

***This Much is True: 14 Directors on Documentary Filmmaking***

Published by Bloomsbury 2013

By James Quinn

By Cynthia Close - Published in *Documentary* magazine in 2013

Reading James Quinn's new book of interviews with fourteen documentary filmmakers was a bit like my encounter with The British (music) Invasion of the 1960's when I first heard The Beatles in my college dorm room. While the forward pays a brief homage to Albert Maysles, the remainder of the book has a distinctive U.K. slant with a majority of the directors having won BAFTA (British Academy of Film and Television Arts) awards as opposed to Oscars or Emmy's. Knowing that James Quinn, himself a documentary filmmaker, was also a former head of factual entertainment at October Films, a leading British independent film and television production company based in London, helps to explain the book's focus, which is not a bad thing.

I confess that I was unfamiliar with the work of several of the directors covered in these in-depth, yet informal interviews, which made the book that much more valuable to me as I had something to learn, even though I'm no longer actively involved in film production. Before beginning his television career, Quinn was in academia, having earned a PhD in philosophy, which perhaps explains his skill in conducting revealing, intelligent interviews with his colleagues as subjects. Each interview addresses an aspect of the documentary process that that director is associated with and includes specific references to particular films.

Geoffrey Smith, known primarily for his award winning 2007 film set in the Ukraine, *The English Surgeon*, is the first interviewee. That film and his more recent project, *Presumed Guilty* (2010) the story of Antonio Zúniga who was wrongfully imprisoned for twenty years in Mexico City have a distinctive sense of time and place which is partly explained by Smith's interest in places that are "gritty" where people have to face hardships and challenges. He says that "its only through conflict and drama that we can learn about the best and the worst of humanity... The third world, second world – they're full of conflict and drama." Smith quotes Orson Welles who said, "After eight hundred years of civilization, Switzerland has only produced chocolate and the cuckoo clock." Implying that Switzerland does not possess the grit in its society that would make for interesting subject matter for one of his documentaries. Having often visited Switzerland, I would have to agree.

The second director covered in the book is Paul Watson who Quinn indicates is known for his "brutal honesty". Watson suggests "unflinching" might be preferable. He's best known for his 1974 documentary series *The Family*, a BBC verité series whose subjects were a working class family in the U.K.. Quinn states the series is credited with "inventing 'the fly on the wall' genre" and also, in part, Watson is often "identified as the progenitor of 'reality TV' ". This raised some red flags. I was only vaguely aware of the BBC version of *The Family* and as interesting as it was it really could not compare with the drama and originality inherent in the U.S. based documentary series, *An American*

*Family*, also known as *The Louds*, shot in 1971 and aired on PBS nationally in early 1973. Watson and the BBC followed (dare I say “copied”?) this earlier model and really can’t take the credit. Watson’s version of *The Family* was pioneering and influential for the U.K. and he has continued to make award-winning documentaries for television, for the past forty years.

Henry Singer was one of those directors whose work I had not seen. While his subjects seem to have a British slant, he was best known for the 2006 film *The Falling Man*, a feature length documentary that sets out to determine the identity of a man who was photographed as he fell or jumped from the World Trade Center on 9/11. In spite of the fact that the film was seen in over fifty countries, and was nominated for an international Emmy and BAFTA it was very difficult to locate a DVD copy. It was never widely distributed in the U.S., which was disappointing. I was very impressed with Singer’s patient journalistic approach that rang true throughout his interview.

Nick Bromfield began shooting classic, Frederick Wiseman style vérité films when in 1988 he inserted himself in front of the camera during the making of *Driving Me Crazy*. He has followed this freewheeling, responsive style of filmmaking ever since and points to the work of James Marsh (*Man on Wire*), another subject in the book, whose work is quite constructed and dependent on recreations of past events, as the antithesis of his own approach. Quinn confronts Bromfield with the issue of his “persona” on camera. He confesses that sometimes “you buffoon it up a bit” but essentially you just are who you are, “it’s not like you’re being Borat and then you’re being Bruno”.

I had the good fortune of meeting Molly Dineen at HOTDOCS one year and was impressed by her openness and sensibility. She was there to attend the screening of her film *The Lie of the Land* (2007) about the ban on hunting with dogs in the English countryside. It seemed everyone was familiar with her work but me and I set out to explore her classic cinema vérité style films. Again, no easy task outside of catching screenings at international film festivals, as she does not have wide distribution in the U.S. She is best known for her “intimate and revealing portraits of British institutions threatened by change”. As she was one of only three woman directors in the book, I had hoped that her films would be more widely accessible. Unfortunately, that was not the case.

Brian Hill, another of “Britain’s most respected documentary filmmakers” has made his skill as an interviewer the focus of his testimony based films. This can be one of the more difficult challenges for any doc maker and Hill manages to give us some important insights to his process of getting to know his subjects.

Kim Longinotto, while a British based documentary maker, has built an international reputation as a voice for woman in this still male dominated world of documentary film. She has won many accolades including the World Cinema Grand Jury Prize at the Sundance Film Festival. Thanks to Women Make Movies, her US distributor, all her films are accessible, and have garnered a wide audience. Unfortunately for Louise Osmond, the only other woman in this collection, her work is more difficult to come by

on this side of the Atlantic. However, many of us may remember the Independent Lens/PBS Broadcast in 2007 of *Deep Water* her extraordinary story of an amateur sailor, Donald Crowhurst, who risks all in an around-the-world yacht race. Her films are built around powerful emotions that help propel you through the story.

**Making Films Funny** is the title of the chapter dedicated to Morgan Spurlock, whose 2004 mega hit, *Super Size Me* was the twelfth highest-grossing documentary of all time and won the Grand Jury Prize when it premiered at Sundance. It is fitting that an American filmmaker tackle the health problems foisted on the world by another American institution, McDonald's fast food restaurants. Spurlock has made a film career combining serious journalism with a self-assured dash of humor, which helps audiences across cultures to understand the issues he addresses.

Julien Temple made his mark by focusing on music. He was involved with the punk movement of the 1970's which led him to a long term engagement with The Sex Pistols, that produced some amazing documentaries including *The Great Rock n' Roll Swindle* (1979) the story of the band from the perspective of their manager, Malcolm McLaren, up to *The Filth and the Fury* (2000) told from the perspective of the last surviving band members.

While I haven't mentioned all fourteen directors interviewed in the book, I had to include Andrew Jarecki, who in the final chapter deals with the editing concerns he had when working on his astounding 2003 feature documentary, *Capturing the Friedmans*. Sexual abuse inside families is a most difficult subject, but more than that this film is about "the elusiveness of facts, and the impossibility (in some cases) of ever really knowing the truth."

In spite of all the challenges that confronted the directors featured in this book, they all seem to agree on the importance of love, respect, emotional truth between director and subject and director and audience, but beyond all else, it's perseverance that counts.

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