

Alec Soth's Archived Blog

February 12, 2007

Docu-DIY

Filed under: [artists & family](#), [filmmaking](#) — alecsothblog @ 11:40 pm

Last weekend I finally got to see *The Departed* (highly entertaining, but not Best Picture material). After getting home from the theater, I popped in a DVD that a friend lent me. It was a documentary called *Billy the Kid*. There isn't much point comparing *Billy the Kid* to *The Departed*. Martin Scorsese is a legend working with a huge budget and the biggest names in Hollywood. Jennifer Venditti is a first-time filmmaker working with a tiny crew and a shoestring budget. Apples and Oranges.

But here is the thing. A few days after seeing *Billy the Kid*, the movie is much more alive in my memory than *The Departed*. Isn't it encouraging that someone working with a video camera and a tiny budget can make something as powerful as an Academy-nominated film?

Similar thoughts occurred to me recently while I watched the documentary *Tell Them Who You Are*. Made by Mark Wexler, the film starts as a profile of his father, the legendary cinematographer Haskell Wexler. But this rather boring biographical premise is quickly abandoned as father and son bicker about politics, family and filmmaking. (One of the most engaging scenes shows the two Wexlers yelling at each other about where to shoot an interview).

Wexler Sr. is an Academy Award-winning cinematographer. Wexler Jr. has made a minor TV documentary for National Geographic. His cinematography is weak. His premise is boring. But the resulting film is as engaging as many of the great films his father worked on.

The idea of making a film, however small, still seems hugely ambitious. I have a hard time trying to make a decent picture, much less ninety minutes of pictures. But the DIY spirit of documentary filmmakers is encouraging. If they can make movies that hold their own with the big boys, maybe there is hope for the rest of us.

14 Comments

1. Reminds one of the old analog adage- 36 shots at stardom in every roll...

Comment by [Stan Banos](#) — February 13, 2007 @ [2:08 am](#)

2. That looks fascinating, powerful.

Interestingly, the director of the film that Jennifer Venditti worked on prior to 'Billy The Kid' is a fashion photographer (Carter Smith) I believe he's represented by Art & Commerce.

Comment by [Sherman](#) — February 13, 2007 @ [5:22 am](#)

3. The king of DIY (autobiographical) documentaries is Ross McElwee's [Sherman's March](#). Talk about memorable. And it's only 2 1/2 hours long!

Comment by [Michael](#) — February 13, 2007 @ [7:59 am](#)

4. I thought a lot about McElwee while watching Tell Them Who You Are. McElwee is indeed the master. Incredible that he manages to do it on film. In the end, his dedication to craft pays off. It sets him apart from all of the rest.

Comment by [Alec Soth](#) — February 13, 2007 @ [8:07 am](#)

5. I really don't know what your idea of cinema or movies is. But I just suggesting a name and a film that you see and know about it. Jean-Luc Godard is th author and the movie is JLG/JLG autoportrait de decembre (1995) specialy if now you are related to france...

Comment by [Crsitian Ureta](#) — February 13, 2007 @ [10:21 am](#)

6. In the interest of tying together Oscar nominated films and DIY documentary, I'm giving a mention to James Longley's "Iraq in Fragments". It was made, pretty much, entirely solo and is a truly amazing accomplishment as well as an important film. If you haven't seen it, it's a must see. Lookout Al Gore...

<http://www.iraqinfragments.com/>

Comment by [Mark S](#) — February 13, 2007 @ [2:45 pm](#)

7. as a photographer and first time filmmaker myself, i want to throw out the names joe swanberg and mark duplass as really fantastic examples of truely independant filmmaking doing a great job of competing with the big boys.

Comment by [Jennifer](#) — February 13, 2007 @ [5:58 pm](#)

8. I saw *Tell Them Who You Are* back in Dec. Agreed on the level of craft, which is the source of Wexler Sr's endless criticism of his son. But the insight into the elder's character is amazing and there are several critical scenes that crystalize the love/hate relationship, one being the argument you mention. His father obviously respected the final movie a great deal nonetheless, based on the final scene (which I will not describe here, but you know what I'm talking about if you've seen it.)

So, with a film, you've got many, many minutes to make an impression and your craft is more the stitching scenes together. At the end, the viewer is left only with an overall feeling, the early scenes are already a fading memory. A photo is going to be stared at and examined for long stretches of time, so I think the hurdle of perfection for that single frame is much, much higher than in film.

Comment by [Todd W.](#) — February 14, 2007 @ [12:01 am](#)

9. "Isn't it encouraging that someone working with a video camera and a tiny budget can make something as powerful as an Academy-nominated film?"

on the contrary, i'm surprised when an academy-nominated film is as powerful as the film made by the person with a video camera and small budget. awards, and for the most part ALL awards (including those in our beloved field of photography and art), are so completely meaningless, if not harmful. rarely, if ever, is truly great and VISIONARY work given recognition. the truth is, what is popular and heralded is what sells, and is what the mainstream wants – what is palatable.

john mayer wins grammy's, not jimi hendrix, and so-on for movies, and so on for photography.

Comment by [john k.](#) — February 14, 2007 @ [8:04 pm](#)

10. the foreboding part about movie making in my brain is working with so many variables and (hopefully) cohorts ... with the cohorts generating the most fear.

Comment by [Richie Killingtree](#) — February 14, 2007 @ [9:06 pm](#)

11. i've spent some time around film and especially film school, and that's a huge part of it – the interpersonal relationship/social aspect of making films. it's a major reason why i haven't tried to make a film and if i did, i'd probably do it with as few people other than myself as possible.

Comment by [john k.](#) — February 14, 2007 @ [9:14 pm](#)

12. one reason i don't like movies is because of all the flash and trash. i understand it's an expensive game, and you want to get your money back, but you can make a compelling story with out a 100 million.

in fact, one might argue it's the only way.

i have always wanted to play around with a video camera.

Comment by [charley](#) — February 16, 2007 @ [4:06 pm](#)

13. At the end of the day, it is the story that matters the most. I mean how many big budge blockbusters suck because of their awful stories is mind-boggling but only because we see them flop before our eyes-we are tricked into thinking they will be good, sometimes they are amazing. But keep in mind that when a great inexpensively made film bubbles up and into our field of attention it has a lot longer road to get there then the blockbuster. In other words there are a lot more gates it has to jump through. Its kind of like public access in new york-most shows are awful some shows are awful but entertaining and then there are some that bubble into MTV or VH1. one of my favorite movies that I have seen to to the no budget rise to the top is "Tarnaion" about a guy growing up with a schizophrenic mother he got a lot of press because he put the whole movie together on apples free software iMovie.

Comment by [Harlan Erskine](#) — February 22, 2007 @ [8:17 pm](#)

14. Many movies that look good in a low budget situation, often times look good because of the low budgets. What I mean is, the quality and lack of polish keeps reminding the viewer that they are getting a hamburger and not a filet mignon. Every carnivore has probably been more satisfied by a Wendy's burger at one time or than a fancy filet, but you can't take fast food and make it high cuisine... the differences will become nauseatingly apparent.

Comment by [James P.](#) — December 19, 2007 @ [12:23 pm](#)

