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## You're Going to Toronto to Eat Hot Dogs? A visit to HOT DOCS, Toronto's feisty Documentary Fest by Lisa Fotheringham



### SYNOPTIQUE [HOME]

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# SYNOPTIQUES

The most natural way for me to articulate the self-reflexive tone of this year's Hot Docs film festival is to present my review of the festival as a story about my trip to Toronto. I am sorry if it bores you; feel free to scroll along to the splinter reviews of some of the film festival highlights at the end of the article, if you prefer.

Taking the train from Montreal to Toronto on the evening of Sunday, April 24th, I took a few moments to consider my relationship to documentary filmmaking. After all, I figured if I was going to be spending my only "week off" between academic semesters watching and learning about contemporary documentary films in Toronto, I should probably understand why.

My relationship with the world of documentary films is a long and winding road. In a pattern similar to many other students of cinema, I've been easily seduced by the stunning images of other locales and eras delivered to me on screen in films such as Alain Resnais' *NUIT ET BROUILLARD* (1955), Octavio Getino and Fernando Solanas' *HORA DE LOS HORNOS* (1968), and Newsreel shorts such as *BLACK PANTHER* (1968). I became fascinated with the idea of a Griersonian documentary tradition and I discovered that I, myself, am a proponent of the argument that cinema, as a visual medium, can supplement social activism.

Admittedly, my acknowledgement of the merger of digital technologies with documentary filmmaking marked the first significant departure from my romantic notion of the documentary film. And, for a short while, in a bout of true snobbism and film purist idealism, I moved away from contemporary documentaries, choosing to focus my energy in other cinematic realms that I unjustly determined more worthy.

I'm not sure exactly when I made peace with the realist/formalist documentary debate that had erupted in my mind (not to worry: the debate never deprived me of any sleep). I believe that it was a silly and naïve debate, in any case. The skull and cross bones of the documentary world is that filmmakers portray information about an environment, an issue, or a being that exists within their own time-space reality for an audience who may or may not have the same relationship to the subject. The aesthetic choices that an artist or filmmaker makes when constructing their documentation should be their own. I have read many studies related to the democratization of art made possible by advancements in digital technologies and I have no strong rebuttal. So, although I do still have a personal preference for the intrinsic beauty that a film like Barbara Kopple's *HARLAN COUNTY, USA* extends, I have grown to appreciate the aesthetic that video art brings to the documentary oeuvre. Moreover, I have developed an admiration for the medium's ability to displace didacticism in a way few classic documentaries ever could.

Temporarily finished with my philosophical meditation, I looked out the train window toward Lake Ontario. I was looking forward to my week in Toronto. I'd never spent much time in the city, and what better time to come, then during one of their strongest and most internationally recognized film festivals?

Monday morning was technically Day Three of the Hot Docs Film Festival, but for me it marked day one. I made my way through the University of Toronto campus to the Isabel Bader Theatre to retrieve my press pass. It was raining outside and a number of delegates seemed to be gathering in the "delegate lounge" behind the theatre in a charming three storey building (part of Victoria College). I decided to check the space out. A buzz of activity filled the air. This apparently was the industry hot spot. There were seminars in the upstairs rooms, a lounge lobby area where people were gathered around on sofas snacking and sipping on coffees, an information room with internet-access, as well as the Doc Shop and a screening room. The screening room was already full and the employees of the Doc Shop were busy taking reservations from film buyers who were interested in screening films from the enormous catalogue of documentaries available for screening (including nearly every documentary submitted to the Hot Docs 2005 festival).

The industry space was "hot", and a nice hideaway from the wet weather, but I had come to the festival first and foremost to see some films. So, after making a note of the operating hours of the delegate lounge, I mapped out my screening schedule for the next few days and made my way to the Royal Ontario Museum (ROM) theatre where I saw my first few films of the festival.

The film screenings were dispersed between four Toronto theatres. The Isabel Bader Theatre and the ROM Theatre I have mentioned. There were also the Bloor Cinema and the Innis Town Hall Theatre (part of the University of Toronto's campus). Each of the theatres embodied their own character.

The Innis Town Hall Theatre reminded me of the theatres from my own university experiences and was located just behind the University of Toronto Library – which architecturally looks like either a peacock or a turkey (there is apparently a debate amongst the locals).

The ROM Theatre was typical of a museum cinema. The floors, seats, and lobby were kept in neat order, with deep red velvet curtains, gold toned walls, and interesting hieroglyphic patterns framing the stage. A quirk about the ROM Theatre was its proximity to the subway line. The first time I was in the theatre I thought that maybe we had experienced a small earthquake (probably more of my paranoid California roots than anything else). When I looked around the theatre however, everyone seemed complacent, and after about two screenings, I hardly noticed the rumbling effect that the passing subway created.

The Isabel Bader Theatre was the most technologically advanced and modern of the cinemas. I was quite impressed with the theatre. It had that special sleekness as well as a titanium shaded modernism radiating a sense of the contemporary. This is also the theatre where the main events of the festival occurred: the awards ceremonies and the interview with Errol Morris.

Finally, there was the Bloor Cinema, the repertory film house with a huge upstairs balcony. I liked this cinema because they served popcorn and soda. Also, it was next door to this incredible, inexpensive Lebanese food place called Ghazale. Thanks to them, I never once ate a hot dog while I was at Hot Docs.

My week was predominantly spent either in one of these four spaces or traveling between them. In total I believe I saw fifteen films, attended three panel discussions, as well as the interview with Errol Morris.

The 2005 Hot Docs Film Festival marked the twelfth anniversary of the festival. Their advertising campaign used slogans such as "Outspoken", "Outstanding", and "Get Real". The festival was outstanding. I don't know if I would necessarily call the program outspoken (after all, the Donnigan Cumming exhibition was going on simultaneously at the MOCCA gallery on Queen Street West), but I certainly learned a great deal about all types of things: taxidermy, Sri Lanka, the Endesa coporation, Jerry Lewis' family, female television correspondents, Arabic media outlets, and lonely and middle aged karaoke-singing men from Germany.

Audiences at Hot Docs film screenings make for an eclectic mix, the most "real" of any festival I had previously attended. Social activists and political analysts mix with film critics and industry producers. Colourful local characters take advantage of the co-sponsorship agreement of the film festival with local newspaper, *The Toronto Star*, which allows for students and seniors to attend any daytime screening before 6:00pm and any late night screening at the Bloor Cinema free of charge. There is little of the red carpet distraction that typically infests star-studded film festivals (although there are Q and A periods after nearly every screening in which the audiences are introduced and invited to interact with the filmmakers). Overall, the festival is successfully delivering "hot" topics to the people, and the people (especially the fortunate Toronto audiences) are eager to take it in.

I thoroughly enjoyed my trip to Toronto for the film festival. I also got to sneak away from the festival hubs a few times throughout the week to catch some live music performances at various local haunts. In addition, I had the good fortune to catch two great exhibitions at the AGO (Art Gallery of Ontario): Bruce Mau's "Massive Change: The Future of Global Design" and "Christo and Jean-Claude: Works from the Weston Collection", both of which I recommend.

### Festival Highlights

There was a definite motif at this year's festival, and this is it: it is rare to find a documentary in which the director does not address, at least to some extent, their documentary process and method. And many times, the journey that the filmmaker makes as they attempt to piece together a story out of the information they have compiled, actually becomes the plot line structuring their film. Perhaps to the over-prescribed masses trying to map their way through the post-modern world, documentary filmmaking has come to be a sort of a holistic form of self-medicating.

I am certainly not proposing that all documentary filmmakers are using their practice therapeutically. This trend is not true of all of the films that I screened during my time at the festival, nor is it true of each of the following films I have highlighted below, nor am I defending it as a well-defined social criticism; it is simply an idea that I believe is worth consideration, especially in view of the growing popularity of the documentary film within our society.

### Yes, the Festival Highlights

#### VENETTA SONG Dir: Eylem Kaftan (Canada, 2005) ROM Theatre April 25, 2005

In this film, Kaftan, a Montreal native of Kurdish descent, embarks on a journey in search of answers in the murder of her aunt, half a world away, in unfamiliar Turkey. This is as much a journey for us, the audience, as it is for the filmmaker, into the mysterious Kurdish customs responsible for this "honour killing"—one of many practices that remain incomprehensible and/or reprehensible in our North American outlook. But, unlike many films that have variously tackled the sensitive and controversial topic of ritualistic violence (religiously- or secularly-inspired), Kaftan's film is noteworthy for its non-didactic tone; she is truly out for answers, even as she struggles to ignore her own prejudices. This is a film about the search for identity: one's own identity and the identity of a stranger. It is also a film about the way that stories are told: through photographs, moving pictures, village tales, and folk songs.

#### ABEL RAISES CAIN Dir: Jenny Abel, Jeff Hockett (USA, 2005) ROM Theatre April 27, 2005

I've included this daughter's affectionate tribute to her quirky dad in my list of favourites, simply because it's so delightfully entertaining. The film chronicles the eccentric and clever experiments carried out by the director's father, Alan Abel, throughout the course of his life-long research into the hilarious particularities of human behaviour. There are elements of Andy Kaufman, Woody Allen and even Tom Green recognizable in Abel's impressive oeuvre, all beginning with his infamous McCarthy-era fundraising campaign to restore domestic "decency" by clothing household pets. Ultimately, this is an insatiably compelling ethnographic film studying the bizarre behaviour of a most exotic group: the 20th century North Americans!

#### SOLIDARITY SONG: THE HANNES EISLER STORY Dir: Larry Weinstein (Canada, 1996) Isabel Bader Theatre April 27, 2005

This year Hot Docs honoured the work of legendary filmmaker Larry Weinstein, whose creative approach to the difficult task of documenting music has enlightened and delighted audiences for decades. Of all the excellent films that took part in the retrospective, I want to mention in particular SOLIDARITY SONG: THE HANNES EISLER STORY, because of the film's unusual and extraordinarily deserving subject. The obscure Eisler, once a film composer during Hollywood's Golden Era, has somehow been overlooked in cinema's history books. Weinstein revises this character for us on-screen, pasting together documentary images with impressive theatrical recreations of Brechtian performances similar to the ones that so heavily influenced and inspired Eisler as a young composer in Weimar Germany. This innovative film resists the heavy-handed dogmatism underlying many documentaries about the persecuted and misunderstood heroes of history. Instead, Weinstein offers us an uncompromising, yet poignant, film uncluttered by histrionics or cliché.

#### GRIZZLY MAN Dir: Werner Herzog (USA, Canada) Bloor Cinema April 29, 2005

Granted, a Herzog film seems an obvious choice for my "Top Festival Picks," but this film is undeniably remarkable. The true beauty of the film is the way it impeccably maintains a balance between the idealism and paternal wisdom provided by the film's protagonist and narrator. A surprising majority of the film footage was shot by Timothy Treadwell himself, an unabashed bear enthusiast, who spent twelve summers living and documenting his unique experiences of bear communities in Alaska. Herzog pays tribute to Treadwell's legacy by treating the former enthusiast's project with delicacy and subtle reverence. The fact that Herzog himself traveled to Alaska's lush and expansive forests is a testament to the poetic and immediate, if blindly naïve, beauty of Treadwell's lifework. This is no National Geographic, IMAX exposé. We get an unprecedented look into the eyes of a Grizzly bear, quite literally, which leaves us to decide: are these creatures misunderstood or are we finally getting a glimpse into the unrepentant primordial, and therefore, innocent, face of evil?

#### Interview with Errol Morris

I quite enjoyed hearing Errol Morris talk about his perceptions on cinema and his film work. He is a colourful character and vividly opinionated. During the first ten minutes of the interview, he made two statements; first, his belief that a notion of true cinema is "remarkably stupid" and second, that he condones capital punishment for those with annoying cell phone rings. These two statements, while not pertaining directly to any particular work of cinema, shed light on the filmmaker's demeanour. The interview was conducted by film critic Gerald Peary who seemed a nice enough guy, however difficult a time he was having keeping Morris' responses within the allotted time constraints.

Morris described the way that he has chosen subjects for his documentary films, noting at least a couple of times that they were prompted by articles he happened upon while researching the Sunday *New York Times*. He also articulated his beliefs about filmmaker and film-subject relationships explaining how he believes that many documentary filmmakers have disturbing ideals about trying to make films depicting how wonderful people are. To these idealistic filmmakers, he raises the question, "What if people really suck?" Then he defined himself as a "secular anti-humanist".

Besides being entranced by the entertaining social perspectives of Errol Morris, I found it interesting to see the kind of work that the filmmaker is currently engaged in. Clips were shown of [moveon.org](http://www.moveon.org)-sponsored ads that Morris worked on for the John Kerry campaign in 2004 as well as his less political ad work for Miller Hi-Life and Quaker Oats. The evening was entertaining, informative, and refreshing. I only wish that there had been more time allotted by the festival for the event. By the time the clips from his corporate commercials were screened, the festival coordinators announced that the interview had already gone over time and that we needed to leave the theatre so that the film scheduled to screen afterward would not run late. It was too bad because I would have liked to hear more about how Errol Morris negotiated such contracts. Instead, the interview ended with a humorous sequence of commercials featuring monkeys eating oatmeal, which, according to Morris' preface, is his strongest work yet!

*Lisa called the multimedia presentation of a panel of the Women and the Silent Screen Conference in*  
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