A Personal Review of the KDocs 2017 Documentary Film Festival

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“KDocs” brands a documentary film festival directed by the exuberant and discerning Janice Morris, a writing instructor in the Faculty of Academic and Career Advancement at Kwantlen Polytechnic University (KPU). Although it depends on institutional support from KPU, multiple sponsors, faculty, student volunteers, and good relations with the Vancouver International Film Centre, KDocs would not have come into being, nor is it likely that it would continue, without the passion of Ms. Morris. She created the festival, she heads its Board of Directors, she personally recruits its speakers, she co-ordinates tasks of such a multiplicity that an ordinary mortal might suffer a nervous breakdown managing them all. Nobody pays her one penny to do any of it. In February 2016, I took in the complete second KDocs Festival (six films over two days). When Ms. Morris asked me in December 2016 to consider attending the whole and composing a candid review of KDocs 2017, I agreed after a brief hesitation: viewing the six films in February 2016 had been emotionally draining. A colleague who had attended two exclaimed the second with a sigh, and she remarked that such films, although stimulating, were “depressing.” But I agreed to view the eleven films over the four days of KDocs 2017 and put together a review. Six of the documentaries were introduced by keynote speakers. Six were followed by discussion panels and audience-participatory question-and-answer sessions. Five showings engaged audiences with the thrill of contact with directors-in-attendance: Alex Williams (The Pass System [2015]), Victoria Lean (After the Last River [2015]), Tamara Herman and Susi Porter-Bopp (We Call Them Intruders [2015]), Min Sook Lee (Migrant Dreams [2016]), and Jeff Petry (Wizard Mode [2016]). The KDocs Festival stimulates and inspires its participants in a particularly powerful way: many of its films are accompanied by such opening lectures, panelist conversations, and audience-activist exchanges.

KDocs’s self-declared mission is a focus on “social justice, global citizenship, and community-building.” One might compare it with the “Justice Forum” series at the larger Vancouver DOXA Festival, which runs each May. KDocs might be described as a complete festival that has chosen to limit itself to a set of preoccupations like those of the Justice Forum. That choice is its strength, and yet it cannot escape a paradox: that which makes you strong can be that which makes you weak. Is there any difference between social justice and justice? Is “global citizenship” not oxymoronic, at least a little? If a community must be built, what claim will it have to organic authenticity? I will return to these questions after a narrative survey.

The two opening films treated ecological degradation. Louie Psihoyos’s The Cove (2009) had gained fame for its exposing the bay-bloodying spectacle of dolphin slaughter in Japan. His Racing Extinction (2015) aims to show how overfishing and habitat destruction are driving animals to extinction at terrifying rates. The documentary has the planet-sweeping reach, cinematographic glitz, and editorial finesse of a massively funded project. Psihoyos and his button-hole-camera sleuths fly to Hong Kong to investigate the trade in smuggled animal parts. On a rooftop of one dealer’s warehouse, they stroll stunned amid twenty thousand shark fins drying in the sun. In Indonesia, his colleagues interview manta ray hunters whom they will nudge toward wildlife tourism. One subplot ends when the Convention on International
Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) passes a long-lobbied-for ban on trade in manta rays. The film’s bleakness of thesis teeter-totters against gorgeous footage of underwater life, wonder-arousing illuminations of microscopic plankton, and scenes featuring a special camera filter (one thinks of night vision goggles) that lights up carbon emissions spewing poisonously from tailpipes, vents, chimneys—damn ing, but visually nifty. Only occasionally during Racing Extinction did I wish for less of Psihiyos as a talking head with bookshelves behind him. However, frequently during the second Thursday evening feature, How to Let Go of the World and Love All the Things Climate Can’t Change (2016), I wished for less of director Josh Fox in voiceover trying but failing to deliver poetry. Fox became famous after his Gasland (2014).

It may be the most overwhelming “issue”: how to think seriously about the planet, our lands and rivers and habitats, how to stop the destruction that industrial society seems incapable of limiting (see Scruton). But although such films, after subjecting us to apocalyptic content and rhetoric, ritually attach “what-you-can-do” concluding segments, I find the additions disingenuous. They remind me of the hellfire preacher who reassures us we can be saved only after browbeating us into the subdued certainty we are horrible sinners deserving punishment. Racing Extinction and How to Let Go will less inspire the unconverted, I would wager, than induce numbed despair.

No reasonable Euro-Canadian could have exited untroubled from the first Friday film, Alex Williams’s The Pass System (Fig. 1). Originally an “emergency measure” reacting to the Riel resistance, a practice pushed by Indian Agent Hayter Reed (pun in name unintended), the “pass system” lasted from roughly 1885 to 1945. It endured, though it was always secretively extra-legislative. Operating mostly on the prairies, the system required any “Indian” who wished to leave the reserve for any purpose to get signed permission from a local Indian Agent. That converted what should have been ordinary affairs into humiliating encounters with paternalist oppression. Stills of the documents recur hauntingly, names of individuals followed by phrases such as: “To get married. 10 days”; “To see daughter. 14 days”; “Hunting big game for food. Two weeks.” The pass system overlapped with that of residential schools. Interviewee Leona Blondeau explains her understanding of her parents’ tragically letting her go: “If you didn’t go to school, your parents went to jail.” The intractability of the stand-off between the settlers’ government and First Nations indigenous on “Canadian” territory is more ironically captured by interviewee Jacob Pete, toward the film’s end: “They want to control our land and they want to
control our resources and they want to control our people, and they want to do it in a nice way.” The film made me feel a measure of shame at the privilege that had permitted my erstwhile ignorance.

With After the Last River, directed by Victoria Lean, we visit Attawapiskat in Northern Ontario. Lean focuses on the community’s struggle for health and dignity in a context where the Crown mechanically privileges DeBeers, one of whose diamond mines has been installed ninety kilometers away. David Lean (her father) works as an ecological toxicologist fighting to get Ontario to acknowledge that the draining of wetlands is turning the rivers poisonous; mercury levels make the fish unsafe for consumption. Houses prove to have been constructed from materials unsuitable for the subarctic: a frail elderly woman with a pail for a toilet pulls back taped carton-sides to show knee-high toxic mould staining her walls. Lean interviews Chief Theresa Spence and follows her to Ottawa. There, despite a 45-day hunger strike, Spence and Prime Minister Harper fail to converse. As Native advocate and New Democratic Party Member of Parliament Charlie Angus argues, Harper’s people play the race card to smear Chief Spence for allegedly squandering “taxpayer” dollars (we all know there is nothing more precious in the universe than “taxpayer” dollars). After the Last River offers glimmers of hope with footage of the Idle No More movement, but mostly insists that the “broken” relationship between DeBeers and Attawapiskat may well be representative of that between settler Canadians and First Nations people generally.

Friday’s third feature, We Call Them Intruders, showed young Vancouver activists Tamara Herman and Susie Porter-Bopp fly to Tanzania and Zambia and interview locals who subsist near to a mine run by the corporation Barrick Gold. Impoverished survivors sift basins of water hoping for shavings: “We’re not happy doing this. It’s just like we’re stealing.” Tailings ponds overflow; a hand shakes a bottle of mucky, undrinkable water. Herman and Porter-Bopp visit huts housing individuals “relocated” by Barrick into such isolated separation that no work is nearby, not even a bus to catch. With zippy graphics, Porter-Bopp explains in voiceover how Canadians unwittingly support the industry: RRSPs and pension funds feed these corporate predators. Canada is home to 75% of the world’s mining corporations – 75% – because to the mining industry our “system” is so very hospitable, disregarding the industry’s record of excellence in smashing and trampling the rights of indigenous people in “underdeveloped” countries. Herman and Porter-Bopp interview a banker who offers the small comfort that “ethical investing” is no oxymoron, despite what counsellors at the big five banks repeat with the monotonic regularity of smug hypnotists.

In Friday’s last offering, raspy-accented Werner Herzog dominated Lo and Behold: Reveries of the Connected World (2016), a film in chapters designed to provoke reflection on the tornado speed with which “interaction” on the World Wide Web has damaged our spiritual health at every level. Herzog interviews a tensely-seated family shell-shocked by the going-viral of an image of the decapitated head of their daughter, their sister: “The Internet is the Anti-Christ,” the mother declares, having understandably entrenched herself behind that militant opinion. Herzog visits exiles in a wave-free haven who have fled electromagnetic radiation from wireless signals and he treats their vulnerability with tenderness. Lo and Behold is certainly worth viewing. However, partly because Herzog’s explorations targeted no villainous institution owning and operating the machinery of oppression (the “web” may lack any one spider at its spinning-wheel centre) and neither speaker nor panel discussion preceded or followed, I was obliged to process the film in non-splendid isolation on the way home. Perhaps that is why I experienced its screening as something of an anti-climax for my second day of KDocs 2017.
Saturday’s offerings shared the theme of state-endorsed violence. The first, Craig Atkinson’s *Do Not Resist* (2016), stood alone as a bit of direct cinema insofar as no voiceover narration imposed itself and only occasionally did text stills billboard facts. On the other hand, its musical soundtrack created a relentlessly ominous audio substrate of doom; and Atkinson stitches together such a dumbfounding parade of muscle clowns and debased politicians who stroll before the camera oblivious to both the absurdity of their trust in the efficacy of weapons alone and the self-condemning upshot of their personal vanity, that the thesis has prophetic clarity: American civilian law-enforcers forces have grown terrifyingly militarized. SWAT training guru Dave Grossman instructs his bull-necked pupils they can anticipate the best sex with their wives after shifts during which they have executed a pumped-up arrest. “Monsters are real,” Grossman declares, monstrously committed to unilateral armed force.

In the 1980s, there were about 4,500 SWAT deployments per year; the frequency has swollen to an annual 50,000.

*After Spring* (2016 [Fig. 2]), directed by Steph Ching and Ellen Martinez, unrolls an intimate portrait of two families forced to flee Syria, residing as if permanently in Jordan’s Zaatari Refugee Camp, not far from Amman. Created in 2012, Zaatari houses over 80,000 people. Celebrities visit regularly. A market street buzzes and blooms with vendors and consumers. Expectant mothers lie awaiting medical care in a small but clean, professionally-staffed clinic. Residents play on cell phones, watch television, lobby for special trailer-houses. A volunteer from Korea creates a Tae-Kwon-Do school to save the children from dispirited idleness; the narrative arc closes with a heart-wrenching award ceremony held at the newly built Tae-Kwon-Do gym, during which the young graduates honour hard-working Klein Kleinschmidt of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), who has
run the camp for many years and who optimistically supported the building of the gym.

The deplorable ensnaring of agricultural workers in Leamington, Ontario by Canada’s Temporary Foreign Workers Program (TFWP) made the subject of *Migrant Dreams*, the work of Toronto’s Min Sook Lee (Fig. 3). Four young people from Indonesia are tormented by the “recruiter” who has linked them to their jobs in greenhouses but then extorts cuts of their wages and threatens if they complain about anything to have them flown home. TFWP “standards” permit employers to house ten persons in 700 square feet, with one bathroom to share. Min Sook Lee powerfully shows that agricultural workers are virtually enslaved; the TFWP lets one employer tie each worker down, and governments make it extremely difficult for them to exercise any status as rights-bearing agents.

*Sonita* (2015), a film by Rokhsareh Ghaem Maghami, closed out the Saturday offerings. It follows the story of Sonita Alizadeh, a teenager living in Iran, exiled from Afghanistan, who dreams of becoming a rapper – she certainly has talent, as the opening footage of her singing shows. But she is threatened by the prospect and likelihood of a forced marriage. A social worker advocates for Sonita but lacks authority to release her from the legal grip of her mother. In rivetingly intimate scenes, Ghaem Maghami captures dialogues between Sonita and that unhappy-seeming woman who accepts without a flicker of resistance the traditions that would see her daughter sold as property, as she was sold in her childhood. The mother privileges one of Sonita’s brothers: “He needs to collect the money from your bride price, so he can pay for his own bride.” As with the final Thursday and Friday films, I lamented the lack of any conversational framing around *Sonita*.

After attending, over 54 hours, to nine feature-length documentaries that dramatized severe disempowerment, trauma, misery, exile, corruption, abuse of power, violence, and victimization; nine films that exposed and analyzed gigantic social-political crises...
and problems with neither “solution” nor end in sight; after absorbing the contributions of the keynote speakers and the never dull post-film panels (I missed nothing) – late Saturday night I walked through my front door and plunked myself down, demoralized. The world was a smorgasbord of disasters and I was a waste of space for having done nothing to “change” it. A white-skinned heterosexual male of Anglo-American descent, salaried, unionized, upper-middle class, able-bodied, blessed by good health, I have never gone hungry. I possess neither victim nor activist credentials. I will not cheat by claiming my vocation is itself activism. I feel obliged, however, in this review, not to disavow that moment of exhaustion – though I refuse to do more than blink, cornered and obtuse, at the paradox of risking the insinuation of a claim to victim status precisely for having none.

That late Saturday night crash explains why I found the “positive” Sunday films nothing less than delightful. Roger Ross Williams’s Life, Animated (2016), based on the book by New York journalist Ron Suskind, had comic power and life-affirming zeal unlike anything else at KDoks 2017, with perhaps the exception of the oddly affirmative After Spring. Owen Suskind, Ron’s second-born son, got lost in autism in early childhood – but only until his parents and brother discovered they could communicate with Owen by imitating voices and roles of characters he understood perfectly, having spent countless solitary hours locked into penetrating studies of Walt Disney cartoons: “I’m Peter Pan and you’re Captain Hook.” Life, Animated is uproariously funny, as many bursts of audience laughter proved. Owen, I wager, will delight the most cynical hearts. After his girlfriend Emily dumps him, Owen asks: “Why is life so full of pain and unfair tragedy?” Owen asks the question with a genuineness so disarming, it seems transcendent. We are to infer at the film’s end that he will continue to pursue happiness, although the best answer may be silence. And what watching Walt Disney cartoons did for Owen, excelling at games of pinball did for Robert Gagno, the Burnaby-native protagonist of the festival’s last film, Wizard Mode (Fig. 4). Like Life, Animated, the film squarely faces the struggle of a person to overcome isolation, gain self-confidence, and manage fear of
loss: “I have to learn how to not let stress win,” Robert confesses—something everyone must learn. During the closing gala, I was thrilled to meet Robert face-to-face.

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The peculiar strength of the KDocs Festival lies in features such as its pre-film keynote speakers—William Rees, Lisa Monchalin, KPU’s elder-in-residence Lekeyten, Wade Deisman, Saleem Spindari, Min Sook Lee, and Faith Bodnar. It derives from the contributions of the panellists during the post-film discussions (too many to name here), who were all—without exception—prepared, articulate, engaging, and informative. One of Janice Morris’s achievements as Festival director is her success with creating groups of interlocutors. One pattern I observed supports my intuition that KDocs would be wise to continue prioritizing introductory speakers and post-film discussions. The pattern: more than one expert and activist endorsed the “conversation” metaphor. They claimed activism not only begins with but also depends upon “listening”: listening seems passive but it takes energy, patience, care, skill—listening to the stories of First Nations people; listening to the stories of exploited migrant workers; listening to the stories of refugees who have fled from war zones, leaving everything behind. Another suggestive pattern was a recourse to the concept of “the human.” On Friday afternoon, First Nations activist Jenn Allen claimed, alluding to the facts of pervasive persistent colonialism: “They’re slowly killing us off… we’re not considered human beings.” “Migrant rights are human rights,” panelist Jennifer Chieh Ho of the BC Federation of Labour asserted after Migrant Dreams. “I’m [treated as] a subpar human being as a migrant worker in this environment,” claimed Hessed Torres, on the same panel. In the Sunday exchanges concerning issues related to inclusion and intellectual disability, panelist Katie Leigh Miller of the Bodies of Film Club spoke up: “we’re not different… we’re all still people.” Such appeals to a baseline of belonging to humankind may suggest that the oft-decried entanglement of leftist and “identity” politics is a rather loose entanglement. Social justice thinking may do well to strengthen anew the links between concepts of human identity and human rights thinking (see Ignatieff and his interlocutors).

Meanwhile, KDocs could dare to lengthen and elasticize its political spectrum. Its commitment to the pillars of “social justice, global citizenship, and community-building” makes it susceptible to a characterization as ideologically monotone. A participant of my description who had viewed only two or three screenings (rather than eleven) probably would have experienced things differently. Nevertheless, it is not irrelevant to report that attending KDocs 2017 start-to-finish felt tantamount to spending four days inside what one might call the Church of Social Justice. I do not intend the moniker as mockery of a misplaced intensity. On the contrary, I speak as one who believes churches and religious communities function, as do other civil institutions in a “free” society, mostly as public goods; I speak also as one who (regardless) felt mostly at home during the Festival. But others may well have found KDocs predictable in its largely unchallenged left-leaning assumptions.

Almost all KDocs’s films (perhaps Herzog’s excepted) belong to the category of the “advocacy” documentary (see Aufderheide 77-91). Overall, throughout the festival, there was no representation of those holding “opposing views”—nobody representing the police after Do Not Resist (for example) or Canadian mining interests after We Call Them Intruders. When we see, at the end of an advocacy documentary, the generic still that reads X declined all our requests for an interview, the unspoken inference is that the decision to withhold guarantees blameworthiness: their silence signifies, and it is a silence packed full of unowned blame. Advocacy itself (whether
left- or right-leaning) probably must restrict its investments in the dialogic. I am not here upholding what have recently and correctly been described as idiotic insinuations of “moral equivalency” between persecutors and victims. Oppression is real; real oppressors are accountable in ways the oppressed are not. In many cases, I suspect, “dialogue” between oppressors and oppressed may get the latter nowhere. I am reporting, however, my strong impression that the speakers, panelists, discussants, and audience contributors at KDocs 2017 were almost always (perhaps just always: I ransack my recall for exceptions and find none) contemptuous of “capitalism”; were enrolled under the banner that reads governments can and should solve problems more quickly than civil society or the private sector ever could; and were sometimes carelessly content to indict a blanket “Western” heritage. Ironically, one problem was that the unacknowledged beast in the room – capitalism – was identified as such, by name, only once, by director-in-attendance Min Sook Lee, and even then, only by implication when she named its opposite, “socialism,” as the politics we need. My point, however, is that I find it difficult to imagine (for example) someone standing up at KDocs and starting “I am a paid-up member of the Conservative party; I voted for Stephen Harper” without fearing groans or hostility or both. Nor was there any sign of any awareness that “social justice” itself labels a concept naming the end-point of an agenda contestable and contested. To point that out is to risk being labelled as a dreadful reactionary: that there can be justice without social justice is something “conservative” thinkers suggest. But not all “conservative” thinkers are despicable; many are wise and humane.

Perhaps KDocs should rest content with its well-defined mission, one to which it is certainly entitled. Perhaps KDocs 2016 and 2017 have only innocently reflected the dominant culture of advocacy documentary back to itself, and to expect more is to expect too much. I will not be troubled if the impressions I have reported prove anomalous. Meanwhile, I have great faith in director Janice Morris, who (I believe) will meet the challenge of staging some vibrant conversations not only between like-minded people, but also between truly differently-minded people, at future KDocs festivals.  

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Notes

1. The KDocs website (www.kdocsff.com) offers a rich and detailed archive of names and affiliations, including the complete 2017 printed program in PDF form. In my opinion, KDocs’s record of peopling and managing pre-film speakers, directors-in-attendance, and post-film panel discussions has been consistently excellent in a way that, perhaps surprisingly, it has not been for DOXA (Vancouver’s Documentary Film Festival). I mention this not to denigrate the bigger and more ambitious festival, which I love, but to praise the organizational discretion and what we might call the diplomatic intuitions of the KDocs director, who manages the selection of all the Festival’s speakers and discussants single-handedly.

2. These quotations are from my personal KDocs 2017 Festival notebook, but I have not been able to verify their accuracy against sound recordings of the Festival discussion panels. If the speakers believe any corrections are necessary, MSJ and I will welcome their requests.

3. Reliable informants have told me that such conversations (more risky and difficult ones) have occurred at other KDocs events I did not attend. I am not surprised, because I did not suspect that any willful policy of exclusion was the cause of the discursive sameness that I experienced.
Works Cited


