



Film Notes

Why you should see the Oscar Nominated Documentary Shorts

Of all the short films we've shown in the last five years, the four Oscar Nominated Documentary Shorts may collectively be the most significant.

Why is this so, and what's in it for the viewer? Read on:

(1) The event is original and unique, the first of its kind, with a limited run of two screening dates only.

(2) The impact and importance of each film goes beyond its initial subject: these films examine the past to inform us about the present and future.

(3) The four Oscar nominated documentary short films offer a single-session symposium on directorial style.

Amplification:

(1) The event is original and unique, the first of its kind, with a limited run of two screening dates only.

Beyond the brief film clips shown on the annual awards TV show, the documentary films nominated for Academy Awards are rarely seen. And never before has the public had the opportunity to see the entire slate of Academy Award-nominated documentary short films, including the Oscar winner, on a big screen in a single session.

The good news is that Cincinnati World Cinema offers you an opportunity to see all of this year's Academy Award-nominated documentary short films in one exciting program. The sad news is that the films will be here for only two nights, July 24 & 25, screening at the Freedom Center at 7:30 pm each night.

(2) The impact and importance of each film goes beyond its initial subject: these films examine the past to inform us about the present and future.

Very few documentary films do this as well as the high-profile Oscar-nominated films you will see at the Freedom Center July 24 and 25. *Examples:*

A NOTE OF TRIUMPH: THE GOLDEN AGE OF NORMAN CORWIN gives us pride in the America that was and high standards for the future in the person of Norman Corwin, "the Edward R. Murrow of radio."

As a broadcaster, writer and as a person, Norman Corwin was, and is, an inspiring American statesman. We quickly discern the reason why: when his landmark broadcast aired in 1945, America came to a stop for that CBS broadcast, heard by nearly half of the country's 140 million citizens. His passion, principles and style contrast markedly with what transpires in the broadcast world today. Equally significant, Corwin's congratulatory admonition to the victorious powers after VE Day aptly applies to global actors and events today.

THE DEATH OF KEVIN CARTER is set against the background of strife and violence in South Africa and starvation and war in Sudan.

When we think of first-responders, the military, police, fire-fighters and paramedics come to mind. But there is another group in this cadre – the journalists and photographers on the ground in various hotspots around the world, who often arrive at disasters or major conflicts along with or ahead of military and relief teams. The things they see and record are horrendous and heart-wrenching, leaving an indelible stamp on their souls.

While the film addresses the circumstances that led to the tragic death of a single individual, the viewer comes to understand the terrible toll exacted throughout the ranks of the profession. And further, we realize that the impact upon journalists reflects the larger chaos in the world today – most often the result of man's inhumanity to fellow man.

THE MUSHROOM CLUB takes its name not from the shape of atom bomb cloud, but from the name given to the group of Japanese born with deformities to parents who were in the nuclear blast zone.

As we look at the consequences of Hiroshima upon its victims, including those unborn children in-utero at the time of the bombing, it is impossible not to think of North Korea, Iran, the nuclear green-light given to India, and the thousands of atomic warheads floating around the former USSR. As the director conveys the growing indifference in modern day Japan to the past nuclear events in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, one wonders just how much of history will repeat itself.

Building upon the ashes of genocide, **GOD SLEEPS IN RWANDA** is a story of hope and determination as the women of Rwanda take back their lives and their country. The lessons learned transcend the third-world and enhance the growing global trend of women as leaders and peace-makers. Although the events of 1994 (800,000 killed in 100 days) are positioned as background, the thinking viewer can not escape the parallels with current events in the Sudan, Somalia, etc.

(3) The four Oscar nominated documentary short films offer a single-session symposium on directorial style.

Because of their limited budgets, documentary filmmaking can be the most personal of all modes of film creation. Often, with very little assistance, just one person writes, edits, narrates, conduct interviews and does the camera work. With this intense level of involvement, documentaries generally bear the distinctive signature of their maker.

While the Oscar Docs directors share common bonds of dedication and the desire to inform, they are otherwise diverse in terms of their directorial approach and accomplishment, producing a rewarding and enjoyable cinematic mix. You might think of the Oscar Docs as the chance to watch a future Errol Morris, Werner Herzog, Agnes Varda or Ken Burns stretch his or her cinematic wings. Observations:

Steven Okazaki is one of the most prolific documentary filmmakers working today; his body of work is remarkable for its depth, influence and impact, and in bringing untold stories to the screen. With multiple Academy Award nominations over the last twenty-five years, and awards including an Oscar and a Peabody, Okazaki has a unique directorial style and technique.

In **THE MUSHROOM CLUB**, Okazaki's manner is laid-back and low key, as he seemingly lets his interviews and vignettes follow their own course. Yet at the conclusion of his 35-minute film he artfully ties the disparate elements together. Okazaki eschews assigning blame or culpability for the events of 1946 and instead creates a common thread built on everyday images - class photos, a spool of thread, a handful of buttons, the daily routines of the survivors, etc. As some directors would use music to set an emotional tone, Okazaki uses footage of cemeteries and parks with running water. His intent is to remind us of the importance of remembering, even while remembrance becomes increasingly difficult as survivors die off and a young post-war population has other priorities.

The use of the atomic bomb in Japan in 1946 is a subject many Americans find difficult to watch. Nonetheless, the film was selected for numerous festivals and special showings - the SF Intl Asian-American, Underdog, Trenton, the Beverly Hills IDA, the American Cinematheque at the Egyptian, and the National Archives, Washington D.C.

For director **Dan Krauss**, **THE DEATH OF KEVIN CARTER** is essentially his first real film - submitted as his thesis project in grad school. Krauss is earnest in his approach; the way he frames his shots and the pace of his film indicate his almost textbook attention to structure and technique. This is based, I suspect, on his newness to directing. The adroit viewer can sense what Krauss wants to accomplish and often anticipate his plot-and-shot sequence. It is clear that Krauss has spent time as a photojournalist - to me, his work suggests that he thinks of himself as a cinematic/journalistic DP or camera man, as opposed to a director. None of this is incorrect or detrimental, but simply serves as an interesting counterpoint to the more confident approaches of Okazaki and Simonson.

For a first-work, Krauss' film fared well in festival competition, winning Best Doc at Tribeca, the SF International, LA International, Cleveland and Orinda; was selected for the DGA, Montreal and Johannesburg fests, among others.

In **A NOTE OF TRIUMPH: THE GOLDEN AGE OF NORMAN CORWIN**, director **Eric Simonson** and producer **Corinne Marrinan** bring a dramatic flair to their work, based their strong roots in legitimate theatre. And what better subject than Norman Corwin, the larger-than-life master dramatist and poet laureate of radio?

The interviews with Studs Terkel, Robert Altman, Norman Lear and Walter Cronkite are divided into easily digestible segments and sprinkled with cutaways to old broadcast footage featuring dramatic readings and bold music. The strings that dominate Henry Wiggen's understated score provide an effective, and soothing, contrast with the broadcast soundtracks. Overall, Simonson's focus on just a single, primary aspect of Corwin's career allows for considerable detail and development, without having to thinly cover his entire life and myriad achievements in a brief period of time.

The rhythmic flow of **A NOTE OF TRIUMPH: THE GOLDEN AGE OF NORMAN CORWIN** creates the fastest forty minutes of documentary cinema I can recall. I was sorry it was over and immediately wanted to see and learn more about this fascinating man.

GOD SLEEPS IN RWANDA is what one expects from a traditional narrative documentary. Directors **Kimberlee Acquaro** and **Stacy Sherman** have a clearly defined objective and achieve it by weaving together the stories of five survivors. The concept is well conceived and researched, the script is crisp but tends to verbosity; and the narrator, actress **Rosario Dawson**, leads the viewer from point to point throughout the film.

The reportorial structure is not detrimental, and the measured pace of the film provides time for close-ups of facial expressions, body language and resultant compassion. In contrast with the tightly-focused Norman Corwin documentary, this film covers a lot of ground – predecessor events and the stories of five women – thereby producing less individual character examination. Because of the subject matter and scope, this trade-off is acceptable and the film on the whole is an important work. And again, because of the subject matter, the film received numerous honors: Audience Awards at Palm Springs, Aspen Shorts Fest and the AFI Silverdocs, plus Best Short awards at Jackson Hole and Ojai.

~ Tim Swallow, July 2006

~~~~~