

Docs Without Borders

A new breed of filmmakers launches a revolution in reportage

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LAST YEAR, the day the U.S. military began to bomb Baghdad, Avi Lewis and Naomi Klein were on the roof of an occupied factory in Buenos Aires, filming workers engaged in target practice with homemade slingshots. The workers had already wielded these primitive weapons to repel attacks by police, and had scavenged their ammunition from the factory floor -- ceramic balls used to grind clay in the production of tiles. Standing on that rooftop, "I had two overwhelming emotions," recalls Klein, linking Iraq and Argentina to a globalized matrix of injustice. "One was a feeling of total irrelevance -- we're throwing slingshots and America is dropping cluster bombs. But part of me felt there was nowhere else to be."

As it turned out, Klein and Lewis were in the right place at the right time. They'd plunked themselves in Argentina's capital as the country was being rocked by a popular groundswell of some 200 factory occupations. And they had their cameras rolling as a group of laid-off employees took over a shuttered auto parts plant in the hope of resuming production under worker control. The filmmakers' sympathies were clear; they were rooting for the workers. But as they followed the story, they had no idea where it was going, or how it would end. The result is a revealing documentary called *The Take*, which plays like a time-lapse portrait of history-in-the-making. One of 106 films at Toronto's 11th annual Hot Docs festival (April 23-May 2), it's just one example of a new breed of non-fiction that's rejuvenating the art of point-of-view journalism.

In the corporate mass media, sound bites are shrinking, news is devolving into infotainment, television is re-engineering "reality" as a Darwinian talent show, and investigative reporting is being phased out as unsexy and too expensive. But an intrepid generation of documentary filmmakers is taking up the slack and finding an audience. Not since the advent of the "New Journalism" in the 1960s has there been such a revolution in reportage. Michael Moore led the charge with a volley of guerrilla documentaries -- *Roger & Me*, *The Big One* and *Bowling for*

Columbine -- flaming arrows that lit up the box office as they ignited controversy. But Moore's incendiary style is only one approach. The recent runaway success of Canada's *The Corporation*, a mild-mannered diagnosis of capitalist morality, shows that there's a new public appetite for political documentaries.

Just as the Internet has democratized information, the availability of low-cost, digital video cameras has spawned a boom in do-it-yourself filmmaking. Klein, author of the best-selling book *No Logo*, and Lewis, former host of CBC Newsworld's *counterSpin*, are the It Couple of the anti-globalization movement. They spent two years making *The Take* with a largely inexperienced crew of activists. He directed; she wrote the script. "We had no idea what it meant to make a film," says Lewis. "We got way over our heads and had to learn to be filmmakers to dig our way out. We didn't set out to make a film about occupied factories. But Argentina felt like a laboratory. We knew it was a good place to have a couple of cameras."

Another emerging talent at Hot Docs, documentary daredevil Morgan Spurlock, turned his own body into a laboratory. This affable American, who's like a kinder, gentler (and thinner) Michael Moore, trains the camera on himself in *Super Size Me*, an alarming experiment in which he lives on an all-McDonald's diet for an entire month.

Now North America's leading documentary forum, Hot Docs showcased some exemplary pieces of journalism. They ranged from *The Origins of AIDS*, a shocking expedition into a scientific heart of darkness, to *Searching for the Wrong-Eyed Jesus*, a hallucinatory trip into the juke joints and hellfire churches of white America's Deep South. Digital video is a world traveller with a sleek sense of subversion, a lens that can slip across borders and peer over the geopolitical brink. In *Tibet: What Remains of Us*, it captures clandestine gatherings of Tibetans reacting to smuggled footage of the Dalai Lama; in *Control Room*, it offers a backstage view of Arab journalists at the al-Jazeera news channel jostling with U.S. military PR flacks in Iraq during the siege of Baghdad.

The new documentaries have a you-are-there immediacy, delivering the sense of unfiltered experience promised by reality TV. But one of the most powerful entries in Hot Docs was in a more traditional vein. *The Origins of AIDS* assembles a motherlode of scrupulous research into an astonishing detective story. This Canada-France co-production re-examines the possibility that the AIDS epidemic was triggered by U.S. scientists who treated close to a million Africans with an experimental polio vaccine during the 1950s. Picking up the thread from author Edward Hooper (*The River: A Journey to the*

Source of HIV and AIDS), it shows how the scientific community closed ranks against him in an apparent cover-up. While scientists Hilary Koprowski and Paul Osterrieth deny manufacturing the vaccine in the former Belgian Congo with minced chimpanzee kidneys, the filmmakers track down lab workers who contradict them with eyewitness testimony. The film concedes there's no absolute proof the vaccine caused AIDS. But its even-handed tone only makes the circumstantial evidence that much more persuasive.

Not all docs are of such earth-shattering import. Ruth Leitman's *Lipstick & Dynamite, Piss & Vinegar: The First Ladies of Wrestling* offers a fascinating portrait of the tough broads who trailblazed "girl wrestling" during the '40s and '50s, in a world of raw showbiz where one promoter saw his adopted teenage daughter die in the ring. The film cuts between archival footage and fresh interviews with these dames -- pre-silicone pioneers who were treated like freaks but had to dress like ladies.

Then there's *Metallica: Some Kind of Monster*, about a contemporary carnival act. In this 140-minute epic, filmmakers Bruce Sinofsky and Joe Berlinger (*Brother's Keeper*) spend two years with the world's heaviest metal band while it undergoes group therapy and struggles to record its first album in six years. As the lead singer vanishes into rehab and the drummer declares war on Napster, the film has some juicy moments, but it eventually turns into an unintentional *Spinal Tap*. If these guys were slightly smarter, the movie might be a lot shorter.

Searching for the Wrong-Eyed Jesus offers a more intriguing odyssey to the musical extremities of America. Director Andrew Douglas and musician Jim White drive a beat-up Chevy Impala through the South with a concrete statue of Jesus sticking out of the trunk. They cruise a hard-luck underworld where the secular and spiritual are joined at the hip -- a trailer park, a truck stop, a coal mine, a prison, a Pentecostal church. With dramatic musical interludes by the likes of David Johansen and banjo veteran Lee Sexton, the film dissolves the borders between story and song, poetry and anthropology, in an atmospheric bayou of pure evocation. Douglas and White have no axe to grind, but in tracing white America's southern-fried fundamentalist roots, they go a long way toward explaining a culture that mystifies much of the world.

By contrast, *Tibet: What Remains of Us* delivers an unequivocal message, one in which religion and politics are fused in a vision of radiant tragedy. Kalsang Dolma, a young Tibetan woman from Montreal, smuggles a digital video player into Tibet with a five-minute message from the country's leader-in-exile, the Dalai Lama -- his first "appearance" in his homeland since going into exile in 1959. She shows it to rapt audiences huddled in tents,

backrooms and monasteries while a mini DV camera -- also smuggled in -- records their hushed, tearful reactions. This National Film Board production, from Montreal directors François Prévost and Hugo Latulippe, is an extraordinary document. There's a heartbreaking beauty to the images -- the broad, handsome faces of Tibetans mesmerized by a tiny screen, tableaux of peasants and monks in sunset fabrics, rainbow lines of prayer flags snapping in a hard blue Himalayan wind.

But Dolma, an unsentimental narrator who doesn't share the Dalai Lama's optimism, threads the film with a brutal sense of history. Visiting UN headquarters, she surveys vast banks of archives documenting a half century of oppression and genocide in Tibet -- the intimate details of her nation's imminent extinction carefully preserved at 35-per-cent humidity. "For China, Tibet has become a gold mine and a garbage dump," she declares, noting that a relentless campaign of Chinese settlement has made Tibet's indigenous people a minority in their own country. In one telling moment, after marvelling at the Dalai Lama's beatific image on the Sony DVD player, a Tibetan peasant says, "This machine is truly incredible." And the irony of a people's fate comes into cruel focus, as the medium trumps the message and technology appears to offer the last word in transcendence.

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