



SIFF documentaries: an antidote for sound-bite reporting

The Seattle International Film Festival features documentaries on subjects close to the hearts of many Northwesterners, including the Earth Liberation Front, sushi controversies, and the growing popularity of electric cars.

By Pamela Biery

May 25, 2011.

If short films are quirky moments and windows into alternative perspectives, then documentaries are their longer cousin, designed by nature to stretch out and look at a situation from multiple viewpoints. Documentaries are the antidote for the sound bite. Documentary film continues the vital tradition of first-person reporting and storytelling.

This year, among many documentaries offered, SIFF includes several that report on environmental concerns. Each takes a long view, turning the situation and story lines around differing opinions and perspectives. Thought-provoking, inspiring, enraging, enlightening — all are words that might fit for this cinema grouping from SIFF's 422 offerings now underway, through June 12.

Note: All schedules and attendees are subject to change. Please check www.siff.net for the latest updates.

Cinematic Study: The Environmental Documentary

(Director's quotes are included, italicized, with each film.)

"If A Tree Falls: A Story of the Earth Liberation Front," USA, 2011, 85 minutes.

Director Marshall Curry takes the viewer down the complex path that pulled individuals into actions intended to block change and protect the environment, but in some cases had unexpected outcomes. Earth Liberation Front's choices and context appear to have run into a changing post 9/11 psychology and enhanced terrorism sweep — a sort of double-whammy that left some in prison, others with fixed opinions, and still more questioning. Curry invites dialogue and conversation by pushing boundaries and destroying assumptions made by both activists and law enforcers.

Curry encountered this story when Federal agents stormed the domestic violence center his wife worked at in New York in 2005, arresting an employee who by many accounts was an ethical and conscientious worker and the son of a Rockaway Police officer. Turns out, Daniel McGowan was arrested by federal agents in a nationwide sweep of radical environmentalists involved with the Earth Liberation Front — a group the FBI has called America's "number one domestic terrorism threat." Uncomfortable questions quickly come to the surface, as Curry tracks the remarkable story of the rise and fall of this ELF cell, by focusing on the transformation and radicalization of one member.

"I'm not that interested in movies that just set up straw men to knock down. I'd rather let strong arguments and powerful characters bang up against each other, and see what happens.... "If A Tree Falls" is a film that asks questions more than it answers them. And by the end of it, I think the audience is left not with a single, easily directed feeling of outrage — though there is plenty of outrage in the story. But instead they are left with an

uneasy sense that things are more complicated than they seem from the surface." — Marshall Curry, director.

Screenings: 7 p.m. today (May 25), Harvard Exit; 6 p.m. Sunday (May 29), Everett Performing Arts Center.

"Sushi: The Global Catch," USA, 2011, 75 minutes. World premiere.

Director Mark Hall looks at the consequences of a cultural mash-up — sushi, global trends, and the impact on fisheries. "Sushi: The Global Catch" includes interviews with fishermen, chefs, market-watchers and educators such as leading researcher Barbara Block

Sushi now is served from Russia to Australia and beyond. While sushi demand is increasing, tuna supply is decreasing. Block, a Stanford researcher who is among the world's leading experts on the Bluefin Tuna, has sought endangered species status for this fish. "The love of sushi, sashimi, is driving a global effort to get tuna at a level that in some cases is not sustainable," observes Block.

This is the world premiere of "Sushi," and director Hall is expected to be in attendance. While traveling, Hall was amazed by the popularity of sushi in Eastern Europe and came to view the cuisine as emblematic of how economies have rapidly globalized, an interesting underpinning to this important film.

A sushi lover himself, Hall pulls back for a panorama of opinions.

"Making the film on locations in five countries gave me a greater appreciation of the traditions of sushi — and how the global growth of the cuisine has diluted these cultural traditions. I also see now how this global phenomenon has impacted the oceans, especially for the most popular fish for sushi." — Mark Hall, director.

Screenings: 7 p.m. June 8, Admiral Theater; 4:30 p.m. June 10, Harvard Exit.

Sushi: The Global Catch - Trailer from Sakana Films on Vimeo.

"The Last Mountain," USA, 2011, 95 minutes.

Director Bill Haney builds a case for change by linking a series of interviews and images to the mining practice referred to as "Mountaintop Removal." This method of coal harvesting quite literally explodes the top off a mountain — there is no delicate way to say it.

"The Last Mountain" takes the viewer into the lives of people who live near this practice and gives a clear-eyed perspective of a mining technique that by all accounts leaves a wide swath of destruction. Massey Energy Company uses this practice. Other news on Massey includes findings and culpability concerning the Upper Big Branch explosion, in which 29 miners were killed on April 5, 2010. This is an opportunity to gain perspective on a topic that is currently in the news.

Clara Bingham, the producer, is scheduled to attend. Bingham's book *Class Action: The Landmark Case that Changed Sexual Harassment Law* (with Laura Leedy Gansler, Doubleday 2002) was adapted into the Academy Award-nominated 2005 film "North Country" (Warner Bros.). "Class Action" was a Los Angeles Times Best Book of the Year and won the AAUW Speaking Out For Justice Award.

"The central front in the battle for America's energy future, with enormous consequences for the health and economic prospects of every citizen, is the fight for Appalachian coal. With politicians siding with their corporate donors, it falls to a rag tag army of local activists to stand-alone for the welfare of their families, their heritage and for a principled and sound energy future." — Bill Haney, director.

Screenings: 7 p.m. June 1 and 4 p.m. June 2, AMC Pacific Place.

"Revenge of the Electric Car," USA, 2011, 95 minutes.

This documentary brings to the surface a long, strange road trip that Americans are all on,

whether we recognize it or not. With "Revenge of the Electric Car," director Chris Haines follows up on his 2006 documentary "Who Killed the Electric Car?" — a film made at a time when as many as 5,000 modern electric cars were destroyed by American manufacturers.

Now, less than 5 years later, companies are competing to bring affordable electric cars to market. "Revenge of the Electric Car" profiles Nissan, GM and Tesla Motors, along with an independent backyard converter, with insights into their processes, problems, and products.

"...it is a rare privilege to be able to tell the story of how sometimes change has too much momentum to be stopped. ...we follow four entrepreneurs battling from the inside. Each one of them let us in on their journey over three years ago on condition that we would not release any footage until 2011. You can't kill an idea whose time has come.... the prize, if they succeed, is really for all of us: the reinvention of the car without gasoline, and potentially without fossil fuel at all." — Chris Paine, writer/director.

Screenings: 8:30 p.m. June 8, Kirkland Performance Center; 7 p.m. June 10, Egyptian Theatre; 4:30 p.m. June 12, Harvard Exit.

'The Revenge of the Electric Car' official trailer from Strawberry Earth on Vimeo.

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Films with a Northwest focus

SIFF is presenting an ever-growing number of films with Northwest connections, from those set in the region to others featuring actors from here — bits of history past and in the making. Here are a few Northwest-related screenings this week. See more at www.siff.net.

"Hit So Hard," USA, 2011, 103 minutes.

Director P. David Ebersole transforms conversations with former Hole drummer and Marysville native Patty Schemel into a moving history and front-row glimpse at life on the road with Courtney Love. For fans, the film shows new home footage of Love, Kurt Cobain, Hole band members, and other musicians.

For the rest of us, Schemel's journey to the edge of nowhere and back makes this a revealing look at the beginnings of grunge and the Seattle music scene. An edifying combination of personal and cultural history, this documentary is brought into focus by Schemel's presence and direct approach to being an openly gay recovering addict, her fame as a female drummer and innovative musician, and of course her new life. Inspiring, empowering and informative.

Screenings: 9 p.m. Friday (May 27), Egyptian Theatre; 4 p.m. Sunday (May 29), Neptune Theatre.

"Winds of Heaven," Canada, 2010, 87 minutes.

Michael Ostroff's documentary on the life of Canadian artist Emily Carr's life includes archival prints and photos, along with new footage from places Carr painted in the Queen Charlotte Islands, including Haida Gwaii. Carr was unique in her early recognition of First Nations art and tribes' precarious cultural fragility, dedicating many years to documenting totems throughout British Columbia. "Winds of Heaven" is narrated with Carr's own words, taken from travel journals and her books.

Carr is paralleled with artists Georgia O'Keeffe and Frida Kahlo, as a woman artist associated with place. A Victoria native, Carr studied in London, Paris, and San Francisco. Seattle artist Mark Tobey is by many accounts responsible for a renaissance in Carr's painting. Director Michael Ostroff is expected to attend.

Screenings: 4:30 p.m. Saturday (May 28), Neptune Theatre; 6 p.m. Monday (May 30), Admiral Theater.

The Mysteries of the Forest from Michael Ostroff on Vimeo.

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View this story online at: <http://crosscut.com/2011/05/25/arts/20943/SIFF-documentaries:-an-antidote-for-sound-bite-reporting/>

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Printed on June 04, 2011