The Left Atrium

Agit-doc

The Fog of War
Directed by Errol Morris
Columbia TriStar, 2003, 106 min
The Corporation
Directed by Mark Achbar and Jennifer Abbott
Big Picture Media Corporation, 2004, 145 min
Fahrenheit 9/11
Written, produced and directed by Michael Moore
Dog Eat Dog Films / Lions Gate Films, 2004, 116 min

Within a short period the cinema-going public has been treated to a group of well-crafted "blockbuster documentaries," and, for a change, the box office receipts have garnered substantial revenue for the directors' efforts. Documentaries are now fashionable fare for the movie-going public. What are the reasons?

Documentaries have traditionally sought to teach and inform, rather than entertain or tell a story. Most certainly, documentarians have slanted their subject matter to present their point of view in a favourable light, but, generally speaking, documentaries are low-brow cultural productions that appeal to reason and balance as they reflect on local colour and issues. The documentaries reviewed here aim to educate at some level, but they are also high-gloss productions with catchy entertainment value. In all three, powerful soundtracks create mood and slick camera work slows down, speeds up or otherwise distorts the film, flooding the viewer's sensorium and appealing to a more primitive, nonverbal level.

Errol Morris (*Thin Blue Line*, *Fast, Cheap and Out of Control*) realizes another tour de force in *The Fog of War*, in which he interviews the controversial former US secretary of defense during the Cold War and Vietnam War, Robert McNamara. At 85, McNamara is in full grasp of his considerable intellectual and analytical powers as he recalls how, during his tenure under JFK and LBJ, the planet came close to nuclear annihilation not once (during the Cuban Missile Crisis) but three times. His views, detailed as 11 lessons learned, show how irrationality, fear, mutual misunderstanding and empire-building escalated the Cold War. After his resignation (or firing) as secretary of state, McNamara served as head of the World Bank for 13 years, which afforded him the opportunity to meet many of his former foes, including Fidel Castro and the former Vietnamese ambassador to the United States. It was through these meetings that McNamara finally understood how one-sided his position had been — a realization inconceivable to current White House leaders.

Black-and-white archival footage (entire Japanese cities being firebombed at the end of World War II, US bombers spraying Agent Orange on Vietnamese forests) is slowed down or speeded up to emphasize the crisis atmosphere McNamara and the White House staff faced every day. Snippets of crucial tape-recorded conversations between McNamara and presidents Kennedy and Johnson give us a frightening insider's look at how world catastrophes were averted by brinksmanship and, according to McNamara, "pure luck." The interviews are edited in such a way that McNamara comes across as a man who did the best he could under the circumstances given to him, but the filmmaker leaves the final judgement up to the viewer. The visuals are accompanied by an excellent but ominous soundtrack composed by the iconic Philip Glass.

Mark Achbar (codirector of *Manufacturing Consent*) and Jennifer Abbott are the directors of *The Corporation*, a film that documents the rise to hegemony of the dominant institution of the twentieth century. Based on the book by David Bakan, the film gives the corporation, an entity with the same legal definition as a person, a psychiatric assessment and identifies it as having a psychopathic personality disorder. The corporation as a legal person has self-interest only as its guiding principle. *The Corporation* makes clear that everyone and everything is a target to be exploited for profit (they show how an ad agency targets children, encouraging them to pester their parents more effectively to buy a certain product). Perhaps the most poignant section concerns two Fox Television journalists

Michael Moore in action: *Fahrenheit 9/11*

who did a whistle-blowing investigation on the use of synthetic bovine growth hormone and its nasty complications for cows and were fired (and sued) by their employer, who was receiving big advertising dollars from the agro-giant Monsanto, maker of synthetic BGH. The environment (water supplies in Bolivia), childhood and even disasters (gold prices rose after the Twin Tower attacks) are all fair game in the race for profits in the amoral world of the corporation. At the end of the film one is left with two feelings: "Wow — are we ever being manipulated and we should do something about it" and "It's depressing to think

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about how to change the absolute power of corporate America."

Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11* brings together the themes of war, corporate power and big government. Moore has established his reputation as a defender of the underdog (*Roger and Me*) and critic of the establishment (*Bowling for Columbine*). The focus of his latest movie is by now familiar to most: *Fahrenheit 9/11* sets out to show how George Bush Jr. and the neocons stole the presidential election and then, after 9/11, invented a pretext to go after Saddam Hussein rather than pursue the Saudis, including the Bin Laden family, who had cozy ties with George Bush Sr. Criticism of the film has been pouring in from all quarters (including the left-leaning *New Yorker*), but Moore has managed to tap into an undercurrent of mistrust among the American public. Much of the information in the film is not new, but it is delivered in a palatable (and entertaining) way to appeal to mainstream viewers. Moore uses his trademark "camera in your face" technique to embarrass politicians (much like our beloved "This Hour has 22 Minutes"), a strategy that has become a bit tiresome.

When documentaries become entertainment designed to reach the largest audience possible, we must distinguish among the filmmaker's conflicting intentions to entertain, educate and persuade. That is to say, do documentaries still contain enough critical content to foster debate, reflection and behavioural change? In post-revolutionary Russia, Lenin invented the department of Agitprop (*agitátsiya propagánda*) to inculcate the values of the revolution in the working class, and contemporary media were used intensively to promote these values. In this age of (dis)information, will the blockbuster documentary replace other, more pedestrian and less splashy and sensationalist film productions? Will we become dependent on this form of "poli-tainment" rather than seeking out other sources of information to inform our opinions? While our neighbours to the south continue in their obsession with the imperial themes of war, deceit and abuse of power, we must not forget other issues — world poverty, AIDS, the environment — that are less sensational but no less important.

Normand Carrey
Psychiatrist
Halifax, NS

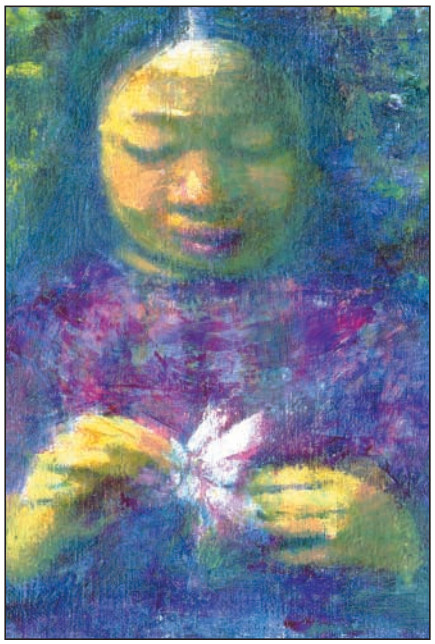
Room for a view

Where orchids bloom: medicine on the border

The patient is a 27-year-old man. He is the last patient of a long day here on the Thai–Burmese border in a large medical clinic founded by Karen refugees of the Burmese civil war — one of the longest-running civil wars in the world. He is emaciated, quiet and somewhat nervous-looking; I can understand him only through my favourite medic. A good friend and a bright light, Wei Lai has worked in this clinic for many years and is practised in the art of history-taking and counselling. We talk with this young man, taking a basic history, and do a general physical exam, which reveals little except for his wasted state. We know only that he does not have the productive cough of the tubercular patient. Nor does he suffer from lack of food, but rather from a prolonged low-grade fever with intermittent diarrhea. For six months.

He is lying on his back on the wooden examining table as the medic begins her fact-finding. I sit by and watch as Wei Lai speaks to him in Karen. I watch the interaction between the two — her long and gentle discourse broken by reluctant nods and short answers of the patient. I watch his Adam's apple rise and fall as he swallows hard, staring at the ceiling as he listens. His eyes speak of the fear and knowledge that all is not well. Does he know that he has waited too long to come, I wonder? Does he know that it might have made little difference anyway? He turns his head to answer our questions, swallows, and goes back to examining the ceiling.

Now and again the world grows heavy on the Thai–Burmese border. This is a place of joy and of sorrow; a place of undeniable hardship. A place where some demonstrate the very best of human nature — a solidarity and caring that is seldom to be found, a *joie de vivre* in spite of want and separation from loved ones — but also a place where poverty, lack of education, insecurity, exploitation and loss are rampant. Burma's health care system was ranked 190th out of 191 by the WHO in the year 2000. The Burmese citizens, whether members of minority groups or ethnic Burmans, come across the



Fred Sebastian

border to escape political oppression and imprisonment, poverty and food shortages, violence between the military dictatorship and armed ethnic groups and the harsh treatment of the Tatmadaw, the militia who relocate

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