

# A Rare Breed: The New Documentary Makers Tackle Major Social Issues

By Greg Vitiello

**W**ho among today's filmmakers ignites the flame of social justice on the television screen? Who asks tough questions about our entrenched institutions – the overlords and fat cats of our society – and, more important, who demands answers? Who argues on behalf of a better life for our indigent and disenfranchised?

For almost two decades, from the early 1950s to the early 1970s, the three networks and public television regularly presented the work of documentarians with strong social consciences. I described that era in an article for this publication's Spring/Summer 2006 issue. And, in conclusion, I asked of our current age: Where are the documentaries of yesteryear?

To answer that question, I've engaged in a random sampling of social and political documentaries from the past decade. The good news is that I've found occasional documentaries that are worthy successors to the work of

Edward R. Murrow and his ilk. Overall, however, the medium has shirked its social responsibility in favor of reality shows, celebrity gossip and other profit-making, politically innocuous topics. And yet virtually everywhere I flipped my remote, other than on the networks, I found a plethora of documentaries spanning virtually every historical era and personality (see the Sundance Channel, HBO, the History Channel, Discovery Channel, Arts & Entertainment, the Biography Channel, CNN and Court TV).

On this wave of non-fiction television, why aren't there more in-depth examinations of key social and political institutions? A glib answer, which I often hear and read, is that the days of social activism passed with the end of the civil rights and anti-Vietnam War movements. While it's true that the political environment changed, what then accounts years later for the emergence of tough social documentaries appearing increasingly at film festivals and in movie

theaters – work by filmmakers like Errol Morris, Michael Moore and Robert Greenwald? Clearly, injustices exist and some documentarians are prepared to root them out.

Here, based on my sampling, is a selection of outstanding social documentaries that actually made their way to the television screen in the past decade:

### **Bill Moyers’ “Capitol Crimes.”**

In this 2006 PBS film, Moyers investigates the lobbying scandal that ultimately led to jail terms for lobbyist Jack Abramoff and Congressman Bob Ney, the unseating of House Majority Leader Tom DeLay, and the besmirching of other Republican leaders. With Abramoff as the central figure, Moyers traces the story of how “the men who came to Washington in the 1980s to lead the conservative revolution wound up running a racket.” The documentary tracks Abramoff’s involvement in an influence-peddling scheme based on his ties to senior Bush Administration officials and prominent conservatives such as Ralph Reed, former head of the Christian Coalition, and Grover Norquist of Americans for Tax Reform. In one of the documentary’s most telling scenes, Abramoff is shown making deals to ensure that a Native American tribe that he is representing will *fail* to get a gambling casino in Texas. Their loss, for which he is richly rewarded, is a gain for another tribe that Abramoff represents. Moyers describes the events involving Abramoff, DeLay and other opportunists as a “swashbuckling spectacle of corruption.” But despite their eventual fall, Moyers sees little reason for optimism in a climate in which the lobbying interests are so large and so entrenched.



Jack Abramoff leaving Federal Court in Washington

“Capitol Crimes” represents Moyers’ return to public television after a two-year hiatus. His return, after almost 35 years on public and commercial television, is clearly overdue. As former NET president James Day writes in his history of public television, *The Vanishing Vision*, “Moyers does more than observe with a critical eye and analyze with a keen intelligence. He applies a moral and ethical yardstick to the issue or event, taking its measure in terms of human values.” Moyers applies that yardstick effectively to the money laundering scandal depicted in “Capitol Crimes.” The documentary also has a strong online educational component for viewers who wish to learn more about Congressional ethics, lobbying and other related public policy topics.

### **Spike Lee’s “When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts.”**

Shown on HBO in August 2006, one year after the devastation wreaked by Hurricane Katrina, Lee’s film seethes with



Terence Blanchard is featured in "When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts," for which he also composed the score.

recrimination at the human indifference that compounded a natural disaster, leaving the city of New Orleans to suffer widespread deprivation and loss. Lee relies on "witnesses"—residents, meteorologists, academics, celebrities—who provide their eloquent, often obscene testimony about the failure of government at all levels to act in responsible, humanitarian fashion.

While HBO isn't the first place on the dial where we might look for socially conscious documentaries, the cable company scored high marks for its previous Lee documentary, "4 Little Girls," about the children killed in the 1963 Birmingham, Ala., bombings. "When the Levees Broke" is a work that we will remember—unlike so many current documentaries that substitute grave voice-overs for rigorous analysis and tread carefully to avoid stepping on the powerful toes of government and business.

Much of the footage of the destructive winds, flooded city, suffering and looting

is familiar from television news coverage. Indeed, even the naming of names is hardly new—from Louisiana Governor Kathleen Blanco to New Orleans Mayor C. Ray Nagin and from former FEMA head Michael Brown to President George W. Bush. What distinguishes Lee's film is his artist's sure hand and the unstinting quality of his outrage, as expressed through more than a hundred interviews intercut with scenes of the devastated city and the evocative music of the Hot 8 Brass Band. Other documentaries about our government's failure to address the impact of Katrina pale by comparison. For example, Discovery Channel's "Surviving Katrina" relied on a handful of interviews, extensive stock footage and dramatized incidents, which by themselves would disqualify any documentary from serious consideration.

#### **Frederick Wiseman's Public Housing.**

Aired on PBS in 1997, Wiseman's 195-minute film is a masterly account

of daily life in a single public housing complex—the Ida B. Wells development in Chicago. Using his trademark *cinéma vérité*, Wiseman captures the rawness, pathos, struggle to maintain pride and self-respect, and difficulties of coping that mingle in this social milieu. He travels with the Chicago Authority police as they seek out drug dealers and other possible criminals (sometimes with excess zeal) and when they are required to evict a man from his apartment (with considerable sensitivity). He listens in on conversations of social workers and other tenant advocates. As he weaves together his tapestry of life within the complex, individuals emerge as main characters, much like protagonists in a novel. For, in fact, Wiseman has the gift of a fine novelist for depicting a social institution in all its complexity. In the end, he doesn't judge, but he gives us a troubling sense of the wages of poverty. "Public Housing" is one of some 35 institutions that Wiseman has featured in his documentaries, which date back to "Titicut Follies" (about a Massachusetts mental institution) in 1967. In the past decade, his work has included such other strong social documentaries as "Public Housing II," "Domestic Violence," and "Domestic Violence II." The development of lighter cameras and sound equipment works to Wiseman's advantage as he creates a rare intimacy with his subjects, whether he is filming an abusive relationship or the interaction between law-enforcement officers and their subjects. But Wiseman's achievement is less to do with technology than with insight and sensitivity. The late documentary historian Erik Barnouw wrote of Wiseman's work, "As an educational force, the films were, above all, destroyers of stereotypes. Issues were always shown to be more complicated—

and more fascinating—than dogma was inclined to make them."

### **Ofra Bikel's "Burden of Innocence."**

In this 2003 Emmy-winning documentary on PBS' *Frontline* series, Bikel updates an earlier *Frontline* report on shortcomings of the civil justice system. She focuses on five men who have been wrongfully imprisoned and eventually released on the basis of DNA evidence. "Burden of Innocence" tracks their lives since their exoneration and finds enduring pain caused by the realization of lost years and continuing social stigmatization. This is, in the narrator's words, "the heavy price they paid for their innocence." Unable to get or keep jobs, bedeviled by memories of prison brutality, labeled "throwaway people," most of the men in Bikel's film retreat into themselves, playing video games, watching television incessantly, turning away from their families and other potential support. Only one man rises from the pain of his experience: Anthony Robinson, who served 10 years for a rape he didn't commit, is enlisted as a "poster child" by a Texas state senator pushing through a bill to reform the criminal justice system. When the legislature passes a statute granting \$25,000 per year to those who have been wrongfully convicted, Robinson is vindicated – and financially compensated. He subsequently goes on to law school. His is the only upbeat story among the five men in Bikel's film who have been exonerated. Through their stories, the documentary instills viewers with a strong social message about the pressing need for criminal justice reform.

Bikel is one of a cadre of some 30 independent producers whose work has appeared frequently on *Frontline* since

executive producer David Fanning first created the series for WGBH/Boston in 1983. Michael Sullivan, another *Frontline* regular, calls the group “a very contrarian organization.” He explains that the trend in news broadcasting is “the 24-hour news cycle, which bombards us with a story, then moves on.” *Frontline* excels by “taking a second look after the crowd moves on.” What *Frontline* creates is “a second draft of history.”

Over the past two decades, *Frontline* has consistently been television’s premier documentary series, often treating such important social issues as racism, poverty, hunger, oppression, corporate malfeasance, and the abuse of governmental power. “The Farmer’s Wife,” produced in 1998 by David Sutherland, is a poignant account of the plight of the small farmer. It focuses on a couple in rural Nebraska for whom the failure of their family farm leads to personal tensions, frustrations and near collapse of a marriage. The couple, Darrell and Juanita Buschkoetter, becomes a microcosm of the dilemma of small farmers across the nation—what the program’s narrator describes as “a vanishing corner of the American landscape.” Other memorable recent programs from the *Frontline* series include programs on drugs (“Busted: The War on Marijuana,” “The Meth Epidemic”), education (“Public Schools, Inc.”) and political manipulation (“Karl Rove, the Architect” and “The Dark Side,” a profile of Vice President Cheney’s role in galvanizing support for the Iraq war).

### Al Perlmutter and Elena Mannes’ “God and Government.”

This 2004 PBS film explores the uneasy relationship between religion and politics in the contemporary world. The film focuses on the United States, where

conservative Christians are “pressing for a greater infusion of religion in public life,” despite the constitutionally mandated separation between church and state. It reports on ways in which the Bush Administration has taken positions that would contravene this church/state separation—such as the faith-based initiatives that provide financial support for religious organizations. Though the grants to these organizations are ostensibly targeted to social programs, there is no way to ensure that the money won’t be diverted into proselytizing. From the global gag rule that denied aid to any international group favoring abortion to the scare tactics that suggest that women who have abortions are more apt to contract breast cancer, the administration is seen to be promoting its religious agenda in the political arena. “God and Government” also charts the complex relationship between religion and politics in three countries without a church/state separation—India, Israel and Iran.

In 2002, Perlmutter and Mannes collaborated on “Muslims,” a two-hour documentary for PBS’ *Frontline*. Airing less than a year after the 9/11 attacks, “Muslims” spanned several countries — from Indonesia and Iran to the United



God in Government (2004): A teenager joins a demonstration in Washington, DC for the inclusion of prayer during the school day.



**Frontline: Muslims (2002):** A young child accompanies his mother while she prays at a rally outside the former American Embassy building in Tehran, Iran, commemorating its takeover.

States—to demonstrate the range of views and behaviors within the global Muslim community. “Personally, I’m interested in spirituality,” says Mannes. “And because of my experience with ‘Muslims,’ Al brought me back to work on ‘God in Government.’ In that film, we were looking at the commonalities and conflict among the three major Abrahamic faiths and what arises where God and government get intertwined. We interviewed a lot of conservatives and liberals from the respective faiths. As with any documentary, you make every effort to be fair and balanced. And you have to have a story to tell.” Mannes’ early experience with *CBS Reports*, combined with her long working relationship with Bill Moyers, has made her acutely aware that “though you certainly can have a point of view, you have to make sure you’re not misrepresenting facts or manipulating things.”

### **Iain Overton’s “Bad Medicine.”**

In this 2005 BBC film, reporter Olenka Frenkiel reveals the shocking story of fake drugs that destroy lives and bring millions of dollars in profit to unscrupulous pharmaceutical makers. The film begins

in Nigeria where Dr. Dora Akunyili, the fearless regulator of the nation’s Food and Drug Agency, embarks on a personal crusade to drive out the counterfeit drugs that are killing so many people. Shrugging aside attempts on her life, she tracks the profiteers to India, Britain and elsewhere. Using hidden cameras, the filmmakers expose the rationalizations of profiteers who are part of the “culture of denial and secrecy.” By the film’s end, Frenkiel reports that “Dora is winning in Nigeria, at least,” since the regulator is ensuring that fewer fake drugs are making their way into the country.

This bold, crusading film appeared on Link TV, a satellite channel serving over 29 million homes with global perspectives and news and public affairs programming not available elsewhere in the United States. Its co-founder is Jack Willis, award-winning producer of such unflinching documentaries as NET’s “Lay My Burden Down” (about the 1968 Selma, Ala., civil rights march) and “Appalachia: Rich Land, Poor People” (about the economic exploitation of mine workers). Willis explains, “What distinguishes Link is that a lot of our work is controversial — it’s good, old-fashioned investigative reporting. We look for documentaries that put issues in context and analyze them, rather than just giving them a spot, the way the networks do.” Link was launched in 1999 as an international channel. But, says Willis, “After 9/11, we felt it was essential to make connections for viewers between domestic and international issues.” Among Link’s other distinctive documentaries have been “Hijacking Catastrophe” (about how the Bush Administration manipulated national fears following 9/11 to dramatically increase military spending and contravene civil liberties), “Occupied Minds” (about

two journalists, a Palestinian-American and an Israeli, on a personal odyssey in search of peace in the Middle East), and “Afghan Massacre: The Convoy of Death” (about how the U.S. military secretly oversaw the killing of 3,000 Afghans)..

Those of us without satellite dishes may ask: What’s wrong with this picture? Why wouldn’t such tough, revealing documentaries as “Bad Medicine” be available to all viewers? That’s a question we might all ask of the many other public and private television outlets. Meanwhile, bravo to Link for its enterprise and independence.

This is my short list of outstanding social documentaries from the past decade. If space permitted, I would certainly include works from PBS’ *Independent Lens* and *POV* series, as well as films that had commercial distribution and also aired on HBO, Showtime, Sundance or other outlets. Liz Garbus’ “The Farm: Angola, USA” is one such example. A

probing work about a Louisiana prison, it won an award at the Sundance Festival and was later seen on A&E.

Writing in the *New Yorker*, David Denby describes a “documentary explosion” among feature filmmakers. He adds: “...as in the sixties, the political atmosphere is ripe for film journalism: public life is awash in scoundrels, liars, and deluded ideologues; all over the world, cultural conflict is playing out on the streets. The adventure of filmmaking has become irresistible again.”

We can hope that this “adventure” will spread across the spectrum of television broadcasters—and that it will continue, rather than sputtering out as the medium allowed documentaries to do in the early 1970s. In a climate rich in documentary producers and social issues, viewers deserve the opportunity to be enlightened and captivated by this enduring form of filmmaking.

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