

**THE
INTERACTIVITY
MANIFESTO**

by

Grant Patten

Let's start off with a big question: does the world really need another documentary, nevermind Canadian documentary? Does the world really need another film, for that matter? Better yet: does the world really need another essay about a film? If one has that urge to create – to write a novel, to paint a painting, to direct a documentary... you have to sort of impose it on the world, and that takes a lot of energy from the artist(s) involved. It seems to me that there are already enough films and essays about films in the world. For a documentary or an essay about a documentary to be worth making nowadays, it better have an incredibly unique, challenging, and worthwhile perspective of some sort. I believe that there have been certain Canadian documentaries made over the years that contain kernels of the worthwhile. But what makes a Canadian documentary? What is a Canadian documentary? Who cares? Canadian documentaries – all films, for that matter – are too passive. Films – and in this case, let's take Canadian documentaries – in our 21st century day and age must begin to become more interactive and immersive for viewers if they are going to have any kind of *real* lasting impact on the public at large.

Sure, people still enjoy straightforward films these days. They even still attend theatres, albeit in increasingly smaller numbers as the years go by. There is still a real feeling of enjoyment the viewer feels whilst watching a film that they find engaging. But it is not enough. It *should* not be enough. The medium has been engrained in this format of presentation since the early 1900s, and if the dwindling numbers of people going to theatres isn't any indication of a problem then perhaps worldwide rampant piracy and subsequent financial destruction of many avenues of the industry should be. Let's give viewers an experience that they cannot pirate; that they cannot simply reproduce by

recording with their cute little camcorders and uploading shamelessly over their pathetic little Internet cyber groups. Let's give viewers an unreproducible experience. What does this have to do with Canadian documentary? This has everything to do with Canadian documentary. Who really has ever even seen a feature length Canadian documentary? Very few of us... or at least, if you have, you usually have no idea that you've seen a Canadian documentary. Let's take three of the archetypal Canadian documentaries for an example: *Lonely Boy*, *Waiting for Fidel*, and *Project Grizzly*. The immediate and obvious problem here is that practically nobody has ever heard of these films. This is especially true of the Canadian public. They have no idea about their own cultural/cinematic history, and it is sad. (Vanderburgh 92) It is likely that more people per capita in the U.S. have heard of *Project Grizzly* than people in Canada. Through analysis of these three films, one might be able to distill a few key important traits from them and in the process propose a model for what might make an ideal Canadian documentary film of the future.

We need to start *attacking* the viewers with our films. We need to start ravaging them. There ought to be no room left for Mr. Nice Guy in Canadian documentary cinema. Within this ideal Canadian documentary film of the future, we must call out Canadians quite explicitly for not caring. No matter what the subject matter of the documentary is, we must blast our potential audience for not giving a crap about their own film heritage. We must get angry at them through the narrative. It must be worked in somehow, someway. I am not about to propose how filmmakers should specifically go about that – they need to be able to use their own ostensibly creative skull for that. But it must be done. We must start yelling at our audience and beating them over the head with whatever it is that we have at our disposal. Passivity – and subtlety, even – is for losers

when it comes to Canadian cinema, because nobody gives a crap. We must start yelling at people with our films to the point that they are unable to simply ignore us. Be explicitly and intentionally controversial. Show what shouldn't be shown. Be as outrageous and wrong and blasphemous and furious and offensive as you can possibly be with your Canadian documentary film. Only then, perhaps, will the Canadian public at large finally begin to get off their culturally lazy asses and take notice!

We as Canadian documentary filmmakers must learn how to *despise the audience*. How dare I talk about our audience that way, our fans? What audience, what fans? We are as non-existent as the dodo bird. We must battle for the acknowledgement of our existence and for the existence of our films, and to do this successfully we must completely and totally despise our audience, or... better said... the audience that we're targeting. Why? Because we should not be making these documentaries to make people feel good. We should not be making them to win their approbation. We shouldn't give a damn whether they love us or hate us. What we as Canadian documentary filmmakers should want is for our work to go at them and *savage* them. We should want our work to come at them and *attack* them to the point that they leave it with the feeling that they have undoubtedly been through an experience. Forget all these pretty wide landscape shots, all these cute little musical montages. They do nothing challenging for the audience, nothing at all. All this is doing is providing a pleasing amount of eye candy for the duration of the film. They might remember some particularly well-composed images afterward, if you're lucky. But so what? What does that result in? Nothing of substance. We must learn how to cause our viewers to leave our films with a seething hatred of something or some kind of emotional equivalent, at the very least. We must learn to be

brazen and extreme. Only then will we begin to get the attention of many – if not most – Canadians with any kind of capacity for thought at all.

What are the aforementioned interesting elements in those three archetypal Canadian documentaries, then? *Project Grizzly* contains an interesting conflict between the real and the performed. On first glance, some might even think it a mockumentary judging by how much the lead subject is obviously performing. Is he merely playing himself, or a heightened version of himself solely for the film? Does this guy really shave with a giant hunting knife off camera, or is he playing it up for us to some extent? Is that perfectly dramatic story of his encounter with a bear somewhat colored? *Fully* colored? Perhaps it never happened at all. Special features on the DVD point out that indeed he went through certain lengths relating to how he is presented solely for the film project. He did not own that buckskin jacket before shooting began, the director admits. It becomes clear, then, that it was obtained very consciously with the thought of constructing a persona as completely and perhaps stereotypically as possible for a movie. Following models of film icons from the past, e.g. Clint Eastwood in *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly*, this documentary subject has very thoroughly constructed a quintessential “man’s man” image for himself on film.

Michael Rubbo’s *Waiting for Fidel* contains some interesting and unique moments found in few other documentary films. The heated arguments between Geoff Stirling and the director about exceeding the shooting ratio and whether or not a film can be considered worthwhile and valid without having made any money are both amusing and interesting. But ultimately, Rubbo proves himself to be too much of a fence-sitter. The world doesn’t need another documentary that doesn’t know where it stands,

especially when it's set in an environment as charged with differing opinions as Cuba during Castro's height. Rubbo takes neither a pro- nor anti-Castro stance. This is a sure indication of a weak and confused director who needs to grow a backbone. When people come to see a documentary dealing with such issues, they want a stance. They want somebody who's putting their foot down on something. They want to be persuaded one way or another. The passivity of *Waiting for Fidel* is overwhelming. All it does is *show* without ever *expressing*. How does the director feel about the people and the issues he's filming? Rubbo should have taken a page from Geoff Stirling's book by knowing exactly where he stands on issues. Stirling lays his foot down when it comes to any issue, as we see in the shooting ratio argument. He is not a weak fence-sitter. The world doesn't need anymore directors who are weak fence-sitters. The world might, however, benefit from another director who really knows where he stands on the issues he documents and doesn't back down from them under any circumstance.

And now we arrive at *Lonely Boy*. This Canadian documentary attempts to be more than a mere educational experience, as many of the National Film Board docs from the time were. *Lonely Boy* attempts to be a true work of art through striking image compositions and interesting musical choices. The majority of the film depicts the worship of a teen idol – in this case, Paul Anka – by obsessive teenage girl fans. Through interviews, we also see much of Anka's eye roll-inducing self-admiration. Via these interviews, I was able to develop a proper seething hatred of my own for Mr. Anka and his unabashed narcissism. I was happy to have been able to extract a response as strong as this from the viewing of the film, but I was nonetheless left with an uneasy question as to whether or not the filmmakers also felt the same way. Once again, what we have on

our hands here is another case of weak fence-sitting directors in Wolf Koenig and Roman Kroitor. Ideally, Canadian documentary directors when making such a film will be very clear on where they stand so as to make no mistake about it in the viewers' minds. Once again, I go back to my philosophy that we must be completely and totally forthright, offensive, blatant, rude, pull-no-punches and no-holds-barred when it comes to documentary filmmaking in Canada. The directors must make a decision. Do they love or hate Mr. Anka? There can be no in-between. They cannot both love and hate. There is no room for that kind of ambivalence in art making. If you're going to bother going through all the effort it takes to produce a work of art, then you better know exactly where you stand and it better not be on the fence. Be *ruthless* with your stance, and be crystal clear. Only *then* will people finally begin to take notice and all the blood, sweat, and tears you shed for your project will be made worthwhile. And your project will not sink into oblivion. It will be remembered through the years on an international scale.

Michael Moore's American documentary projects serve as a successful model to follow for your endeavors as Canadian documentary filmmakers of the future. Michael Moore is not a weak fence-sitter. He knows exactly where he stands on whatever subject he happens to be documenting at the moment, and he is not afraid to show this stance. Meekness is the primary pitfall of Canadian documentaries. We must no longer waste our time on being polite or worrying about offending somebody. We must learn to embrace and relish, even, the fact that we're going to anger a lot of people by taking a stance, no matter what stance one takes. It is inevitable. We must learn to love anger, and in turn we must learn to love provoking anger through our films. Only then will we be noticed on a scale of any importance.

All three films mentioned above have been inundated with reviews by the folks who've actually seen them relating to how it's a shame that they haven't been noticed on a larger, grander scale. It's a shame that more people do not know or talk about them. It's a shame that the directors haven't received more recognition. Well this is exactly the kind of oblivion that one falls into as a polite artist; an artist without a good set of balls. Michael Moore has a good set of balls. He is not at all afraid to say what he thinks, and to say it without even the slightest concern for political correctness. This is how documentary films get noticed: by being fearlessly provocative. And with this concept in mind... we as Canadian documentary filmmakers must start growing some balls, and the sooner we start the better.

And so now I shall address the relevance of the title by discussing the ideal method by which we as Canadian documentary filmmakers might really begin to shake things up: **interactivity**. Let's forget about the old ways for a minute now, and by old ways I mean the ways in which we've been making films for a hundred or so years now, give or take certain advances in the technology. Fundamentally, we've been sticking to the same old process of committing to film or video a series of images with sound and presenting that via some square-shaped projection device, whether that be an old-fashioned movie theatre, a website, a cellphone, or whatever other means. No matter how you break it, it's all very passive stuff. The viewer sits there near-motionlessly in the darkened theatre, or holds the cellphone up to their face until the product stops playing and the "experience" is over with. There is no real interaction. Let's make it a Canadian documentary that breaks new ground... a documentary experience that *really involves* the viewer from head to toe.

And I'm not speaking of those lame "interactive movie" ideas that have been attempted thus far either, which essentially amount to nothing more than a choose-your-own-adventure style book-movie where the viewer is invited to decide which scene the movie cuts into next. (Garrand 66) Big deal. The viewer is still sitting down near-motionlessly without any physical involvement built into the experience, aside from the occasional push of a button to indicate where they decide the film's next direction should be. I'm not impressed.

No, what I'm talking about is a fully interactive experience for the viewer. One in which advantage is taken of *all five* of the viewers' senses: taste, smell, touch, hearing, and sight. As we're awake, traditional cinema only manages to take advantage of a mere two of those senses. What about a documentary-like experience that manages to exploit the other three? Wouldn't that be revolutionary? It seems the logical next step. Perhaps, yes, cinema has stayed the way it has for so long because it works and people like it. That is granted. But another reason for it is that people are lazy and complacent and unwilling to experiment with new developments. Cinema could go so much farther than it has; it could work *even better* than it does. There will always be a place for traditional cinema. This new development will not make traditional cinema obsolete. But it will be a full evolution, and an important one at that.

What, exactly, am I speaking of then? Before getting into specifics, let's first do away with the notion of the camera. Take away the camera aspect of cinema, and look at what you have. Now take a look at murder mystery dinner theatre. Look at what those guys are doing. They are on to something there. They are involving their audience into the experience, albeit not as fully as they could be. But it is an interesting notion of the

audience directly participating in the event(s) at hand. Now let's transpose both of these ideas onto a Canadian documentary film concept. Let's suppose a Canadian director has been developing a documentary idea on street youth in Toronto. Well, forget about the camera. *Take your audience there.* As a director, you would have some general idea as to how things will play out. You could setup a scenario to some extent, as all documentary directors do. And then you could immerse your viewer(s) into that experience by directly involving them with the street youth. You as the director would be supervising the experience. Wouldn't it be interesting to setup a situation where viewers could spend a night with street youth? They will certainly come away from this experience more directly and viscerally affected than through the watching of any passive film.

Or to a less extreme extent, the camera could be retained. But thought needs to be put into other elements. You are certainly not conveying the full reality of a situation with such an integral sense as smell excluded from the experience. Filmmakers must figure out how to convey this sense to viewers. They were onto something with Smell-o-Vision back in the 60s, but they gave up on it after realizing it needed a lot more work. Well, let's start putting in the necessary effort to make it work! We need to stop with the lazy excuses. It's not only worthwhile, it's essential. As for taste, how about incorporating a device into the viewing experience that simulates for the viewer what an on-screen character is tasting at the time? Another essential element that – incredibly – isn't even being given any thought at the moment, it seems.

And here I'll pose a final challenge to Canadian documentary filmmakers of the future. I've proposed specific ideas on how smell and taste could be incorporated into the movie viewing experience. Touch seems like it might be the most difficult sense to

incorporate into a movie viewing experience. Figure out how this can be done, and do it in a Canadian documentary experience. And do it while being completely fearless with regards to the content of your documentary and who it might offend. This approach will most definitely result in a healthy amount of attention. I use the word experience now because we're not necessarily even talking about a film anymore. We must learn to strive for the invention of *a whole new thing*, and the mere brave attempt at such a goal can only bear positive results for the future of the medium as a whole.

WORK CITED

Garrand, Timothy. "Scripting narrative for interactive multimedia." *Journal of Film and Video* 49.1/2 (1997): 66-79.

Vanderburgh, Jennifer. "Ghostbusted! Popular Perceptions of English-Canadian Cinema." *Canadian Journal of Film Studies* 12.2 (2003): 81-98.

Lonely Boy. Dirs. Wolf Koenig and Roman Kroitor. With Paul Anka. National Film Board of Canada, 1962.

Project Grizzly. Dir. Peter Lynch. With Troy Hurtubise. National Film Board of Canada and Shoreline Entertainment, 1996.

Waiting for Fidel. Dir. Michael Rubbo. With Joey Smallwood and Geoff Stirling. National Film Board of Canada, 1974.