

Docs reconfigured: Three filmmakers throw away the genre

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Last Updated: October 11, 2009 3:55PM UAE / October 11, 2009 11:55AM GMT

According to Random House, a documentary is “based on or re-creating an actual event, era, life story, etc., that purports to be factually accurate and contains no fictional elements”.

If that is what you are looking for at this year's MEIFF, you'll be hard-pressed to find it. Among the 15 selections in the festival's documentary section are a handful of traditional documentaries that fit Random House's definition. Far more intriguing, however, are the works that eschew categorization, mixing fact with fiction, archival footage with scripted scenes and a re-imagining of historical events, all in the quest for truth.

Documentary film has woven its way in and out of dictionary definitions ever since the first screening of a film – a locomotive barreling in the direction of the camera – sent audience members diving under their seats. Considered by many to be the father of documentary filmmaking, Robert Flaherty will forever be remembered for “Nanook of the North”, an ethnography of northern Alaska's dwindling Eskimo population. Nanook fished. Nanook hunted. Nanook built an igloo. And to the dismay of many a film student who belatedly learned the truth, Nanook did much of it just for the camera.

Perhaps the most famous staged scene in a documentary came in Luis Bunuel's *Las Hurdes (Land Without Bread)* when Bunuel shoved a donkey off a cliff to illustrate the narrator's statement that the animals frequently fell off a treacherously narrow path that villagers were forced to navigate.

The documentary vanguard eventually turned to cinema verite, a style in which the camera is considered a passive observer of unfolding events. The Niger-based Frenchman Jean Rouch became known for this school of filmmaking but even he was aware that the camera and simply recording action on film inevitably influenced the action itself. He began to break the rules of filmmaking, consciously inserting jump cuts and screening one film for its Nigerien participants in the bush and then using their off-the-cuff commentary as the film's soundtrack.

Stretching from the structuralist cinematic poetry of Stan Brakhage to mockumentaries such as *This is Spinal Tap* and *Best in Show*, documentaries no longer fit any definition. Instead, the term has come to be such an ingrained part of our vocabulary that it is expected to qualify as a category – a category which now has no limits.

With that in mind, the following three filmmakers whose films appear in MEIFF's documentary section could be dubbed documentarists. Or they could be called just filmmakers. That, in the end, is what all three probably prefer.

Johan Grimont's *Double Take*, Ghassan Salhab's *1958* and Kamal Aljafari's *Port of Memory* are not popcorn and Coke kind of movies. Nevertheless, you are likely to find yourself so deep in these films that you've forgotten all about the refreshment stand. And that's what film is all about -- no matter what you call it.

Ghassan Salhab, Beirut

1958 (2009)

It was over a table full of mezes in Beirut last spring when Ghassan Salhab first mentioned to me his film, 1958, a title of particular importance to him. It was the year of his birth to Lebanese parents who had emigrated to Dakar, Senegal, but it was also the year that civil war first broke out in Lebanon. He described the project as "kind of autobiographical with historical events mixed in" and left it at that.

Although slated in MEIFF's documentary section, Ghassan now calls it an "essay". The mixture of still photography, news footage, archival film and audio and interviews with his mother and a few others is a visual and aural collage, a cinematic poem. Quite different from his best-known work, *Terra Incognita* (2002), which screened in the prestigious "Critics' Week" sidebar at the 2002 Cannes Film Festival, it is also similar in that any traditional narrative is absent.

"I am a filmmaker, not a storyteller," Ghassan said by phone recently as he was preparing to travel to Abu Dhabi for MEIFF. "1958 is a kind of poetic approach about the disenchantment of my own birth, of my own mother, of my own country...It is not informational. It is not meant to make people understand but to make them feel...I am not presenting facts, per se. Cinema is not about presenting facts; it is about trying to understand the world through the presentation of images." From that perspective, 1958 is both a highly personal film – indeed, given its genesis, how could it not be? – and one which reaches far beyond the personal. The filmmaker has chosen the images to include in the film but he also is forced to ponder them along with the viewer. "We are looking at images of 1958," he said. "We are not looking at 1958...Nor can I speak about 1958 – because, after all, I don't remember it – so I do it through my mother."

Snippets of an interview the filmmaker conducted with his mother appear periodically throughout the film, her image something of a visual refrain that assumes various levels of significance.

"This is not a family movie," Salhab told me. "My mother is important, of course, because she put me in this world...But it's pure coincidence that she was very nationalistic, pro-Nasser. If she had not been busy with me, I am sure she would have been on the streets with the others...If she were not involved [emotionally and politically], I would not have used her in the film. I used her as a woman, as an Arab woman and then as my mother."

Is 1958 a documentary?

"I don't think in those kinds of categories," he responded. "I don't start out making a film and think it is a 'documentary' or a 'fictional film' or anything like that. I am just making a film."

Kamal Aljafari, Palestine

Port of Memory (2009)

“Since the 60s, Israeli and American films have been made in Jaffa but in Israeli films there are no Palestinians there and the Americans have used it to double as another location,” Kamal Aljafari says. “[In Port of Memory], I am showing the people that were never shown. As a Palestinian artist, I need to document these people's lives. Their stories are important to tell. I tried to narrate my story within these parameters.”

The stories the German-educated filmmaker has chosen to narrate, however, are not the usual stuff of “the movies”.

“I'm interested in daily life where nothing is really happening,” Aljafari explained over the phone from Cambridge, Massachusetts where he currently has a one-year fellowship at the Radcliffe Institute at Harvard University.

Given the events in Palestine and the usurping of its images by international news organizations since the end of the Second World War, it is little wonder that a Palestinian filmmaker would focus his energy on constructing an authentic identity away from the sensationalist influences of news shows and movie producers.

“I'm fascinated by the potential of real people, not actors, on film. Their expressions and their movement are so real...In one scene, my aunt makes a bed and I can assure you that she makes that bed better than even the best Hollywood actress could do it,” he concluded with a laugh.

Exploring the uneventful as a conduit for the truth is hardly a radical notion even in the world of film. But it is not what producers are expecting from a Palestinian filmmaker. And, as such, it was difficult to raise funds for the film even with its extremely limited budget.

Enter MEIFF.

Aljafari had already distinguished himself as a filmmaker while a student at Cologne's Academy of Media Arts, his short “Visit Iraq” (2003) receiving a nomination for a German Short Film Award. For Port of Memory, he garnered the support of the Sundance Institute and when MEIFF learned of Port of Memory, they supplied finishing funds in return for a premiere at this year's festival.

He calls Port of Memory a cross between visual art and cinema. “It involves issues I want to comment on. As a filmmaker, I wouldn't define it as documentary or fiction. When I work on a film I never define the nature of the genre.”

Johan Grimonprez, Belgium

Double Take (2009)

When I first met Johan Grimonprez at a cafe in Brooklyn four years ago, he made it clear that as far as he was concerned much of what takes place in front of a camera has been planned or at least contrived, the contrivance becoming even more exaggerated when the footage is presented to the public. We were discussing his film *Dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y*, a fascinating history of the symbiotic relationship between skyjackings and television. One, Grimonprez deftly illustrates, could not have acquired such popularity without the other. The other day I called Johan on his mobile, reaching him on a Greek island, where he had retired to write for a few days, to talk about *Double Take*, his latest film, which is screening at MEIFF. As is *Dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y*, *Double Take* is comprised largely of archival footage but it is interwoven with a fictional storyline in which Alfred Hitchcock is portrayed as an unwilling pawn in the Cold War. Hitchcock himself, in the world of Grimonprez, is also something of a subversive as illustrated by his direct acknowledgement of the commercials that necessarily interrupted the stories presented on his TV show, *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*. Grimonprez, after all, considers TV content as a draw for people to watch commercials rather than commercials being a simple funding mechanism.

Double Take presents a number of issues that fascinate Grimonprez: the Cold War, the doppelganger, Alfred Hitchcock and television. Born in 1962, the filmmaker easily remembers the Cold War, one big McGuffin during which the US and USSR exploited media, especially TV, to scare the hell out of all of us; Alfred Hitchcock: "I remember a book that my father had when I was a kid that was all about Hitchcock and full of pictures"; The double: "My father actually looked a lot like Hitchcock."; and television, a wondrous device capable so much mischief.

"The casting alone became a project," Grimonprez said, referring to his shorter video, *Looking for Alfred*, which grew from auditions attended by Hitchcock doubles, ambitious impersonators that included not only rotund Englishmen but Asians and women, as well.

"The archival material took up a big chunk of the budget," he recalled. "I was an artist in residence at the Armand Hammer Museum, which helped set up a relationship with the UCLA (University of California at Los Angeles) Archives. Then the film academy made a connection to the Hitchcock Trust, which enabled access to archival material for very cheap."

When I asked Johan what he thought about *Double Take* being programmed in MEIFF's documentary section, he was a bit puzzled. "Some festivals have programmed it as a fiction film, others as a documentary," he said. "It's a weird hybrid. But the idea is to get the story across. The medium is not important."