees and ask frankly whether awards should be eliminated in favor of appearance fees. Such a site for discussion is invaluable.

**PR & VS:** Through these different positions that you occupy within documentary film festival networks, what have you learned about the particular challenges that documentary filmmakers, documentary film festivals, and the documentary film industry (production/distribution) face today?

**DH:** We are, perhaps, in a golden age of documentary film. Thanks to digital media, we have more content and more content-makers than ever before in history. Via smart phone or a DLSR, the ability to capture moving images at low cost and high quality has created a plethora of documentaries, and the popularity of the form is evident on major online distribution sites like NETFLIX or VIMEO.

Yet the documentary filmmaker is still just getting by. Theatrical distribution yields small gains at the box office (the highest grossing documentary of all time, Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 911*, first screened over a decade ago), online distribution often has little transparency in terms of payout vs. units sold, and those that do have transparency pay poorly. Even with the ability to self-distribute, documentarians are quite poorly compensated compared to their narrative counterparts.

In the US, foundation support and grants are extremely competitive, and such funding often favors the more experienced, proven filmmaker. And though advocacy-based documentaries are popular, the creative community has begun to chafe under their restrictions, resenting the need to track a film's efficacy for social change or having to include such funding and activities for the life of their movie. Complicating matters, advocacy-based documentary is not the sum total of the form, though it may often be the easiest to find funding to create. Addressing the problem of funding and how it drives content will be a major issue for the field for years to come.

As common and popular as documentary seems to be, it is wildly underrepresented not only in the market place but also in the arts world. Only a year ago was the first documentarian (DA Pennebaker) given a Governor's Award by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts & Sciences. College-level documentary programs spring up at universities, churning out young filmmakers with their degree grasped tightly in their hands, only to find the economics of the field daunting. Many either succumb to working in other fields like reality television or become professors at another college-level documentary program, sometimes without enough time in the field to be able to pass on any profundity of experience to a new generation of filmmakers barely a decade or so younger.

The sheer magnitude of documentaries serves as a blessing and curse for festivals and distributors. The new guidelines for the documentary branch at the Academy is a perfect microcosm of this: now many more films qualify and need to be seen by adjudicators for the awards process, but volume makes it nearly impossible for the academy member to see them all.



This holds true for festivals as well. (For the sake of this discussion, I am excluding the market-driven and for-profit festivals, such as Tribeca and Sundance.) Respectable festivals will not take more submissions than they can honorably and fairly judge at any one time, yet more and more online platforms exist to increase submissions at film festivals. To what end? How can we reliably look at and fairly judge so much content?

So for both the festival and the filmmaker, the economies of scale must be carefully managed, and neither of them significantly benefit. The filmmaker can only submit to as many festivals as s/he can afford to (without a patron), the festival can only take what it is able to judge in any given season, and both entities are left short. The festivals then struggle to provide travel and accommodations (depending on the festival), sometimes paying the distributor directly, and the filmmaker gambles on winning a cash award or makes the investment hoping the film will get picked up, create word of mouth, and drive further sales/screenings.

Even if film festivals paid filmmakers for their attendance, after a year or two of making the film, how many festivals would the director need to attend to make a living? Would only the director attend? What about the producers, or the human subjects of the film, who so often make or break audience engagement?

[Festivals serve a key role for many documentaries: they provide a theatrical release of the movie.](#) They play around the US from city to city, building an audience and collecting sets of laurels that are then used by the distributor in their trailers, so that the art house audience knows someone else liked this film, and then they play New York and Los Angeles to hope for a good review and get noticed by Academy voters. Winning that statuette can extend the life of the film, and certainly helps the director fund her or his next project.

A few key things are lost in these industry realities.

First, it is harder and harder for good quality festivals not only to survive, but to get started. And documentary festivals lack the red carpet star power of the narrative film world; so attracting press is doubly hard. This also impacts sponsorships and, for some festivals, ticket sales (though Full Frame enjoys an extremely high sell-out rate).

The “why” of creating or having a film festival can fill another interview, but putting economics aside (and I believe deeply in the economic value of film festivals), it is because theatrical exhibition offers a profoundly human experience that the online experience cannot. Film was created to be seen on a large screen viewed by a large group together, not on a screen measured in inches. The medium was created for theatrical exhibition. There is a different physiological experience to see and hear a film in a large screen format. Imagine experiencing some of the more visually stunning films, such as *Samsara* (Ron Fricke, 2011) or *Koyaanisqatsi* (Godfrey Reggio, 1982), on a small screen, or witnessing the deeply personal journeys of the subjects in *How to Die in Oregon* (Peter Richardson, 2011), a film about the right to die, without the many other people experiencing the film simultaneously around you. And the at-home theater experience does not replace this, either. A recent study by the Art House Convergence showed that the majority of homeowners with at-home cinemas donate to and/or frequent the local art house cinema in their community. The hard-nosed marketer might have assumed otherwise.

But the addition of being with others while one experiences the film, and documentaries in particular, creates a bond between audience and filmmaker that only the festival experience offers, and with documentary quite often the additional opportunity of hearing from the human subjects of the films, as well. And this emotional experience goes two ways: the filmmakers are vulnerable and anxious for the audience to receive their work, but the subjects are completely exposed. Slivers of their lives have just unspooled before a house full of strangers. More than once have we had the privilege of experiencing no fewer than 1,000 strangers weeping, laughing, and jumping to their feet at the end of a screening (Figure 3), all



Figure 3 An excited packed house

connected by the opportunity to experience the film as it was meant to be, the

overwhelmed subjects of the film received not as celebrities, but as friends. People we feel we know.

The push to online distribution leaps over this process, and has the potential to significantly devalue it. On the one hand, I do not fear the transition, as I know we as humans have demanded this live experience for centuries, just as the struggle for payment of artists has gone on for, literally, centuries.

So my hope is that documentaries will expand their theatrical lives via festivals and/or the art house. What I so often refer to, as “the communal campfire” of the movie theater at a film festival is the place where we gather against the pressing darkness. It is a place to hear someone else’s story, and escape the daily narcissism of “selfies” and “Throwback Thursdays” on social media, where every meaningless moment is documented, ensuring that no moment is special.

My hope is that through more theatrical exhibition, the essence of the documentary form will not only survive but thrive as we draw closer together in the global village and realize through the amazingly brave work of the documentarian that, as the ancient Roman playwright, Terence once exclaimed, “nothing human is alien to me.”

Links:

<http://www.fullframefest.org>

<http://ifpfestivalforum.org>