

Beyond Likes and Dislikes, Documentary Films as Tools for Critical Reflection: Thoughts Prompted by the 15th Annual Chagrin Documentary Film Festival

In a world saturated with information, both genuine and fabricated, our engagement with documentary films offers more than mere entertainment; it provides a rare opportunity for sense-making, emotional growth, and the development of critical thinking. To truly benefit from these experiences, we must move beyond our temptation to pick favorites or reduce films to superficial “likes” or “dislikes.” Instead, we should allow films to provoke us, unsettle us, and even challenge our understanding of reality. This deeper engagement helps us resist the pull of misinformation, disinformation, and overly commercialized “sponsored truths” that bombard us daily.

Documentary films often explore complex subjects that defy easy categorization. For instance, "Spyral" invites viewers to question the boundaries of privacy and security in a digital age. By examining the ethical concerns surrounding surveillance, the film asks us not just to accept its perspective but to critically assess how technology shapes our freedoms. This kind of engagement moves us beyond passive consumption, encouraging us to ask whether the truths presented in the film are complete, partial, or distorted. Similarly, "Porcelain War" juxtaposes the delicate art of porcelain-making against the harsh backdrop of war, making us reflect on how art can serve as both a form of defiance and a medium for cultural preservation amid chaos. Here, the artistic choices are not merely decorative; they force us to grapple with the contradictions of beauty and brutality, compelling us to ask deeper questions about what we value during times of conflict.

We live in a time when truth is not only disputed but often commodified. Political rhetoric, conspiracy theories, and sensational media narratives continuously shape public perception, creating a landscape where information is weaponized and truth is malleable. Documentaries such as "Don't Look Away" and "To the Bottom and Back" expose social injustices, human rights abuses, and the struggles of addiction in ways that resist the oversimplified narratives often presented by mainstream media. These films do not merely offer solutions; they present raw realities that require us to wrestle with our moral values, question the systems that perpetuate suffering, and consider our responsibilities as citizens. It is crucial that we approach these films not with blind acceptance, but with a willingness to confront the uncomfortable truths they reveal.

As viewers, we must cultivate a genuine appreciation for the artistic vision and technical talent behind these films. From the compelling storytelling in "Blink," which captures the fleeting beauty of everyday moments for a family facing the loss of sight, to the immersive sound design in "Canyon Chorus," where nature's subtle acoustics create a deep sensory experience, documentary films are crafted to engage us on multiple levels. They entertain, educate, and inspire, but they also disturb and console. This spectrum of emotional and intellectual engagement reflects the films' power to stimulate empathy and challenge our perspectives. It is not enough to consume films passively; we must allow them to get inside us, to change how we think and feel, and to foster a more nuanced understanding of the world.

"Letters from a Battlefield," directed by Jude Pago, tells the powerful story of Jacqueline Lundquist's journey to understand her late father, Donald C. Lundquist, who served in Vietnam in 1967-68. Through hundreds of letters and hours of audio tapes sent to his family during the war, Jacqueline

retraces her father's footsteps and uncovers a connection with a North Vietnamese soldier who had fought on the opposite side. The film explores the contrasting yet deeply similar experiences of two families affected by the war, offering a poignant look at the human impact of conflict across borders. There is a reality beyond the side we are on in war and life, reminding us that shared human experiences often transcend the boundaries imposed by conflict.

In a society where we are constantly nudged, kicked, and dragged to view the world in a particular way, documentary films offer a reprieve from the "canned points of view" that dominate our screens. Films like "The Body Politic" and "The Job of Song" use art and music not just as entertainment, but as forms of resistance and social commentary. They compel us to see beyond the surface, encouraging us to recognize art as a catalyst for change and a vehicle for truth. When we engage with these films, we are not forced to agree with the perspectives presented; rather, we are invited to respect the filmmakers' right to speak, even if what they show us is unsettling or contrary to our beliefs.

The challenge lies in resisting the urge to seek simplified narratives that conform to our existing worldview. Films such as "The Lost Sparrows of Roodepoort" and "The Red-Bellied Lemur on the Verge" do not just advocate for conservation; they expose the complex interplay between urbanization, wildlife preservation, and human responsibility. These films encourage us to question how our everyday choices impact ecosystems and to recognize that the solutions are not straightforward. By engaging with these films, we learn to appreciate the multifaceted nature of reality and to reject the oversimplification of complex issues.

In navigating the moral campaigns, misinformation, and ideological conflicts that confront us, documentary films can serve as a litmus test for our understanding of reality. They offer us a means to explore ethical questions, challenge our conditioned responses, and cultivate a more civil and compassionate approach to each other's shortcomings. When we step back to see for ourselves, allowing films to challenge our assumptions and push us beyond our comfort zones, we develop the resilience and courage necessary to live in a world rife with uncertainty.

Ultimately, documentary films do not demand our agreement; they demand our engagement. They ask us to step outside our conditioned views, confront difficult questions, and grapple with life's complexities without retreating into oversimplified realities. The more we allow films to provoke thought and stimulate growth, the more we are prepared to navigate the hurricane-strength forces of misinformation, political rhetoric, and social division. In this way, documentary films become not just a mirror reflecting society, but a lens that helps us see the world more clearly, compelling us to grow in empathy, emotional intelligence, and critical thinking.

In documentary film, the line between truth-seeking and artistic license is fine and often contested. Truth-seeking as a guiding principle prioritizes presenting facts and evidence to inform or expose, aiming for an accurate portrayal of reality. However, the filmmaker's choices in framing, editing, and storytelling inevitably shape how the truth is conveyed, introducing elements of interpretation. Here, artistic license plays a role, allowing filmmakers to use creative techniques to emphasize certain themes, evoke emotions, or communicate a broader message. While these choices can deepen the film's impact and make complex issues more accessible, they can also blur the boundaries between objective reality and subjective interpretation. This delicate balance challenges documentary filmmakers to

navigate ethical considerations, ensuring that their pursuit of a compelling narrative does not compromise the authenticity of the truth they seek to present.

The insights gained from engaging deeply with documentary films can guide us in transcending the political circus that bombards us daily and in making more thoughtful and informed decisions about our nation's leadership. Just as documentaries push us to question, reflect, and seek truth beyond the surface, we must apply the same approach when evaluating candidates for public office, especially in this vitally important election year. The critical thinking, empathy, and commitment to understanding complexity that films encourage are the very qualities we need to cut through the noise of partisan rhetoric, misinformation, and simplistic sound bites that dominate political discourse. By stepping back, questioning assumptions, and resisting the lure of "canned points of view," we can more clearly assess the values, integrity, and policies of those who seek to lead us.

In closing, my wife Mary and I would like to express our gratitude to the Chagrin Documentary Film Festival for providing a platform that brings important stories to life and fosters meaningful dialogue through the art of documentary film. First and foremost, we deeply appreciate the filmmakers and producers who shared their works of art at the film fest. Secondly, the festival would not be possible without the founding vision and ongoing stewardship of Mary Anne Ponce, whose dedication has guided it from its inception to becoming a highly celebrated cultural event. We also extend our appreciation to the CDFD board for its committed leadership, the many generous sponsors whose support sustains the festival, and the tireless efforts of the trained volunteers whose passion and hard work ensured a seamless and inspiring experience for all. It is through this collective effort that the festival continues to enrich the community and elevate the power of storytelling. Finally, a note of thanks to our neighbors Annette Lowe and Doug Dolch for introducing us to the film fest.

About the Author

Don Iannone teaches business at Transcontinental University, a European Union-based university with a campus in Columbus, Ohio. He is a writer, poet, and photographer. His most recent book, America's Dream at a Crossroads, The 2024 Presidential Election and Beyond, positions the American Dream of economic and social mobility as a defining issue for the upcoming election and beyond. He is currently working on a collection of poems that explores the U.S. Civil War, delving into its origins, the conflict itself, and its enduring impact over the past two centuries. The collection aims to capture the war's profound influence on American society, examining the cultural, political, and social ripples that continue to shape our nation's identity. Through vivid imagery and poignant reflection, the poems seek to offer fresh insights into the legacy of the war, addressing not only historical events but also the ongoing struggles and transformations rooted in that turbulent period. Don holds a Ph.D. in philosophy and lives with his wife Mary just outside Chagrin Falls.