

The new reality of documentaries

Thanks to "Bowling for Columbine" and others, the genre's audience grows (that's good) as a taste for sensation creeps in (that's bad).

By Kenneth Turan, Times Staff Writer

Think of documentary film as the Esau of cinema. It was born first, with an 1895 Lumière Brothers 50-second short film of workers leaving their factory, but the more glamorous fiction film, like brother Jacob, was almost immediately nipping at its heels and soon supplanted its elder in the world's favor.

The documentary has never taken its less glamorous status lying down, and there is no reason it should. Though far fewer people see them, documentaries can be as provocative and as entertaining as fiction films and, not surprisingly, they're considerably more informative. It's one of the truisms of the Sundance Film Festival, for instance, that watching all 16 doc competition entries is invariably time better spent than sitting through the same number of dramatic entries.

With the awarding March 23 of the Oscar for best documentary feature and short films, one of the doc form's rare moments to enjoy the warmth of a truly mass audience, this is a good time to assess what is happening in that world. It's been a particularly topsy-turvy time for nonfiction films: Changes both noticed and little-regarded have been taking place that may affect what appears on screens for some time to come.

The best news is that documentaries seem to be getting more popular than ever. Sundance created a whole new section this year called "World Cinema Documentary" that showcased nine docs made overseas; North Carolina's Full Frame Documentary Film Festival has been a success for six years; and Michael Moore's omnipresent "Bowling for Columbine" is now the highest-grossing documentary of all time with about \$19 million in domestic box office to date.

"Columbine's" success also demonstrates that documentaries can touch an emotional chord nationwide just as fiction films can. Its cinematic virtues aside, it seems likely that "Columbine's" anti-violence message has been a powerful lure for those audience members desperate for an antidote to the major media's fascination with the impending war on Iraq. That passion for dissent may also have been a factor in "Columbine's" unprecedented best original screenplay nomination from the Writers Guild.

Yet, having said that, it's a function of the increasing fragmentation of the documentary world that "Columbine's" reception has been all over the map, starting with the fact that the film was named, bafflingly to be sure, as the best documentary of all time in an online poll conducted by the International Documentary Assn.

On the other hand, when the Directors Guild of America named five nominees for its version of this year's best documentary prize, "Columbine" was not on the list. "Columbine" was included as one of the five Oscar-nominated films but, in a further confusion, only one doc, the Holocaust-themed "Prisoner of Paradise," was nominated by both the academy and the DGA. If the doc establishment ever spoke with one voice, those days are long gone.

Theory versus practice

Still, as far as the academy goes, the situation with docs has definitely improved over the past few years. Documentarians now have a full-fledged branch instead of the committee that ran things in the dark old days when "Hoop Dreams" was passed over, and working documentary directors have a larger say in what happens.

Now that they are a branch, the documentarians are attempting to place more emphasis on docs that actually spend some time in theaters as opposed to the large number, even of the ones that are in competition at Sundance, that are financed specifically for broadcast screenings on PBS, HBO or Showtime. Plans are afoot to increase the number of cities and the number of weeks a doc will have to play to be eligible for an Oscar, and while that it is a solid idea in theory, it's going to be interesting to see how it plays out in practice.

One of the things to be fearful about is what kinds of films can be successfully sold to theatrical audiences. It's heartening to see excellent work such as "Blind Spot: Hitler's Secretary," "Amandla!" and "Lost in La Mancha" playing across the country, but there is another trend, visible in Sundance films and elsewhere, that is troubling.

For, unlikely as it seems, a whiff of something like the shameless attitudes of "reality" TV seems to be infecting many prominent documentaries. The idea that you point a camera at an accident waiting to happen and then stick around to record the results has become an increasingly prevalent -- and audience-pleasing -- way to make a documentary.

To a greater or lesser but still undeniable extent, this sensibility is infecting many prominent and well-intentioned docs. The otherwise excellent "Daughter From Danang," a winner at Sundance and an Oscar nominee, allowed a woman to fend for herself in Vietnam even though it was obvious a crisis was brewing.

"Stevie," nominated for an IFP award, has one of "Hoop Dreams' " co-directors on hand with a camera to record the decline and fall of a young man he used to be a big brother to. In "Capturing the Friedmans," winner of this year's grand jury prize at Sundance, a family videotaped itself as it fell apart when a father and one of his sons are charged with child molestation.

Clearly, capturing reality as it unfolds is the premise of many of the best of documentaries, from "Hoop Dreams" to the excellent "Balsaros," in which Spanish filmmakers follow Cuban refugees from their boat building days in Havana to life in the U.S. years later. But rather than being seduced by sensation, those films are compelled by human drama. That may sound like a fine line, but it's a clear and unmistakable one as well.

It would also be sad if this taste for sensation made it harder than it already is for some of the best documentaries, both traditional and non, to get theatrical bookings and Oscar recognition. Though Anne Makepeace's excellent "Robert Capa: In Love and War" was commissioned by PBS, its fine use of Capa's photographs is inescapably more moving on a large screen. The same goes for the visuals of another Sundance film, Travis Wilkerson's out-of-the-ordinary exploration of America's radical political past, "An Injury to One."

Given the nature of what theatrical audiences can be seduced into seeing, neither of these films might even be eligible for Oscar consideration in future years. While that is understandable and maybe even a tough-love necessity, it's sad to see good work find itself beyond the pale, even for the best of reasons. And it's sadder still to think of a taste for the tabloid getting a toehold where it's never been before.

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