

Interview with Ezra Winton, Director of Programming at Cinema Politica

by Papagena Robbins and Viviane Saglier

Ezra Winton holds a PhD in Communication Studies from Carleton University and is a Postdoctoral Fellow at NSCAD University where he is researching the relationship between documentary media and social movements. His many years of research on North America's largest documentary film festival, Toronto's Hot Docs, culminated in his PhD dissertation, Good for the Heart and Soul, Good for Business: The Cultural Politics of Documentary at the Hot Docs Film Festival (2013). He is the co-founder and Director of Programming of Cinema Politica (est. 2004), the world's largest grassroots documentary screening initiative. He co-edited the recently published volumes Screening Truth to Power: A Reader on Documentary Activism (Cinema Politica) and Challenge for Change: Activist Documentary at the National Film Board of Canada (McGill-Queen's University Press), and his essay "Upping the Anti: Documentary, capitalism and liberal consensus in an age of austerity," was selected for the anthology Best Canadian Essays 2014. He is co-founder and editor at ArtThreat.net and a contributing editor at POV Magazine.

Papagena Robbins & Viviane Saglier: What is your understanding of the challenges, peculiarities, and stakes of the documentary film festival network as opposed to other festival networks?

EW: In my PhD dissertation, as well as in other writing, I situate the particular nature of documentary festivals by differentiating them from other film festivals in a few key ways. First of all, documentary is historically the more marginalized, cinematic cousin to fiction. This means that festival scholars writing about "niche festivals" that include queer, labour, diasporic, disability festivals and everything in between should also (but don't always) include documentary as either a component part of those other niche iterations, or as its own category: the documentary festival. Documentary, in spite of the exceptional Michael Moore vehicle, Al Gore slide show or Morgan Spurlock stunt (Image 1), remains decidedly on the fringes of mainstream culture, and as such it has more in common with conceptions of alternative media than any notion of what

constitutes mainstream cinema. Considering documentary as alternative media is both a theoretical approach and a political position: the conceptual terrain is both parallel to and at odds with mainstream, commercial film culture.

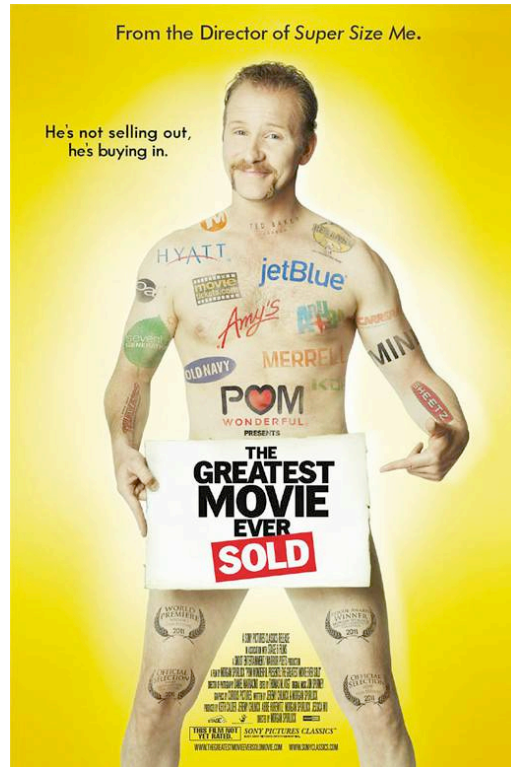


Image 1 A different kind of festival activism: Morgan Spurlock's *Greatest Movie Ever Sold* opened Hot Docs in 2011. Spurlock, who toured the festival circuit wearing a suit covered in corporate logos and other brands, epitomized a kind of activist appropriation as he traded on social justice themes while promoting a film that uncritically celebrates capitalism and materialism.

This leads to the second consideration of documentary festivals as differentiated from fiction-focused fetes: documentary, as an alternative media form, has a robust and enduring association with challenging the status quo, with contesting conventions and with confronting power in all its oppressive and familiar shapes. In this regard, where documentary goes, so goes activism, and as anyone who has been to a commercial film festival can attest, these annual shrines to cinema business and art offer little opportunity for political muckraking or organizing. Therefore the combination of documentary + festival presents an intriguing and unique contact zone that combines the first two foundational, or traditional, festival elements with a third: that is, business,

art and activism. At activist festivals this third element is encouraged, and at commercial festivals like this year's edition of TIFF—a very important industry event whose managers were very unhappy with the on-site antics of guest filmmakers and pranksters The Yes Men (Image 2)—activism is wholly banished.



Image 2 Members of The Yes Men's Yes Lab don survivaball suits and await the signal to enter the RBC bank office nearest the TIFF Bell Lightbox, where an action was staged during TIFF 2014 that brought attention to the festival's sponsor and their problematic financing of Canada's tar sands industrial project.

Thirdly, documentary arrives on the festival circuit with all kinds of truth baggage. And while I don't pretend to neatly carve up cinema into "documentary" and "fiction," the former does for the most part engage with *the* world, while the latter with a world (for more on this, see: Nichols in Winston 2013, 33). While the conventions and practices are constantly being challenged, redrawn and reimagined, *documentary* is still a

category of cinematic language and culture that elicits certain expectations and assumptions from audiences, regardless (in spite?) of the artful intentions of its makers. These preconceptions mostly hinge on an audio-visual cocktail of storytelling, veracity-vouching and truth-claims, and all the meaning-making that happens between the screen and audience emanates from this axis. In this regard, the cultural politics encountered at and embodied by a documentary festival are markedly different from those at a fiction-focused or themed festival (Hot Docs versus TIFF for example), where audiences expect to encounter mostly truthful representations of the world at one and mostly manipulated or unbelievable worlds at the other.

These differences, which make up some of the facets of documentary that contribute to its enduring difference from fiction, compel me to consider documentary festivals differently from fiction-focused festivals—both observationally and normatively.

PR & VS: Thanks for this very clear overall presentation. How can we think of the diversity of documentary film festivals within this framework?

EW: In my work I differentiate between festivals that are commercially and community-oriented events and institutions. Whereas the former is principally concerned with maintaining the festival's successful operations and growth through revenue-generating activities, the latter privileges community engagement through collaborations, critical discourse and inclusive spaces where activists, artists and audiences interface. All festivals are contact zones for culture, commerce and community, but the degrees to which festivals order their objectives and policies contribute to very different contact zones (experiences at Hot Docs, True/False and the Bristol Radical Film Festival vary wildly in this regard).

Commercial festivals, which commonly share fiction film as their main product of circulation, may still bring together these interlocking facets mentioned above, but tend to manage the events and spaces contained as highly regulated systems of cultural and political enclosure where the festival experience is prefigured by a kind of consumer-based spectatorship and the overriding ordering mechanism is capitalism. The standard

festival experience at these gatherings can be summarized via the familiar consumptive chain of product purchase, product consumption, and product dispensation. The experience is further conditioned by the steady reinforcement of corporate sponsorship through visual cues in every nook and cranny and as advertisements projected before each film (principle sponsors seldom have anything to do with film, or culture for that matter).

At community-oriented festivals, which are usually smaller, more intimate affairs commanding fewer resources, this chain is disrupted in various ways, three of which are important for my research and my interests in approaching film as a social justice platform: (1) Screenings are free or pay-what-you-can; (2) Screenings are followed by lengthy post-projection discussions between audiences, artists and activists; and (3) Screening spaces and the entire space of the festival is infused with related elements of civil society and political or activist groups in the form of organizational literature, campaign materials, tabling, individuals volunteering, etc. With the foregrounding of access, dialogue and activist inclusion setting these festivals apart from their larger commercial cousins, it is not surprising most community-oriented festivals focus on documentary as the cinematic thread from which all activities tether.

PR & VS: What is the role of Hot Docs within the documentary film festival network?

EW: I chose to write a PhD dissertation on Canada's largest documentary film festival because I had—during a decade of attending the festival—observed a dissonance between the qualities of a community-oriented festival and the documentary world. Through my research, which combines interviews, an ideological reading of programming, and some discourse analysis, I came to the conclusion that Hot Docs was charting a departure from its community festival roots as its managers sought to situate it as an important commercial-oriented, industry event and institution. To be clear, this model—which is resolutely focused on constant growth—makes sense to many in the documentary industry in this country and is not without its merits. Aware that documentary is all but dead on broadcast television and facing funding collapse, I have spoken with many filmmakers who see Hot Docs as a bright light in an otherwise

dim documentary landscape. But the festival's predilection toward increased ticket sales via crowd-pleasers, corporate-sponsor accord, hyper-efficient scheduling that precludes lengthy discussion, and the bracketing out of progressive, political and radical activism, is worrisome to others, myself included.

If Hot Docs, which screens around 200 documentaries each year in April/May, has a budget of around six million and a staff of 60, is becoming so important—so *indispensable* to the documentary community—then I believe we should be looking at the festival diagnostically as well—that is, we should infuse some critical insight among the heaps of praise bestowed upon the Toronto titan (such analysis is sorely missing in the academic realm, leading me to think we would do well with the creation of a “critical festival studies” strand). Hot Docs, which began in 1993 as an outgrowth of the advocacy group that would later become the Documentary Organization of Canada, is the second-largest festival of its kind in the world (IDFA in Amsterdam is said to be the only larger doc fest) and acts as a convention-setter and ideas-leader in the doc festival circuit. As Hot Docs cuts a commercial path to success, the festival mirrors, in a more diminutive or diluted way, the commercialism of fiction-oriented festivals like Sundance or TIFF, global media events where US products, liberal politics and celebrity culture swirl together into a sugary, Technicolor dessert (tasty but not very nutritious). Michael Moore has said we need some sugar to help the medicine go down, alluding to documentary makers that dare to forego entertaining tropes in their art (at their own peril!). In my opinion, the saccharine apogee has been achieved on the commercial festival circuit, and we could now use something else to balance out the steady flow of fructose.

I'm not arguing that Hot Docs has abandoned its community and activist roots altogether. I'm instead registering concern that the “turn to the commercial” has consequences (Image 3), and as such, the festival, in my opinion, should also look back as it charges forward. Summoning the past recalls the institution's early history, where advocacy, documentary activism and serious discourse around the genre and form ruled the day. It wasn't perfect to be sure—pecuniary shortcomings and an exclusive

focus on filmmaker participation needed to be corrected in later years, but the festival seemed principally concerned with community, and that community included activists.



Image 3. Members of Canada's documentary community stage a rally against cuts to the arts during Hot Docs 2012, a few blocks from the festival's headquarters. Many attendees felt the festival's silence and inaction with regards to the cuts, which were announced before Hot Docs 2012 launched, was both inappropriate and disappointing.

This last point brings me back to the beginning, and that is that documentary and activism have been historic bedfellows for good reason: artists and active civil society members who are both focused on issues of social justice and anti-oppression constantly come together around art, public dialogue and take-away actions. This is a robust legacy of documentary that is nurtured and sustained at community-oriented festivals and all too often ignored, relegated to the screened content or otherwise marginalized at commercial-oriented events.

PR & VS: Let's take a look at a very different model for exhibiting documentaries, one in which you are personally involved. Could you briefly present the objectives, strategies, structures, and reach of Cinema Politica? What are the benefits and disadvantages of such structures in comparison with film festivals proper?

EW: We started Cinema Politica (CP) in 2003. It originally began as a singular series of political film screenings (documentary and fiction) at Concordia University. Within a few

years other campus groups were contacting us to start their own chapters, we shifted to a documentary focus, and incorporated as a non-profit media arts organization. Today we have nearly 100 campus and community-based locals (or chapters) throughout Canada and abroad, a staff of three, and scores upon scores of volunteers throughout what we effectively refer to as the CP network. The organization does not take any kind of corporate sponsorship and our operations are funded through membership fees from locals, arts council funding, foundation support for certain projects, and good old fashioned fundraising. Locals choose from a central pool of programming that is constituted in Montreal by a team of programmers twice a year, and each local agrees to make their events free or pay-what-you-can. The chapters are semi-autonomous and decide their own structure and programming, which means we have anarchists, students, professors, retirees, and everyone in between (or all the above) organizing hundreds of screenings each year. Whenever possible, speakers are brought to screenings to lead lengthy post-screening discussions that build on the issues raised in the films, and activists are invited to hand out material and interact with the audience.

Our mandate can be pared down to three essentials: (1) to support and grow appreciation for independent political documentary; (2) to build and sustain an alternative dissemination network for such works; and (3) to connect independent political artists to audiences and activists at screening events.

The challenges of our structure are also the benefits: by eschewing corporate money and by not charging admission we have to work hard to keep the lights on, but we can sleep at night! Funding is always the first issue any activist-oriented organization will flag as “our biggest challenge,” and it is no different for Cinema Politica. Our network is mostly volunteer-run, and those that are paid are certainly not paid the kinds of salaries you’ll find at the established commercial film festivals.

This corporate-free and anti-capitalist model reflects our values, and if our labour and process doesn’t reflect the ways in which we envision a better world, then we see no point in doing what we do. If we were to switch course and take, for instance, money from Barrick Gold or Coca-Cola to sponsor an environmental sidebar of eco-

documentaries (Image 4), we would be facilitating corporate green-washing and reproducing the system that we seek to challenge: neoliberal corporate capitalism. Charging admission would also reproduce this system, a model of consumption that is highly successful at excluding the poor and working class from accessing media arts culture outside of the world of television.



Image 4 Coca-Cola was Hot Docs’s Environmental Film Sponsor in 2012, a greenwashing position that was appropriately terminated in following years of the fest.

Our model is different from festivals on another crucial point: we pay screening fees. Where this practice is spottily deployed at best in the festival circuit (“Just pay the fucking filmmakers!” is how former Hot Docs head of programming Sean Farnel puts it), and often non-existent at non-festival screening initiatives, artist remuneration reflects our values that include paying artists for their time and labour. This is our main expense, as our fairly non-hierarchical and non-bureaucratic structure means administrative overhead is comparatively low.

Lastly, Cinema Politica privileges radical and progressive activist voices and perspectives, both in our films and the spaces created around the films. The upside is inclusive, dynamic, politicized spaces where activists, artists, academics and audiences

all come together to foment community and drive political engagement at screenings and beyond. The downside is we are completely ignored and/or disregarded by the mainstream, state and corporate media. When you aren't championing a liberal, status-quo-affirming stance (new big budget documentary, narrated by Hollywood star, argues that doing just a little can save the world!) you are destined to mingle in the margins. That said, we're in pretty damn good company out here on the periphery.

PR & VS: How do you think the network around which Cinema Politica is constituted relates to other such documentary presentation organizations, like Toronto's Hot Docs or Montreal's RIDM?

EW: I think there is overlap in terms of films and audiences, to be sure, but the ways in which documentary-focused networks and communities are constituted at each site varies. At Hot Docs, activists may find appealing and useful films (despite a program that is often dominated by liberal consensus documentaries and slick Sundance products) but will encounter few other encouraging offerings. At RIDM, activists can discover a smattering of political documentaries (but will find an established current of European and observational, i.e., non-POV fare, which is a documentary expression mostly incompatible with political mobilization), as well as robust dialogues after projections, and the odd exceptional presence of civil society groups and organizations.

At Cinema Politica, activists are incorporated into the framework in every dusty corner of the organization. CP is organized and run by activists. We conduct community programming with activists. We program works made by committed activist-documentarians. We invite activists to speak at screenings (even when we have the artists present, and not without their consent) and to table at our screening spaces. We privilege activism in our programming and our organizational structure, and the material and virtual social spaces that grow out of the first two.

All that is to say, while activists will certainly find useful and inspiring moments and media at Hot Docs and RIDM, neither festival can be said to be a destination for activists, but both are instead documentary showcase events. This is the core,

fundamental difference between most film festivals (not all, mind you, as many activist and radical festivals disavow capitalist and liberal frameworks in their design) and an initiative such as Cinema Politica. Our values and organizational logic, and therefore objectives, are markedly different. We believe there is enough entertainment in the world to last several lifetimes, and as such, we see no real value in folding documentary into the entertainment consumer regimes currently circumscribing much of contemporary culture and society.

We rather see an indelible link between documentary and activism and strategize ways in which we can fuse the two into “documentary activism” (for more on this, see: <http://www.cinemapolitica.org/documentaryactivismbook>) in everything we do: from selecting the films to working with activist groups, to organizing screenings, to “long tail” activist-artist-audience commitment, to campaigns and causes, long after the credits have rolled. Commercial festivals, which are run like large and small businesses that ultimately manage culture and propagate a festival model (and therefore reproduce capitalist frameworks, thus financializing social life and culture), bifurcate documentary and activism, so that the former is to be publicly consumed and the latter privatized in individual acts, if at all. As a former head of Hot Docs once told me, the festival doesn’t “do” politics. And many would agree that this isn’t the purview of a large commercial festival focused on pleasing audiences and bolstering the industry.

Yet, this longstanding relational orbit that documentary and activism have compels me to believe that festivals that focus on documentary yet bracket out activism are ultimately performing a disservice to both the genre and various documentary-engaged communities. From what we’ve witnessed, audiences are actually eager to “plug into” documentary activism, so we say let’s give them more opportunities and in doing so, provide more hope to undermining, changing and/or dismantling systems of domination and injustice.

PR & VS: How would you define the relationship between international documentary film festivals and activist projects critical of institutions?

EW: Michael Parenti, in *The Culture Struggle*, argues that society encounters its culture through social structures that include institutions, and that those institutions “are regularly misrepresented as being politically neutral, especially by those who occupy command positions within them or who are otherwise advantaged by them” (2006, 15-16). Just as I reject the notion that journalism, documentary or any media can be objective, I agree with Parenti that the misrepresentation of cultural institutions as apolitical is problematic and itself a kind of political maneuvering. Festivals are, for better or worse, arbiters of culture: they are taste-makers, convention and trend-setters, gate-keepers and resource-allocators.

Commercial film festivals not only suggest to audiences what the best and most important current work is, but, to borrow from Raymond Williams, also construct the structure of feeling around the circulation and consumption of those works. Increasingly festivals are also ramping up their resource-allocation powers and becoming producers of films, as the raft of Tribeca and Sundance Institute films attest. All this begs the question: which films, made by which filmmakers, are getting made and seen in which contexts, and which ones aren't? The complex equation behind the answer to this question concerns cultural politics, and institutions act as filters of and mirrors to the politics of any given culture at any given moment in history. Festivals are fundamentally political in nature, if we take for a starting point their ability to allocate resources, set agendas and establish hegemonic ordering systems in a variety of arenas (from spectatorship to aesthetics to ideology).

PR & VS: How do you see Hot Docs and RIDM negotiating this tension? What are the differences and similarities in how Hot Docs, RIDM, and Cinema Politica relate to institutions and/or institutionalization and activism?

EW: In the neoliberal-consumer paradigm that has come to constitute and be reflected in our political and cultural institutions, film festivals like Hot Docs and RIDM could serve as crucial sites for contestation and resistance to the paradigm. As curators of documentary culture, they not only provide a platform for outstanding works, but act as institutions responsible to the communities they serve—communities that include

audience-activists and artist-activists. As such, I am reminded of Chantal Mouffe's sapient observation:

This is of course what has happened with the present *Zeitgeist*, the so-called 'third way,' which is no more than the justification by social democrats of their capitulation to a neoliberal hegemony whose power relations they will not challenge, limiting themselves to making some little adjustments in order to help people cope with what is seen as the ineluctable fate of 'globalization' (In *The Democratic Paradox*, 2009, 5-6).

My concern is that while documentary festivals become more important—crucial even—in their role as providers of platforms for an already marginalized genre, they also take on the institutional shape of their fiction-focused commercial cousins, providing space for discourse and action concerned with “little adjustments in order.” Jacques Rancière or Meg McLahan and Yates McKee might call this the “distribution of the sensible.”

A festival that denies documentary activism as a vibrant and disruptive aspect of a festival's cultural politics—where ruptures in consensus and sensibility could have otherwise occurred—opens that institution up to criticism and anti-institutional arguments, to be sure. When documentary festivals become kinder, gentler versions of hyper-consumer mainstream media, enclosure takes place (narrowing the sensible, the accepted, the political, etc.), and in that space one will find media and discussion around “human rights” and “the environment.” However, what one won't find, for instance, is discourse around anarchism as a viable socio-political approach, or anti-capitalism as a worthy ideology (recently this tension was put into sharp relief when *The Yes Men* attempted to draw critical attention to TIFF's sponsor, RBC, and the bank's role in financing the tar sands, which feature prominently in their new TIFF-selected film). In other words, minor modifications are made to the status quo, and the liberal democratic consensus Mouffe describes as unachievable, yet paradoxically an ordering ideology, is sustained further.

I see film festivals, like all institutions, negotiating the tension between their roles as institutions and political activism in two principle ways: *appropriation* and/or *exclusion*.

Activism at commercial festivals is folded into the contours of the consumer-capitalist framework as something that happens exclusively on screen or is the very act of consuming, and in this way is managed appropriately by the cultural institution interested in professionalism, efficiency and customer satisfaction (no messy antagonisms like political debate, picketing, flyering, etc). Direct action, or radical and progressive activism that flourishes after the lights have come up, is excluded from commercial festival spaces, where Q&As last no more than 15 minutes, and where no space is afforded to civil society groups who may connect with the issues and topics in the documentary just projected.

I would say these are the two standard ways in which commercial festivals negotiate this tension. As for Cinema Politica, we aren't an institution, but rather a coalition of activists and docuphiles who operate under a non-profit framework for funding purposes. We are not an institution in that we are not parsed off from the culture, but rather our organization, like so many arts and activist groups, is a space where we interface with the community we work with. And as anarchists, we do our best to make that space non-authoritarian, anti-capitalist and concerned with collaboration or mutual aid.

PR & VS: What is the particular role of programming in this negotiation?

EW: Programming plays a massive role. Whereas festivals will tell us (it should be mentioned we collaborate with festivals, including Hot Docs and RIDM, throughout the year on numerous screenings) "we have a film on oil already," we'll be concerned with who made the film and which community it might interface with. We might ask: Is this another film sculpted from the clay of (white male) privilege? Have we got enough of those already? Whose voices are represented and whose are harmed or excluded? How is power functioning and portrayed with regards to a particular film?

I've written about a diversity deficit at commercial documentary festivals, where there is issue and subject (or protagonist if you wish) diversity, but not producer diversity. As well, there is diversity in the volunteer population at the top festivals, but look behind those front lines to the people making decisions and a different institutional portrait emerges. Further, commercial festivals seem so attuned to issue fatigue (not too many

films in one edition on one subject) but completely disinterested in artist or cultural worker diversification. This is another symptom I attribute to institutions that reproduce the consumer capitalist framework, where privileged demographics (usually white, often male individuals) dominate in the most important roles: those that rule over and allocate resources and oversee representational framing and composition.

With regards to CP, while I am the Director of Programming at Cinema Politica, my role is to facilitate and articulate the numerous discussions and debates around our submitted films that ultimately lead to our yearly program. Since we work with activists, filmmakers, academics and critics, we have a rich variety of experience and opinion, but our process is guided by a fundamental value of community work. And since the community around us is dynamic and diverse, our programming should reflect that reality on screen and behind the lens. We also program collaboratively with numerous civil society and activist organizations.

All that is to say, I describe our programming orientation as “community programming” and the kind that commercial festivals conduct “capital programming.” Both have their purposes, but clearly I value the former over the latter. Community programming—that is programming with, by and for a community or communities—can be messy and sometimes more narrow in appeal, but it is rewarding and yields dynamic and even transformative screening events.

A community programming case in point is the recent in-house debate spurred by a documentary exploring female sexuality and the loaded term “slut.” Cinema Politica programmers were fairly divided at first: some (including me) found the film in question to be playful, inventive and a provocative conversation-starter for the audience we often imagine we’re programming for: undergraduate students. Others found it to be narrow in its straight, white, cis-gendered orientation, as well as unforgivably culpable in its papering over any critical discussion around the sex worker or the “paid slut.” We ultimately chose not to program the film in our current schedule, and will instead consider it for a special sidebar presentation opportunity in the future (where it will have better context, in conversation with other films that expand the scope of the discussion).

I think this process of our programmers—some of whom reached out to sex workers for feedback on the film—duking it out over the politics of representation (both in front of and behind the camera) really speaks to the ways in which our curatorial approach is different from a commercial festival, where a film is judged on objectively (or conventionally) defined “merit,” and where aesthetic and ideological concerns follow the populist liberal model of mass satisfaction.

Aside from overcoming the diversity deficit that the steady documentary barrage of *white-guy-with-camera-who-just-discovered-xyz-problem* presents, Cinema Politica also programs with documentary activism in mind. That is to say, we ask: can this film be used as more than an information channel for a particular issue? Can it serve a different purpose, such as providing the platform for political dialogue and discourse, followed by inspired collective action on an issue? With this in mind, we will overlook technical shortcomings of a given film because the politics are so critical and their presentation so potentially activating. This approach is also informed by our understanding that only a select and privileged few can access the resources that produce big budget documentaries, and the remaining artists should (and need to) be supported as well.

Lastly, we privilege radical committed documentaries because we think mainstream culture, including commercial festivals, already does a great job of privileging liberal consensus documentaries. For further discussion on this, see my article, *Upping the Anti: Documentary, capitalism and liberal consensus in the age of austerity*, in *POV* magazine. (<http://povmagazine.com/articles/view/upping-the-anti>).

PR & VS: How are audiences and filmmakers conceived of differently in the different networks of Hot Docs, RIDM and Cinema Politica?

EW: As I imagine each imagines it: CP’s ideal audiences are activists who are engaged in building and strengthening the shared knowledge and community potential of still more activists, and who we hope will be compelled to join a cause, campaign or organization after attending one of our screening events, while also having grown their appreciation of documentary (in other words, the perfect audience member). Hot Docs’s

ideal audiences are the vast liberal middle and upper classes that politicians speak to, and liberal consensus documentaries are made for. Hot Docs is in Toronto, a city globally regarded as having amazingly appreciative film audiences, so upholding that satisfaction is part of imagining the audience (Image 5). RIDM's ideal audience is made up of bilingual art-house enthusiasts out for a night of compelling, difficult and/or dark documentary who retire to an equally compelling, difficult and dark corner for a glass of Merlot and conversation.

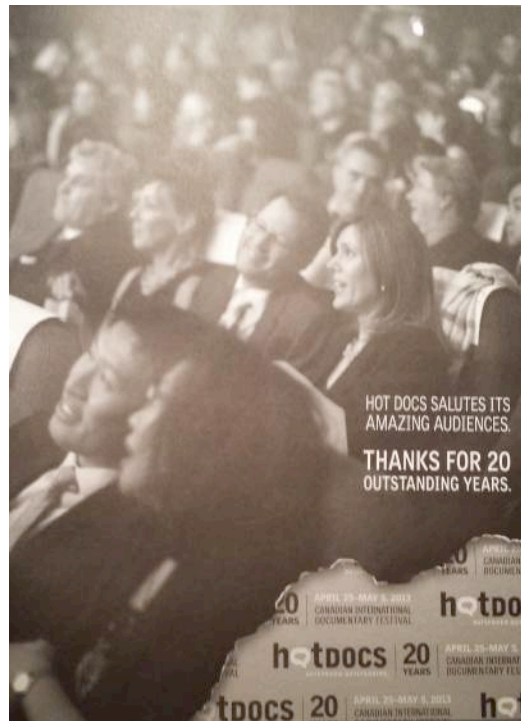


Image 5 While this may or may not be a photograph of Hot Docs's imagined 'ideal audience,' it is notable for appearing as the promotional image of the festival's audience in celebration of 20 years of activity. Of particular interest is the unified aesthetic this audience strikes: mature, middle to upper-class, well-dressed in suit and cocktail attire – altogether classy.

On this last (cheeky) note, audiences are what we know the least about, and as such they are considered the Holy Grail for marketers and funders in the documentary world. One look at all the "impact" studies of the last five years—as private investors and researchers desperately search for the connective tissue between consumption and behavioural change that can lead to more sales in all manner of consumption—suggests audiences are the Next Big Thing in this competitive attention economy. For

my part, I hope some of that research reveals to commercial festivals the on-the-ground fact that audiences far and wide are eager—desperate even—for ways and opportunities to encounter documentary beyond consumption—they are ready to be inspired, to get engaged and to activate their passion and resolve.

In closing, I'd like to channel Peter Wintonick, and ask that all the festival organizers and managers close their eyes, imagine a real existing doc-utopia, and chant with me: Viva documentary (festival) activism!

Referenced Works

- McLagan, Meg and Yates McKee, Eds. *Sensible Politics: The Visual Culture of Nongovernmental Activism*. Brooklyn, NY: Zone Books/MIT Press, 2012.
- Mouffe, Chantal. *The Democratic Paradox*. London: Verso, 2009.
- Parenti, Michael. *The Culture Struggle*. New York: Seven Stories Press, 2006.
- Rancière, Jacques. *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*. Steven Corcoran (ed.). London-New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2010. 27-44.
- Turnin, Svetla and Ezra Winton. "Introduction: Encounters with Documentary Activism" in *Screening Truth to Power: A Reader on Documentary Activism*. Svetla Turnin and Ezra Winton (eds.). Montreal: Cinema Politica, 2014. 17-28.
- Winston, Brian (ed). *The Documentary Film Book*. London: British Film Institute, 2013.
- Winton, Ezra. *Good for the Heart and Soul, Good for Business: The Cultural Politics of Documentary at the Hot Docs Film Festival*. PhD Dissertation, Carleton University, 2013.

Links:

- <http://www.cinemapolitica.org/>
- <http://ezrawinton.com/>
- <http://artthreat.net/author/ezra-winton/>