

THE ART AND BUSINESS OF INDIE DOCS AND CULTURE

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POINT OF VIEW

POV

Sundance survival hints
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**Are docs sexy?
A POV debate**

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The Paris Paradigm & I'll Show You Mine

Are
Docs
Sexy
?

A “he said/she said”
piece By Noelle Elia
and Adam Nayman



Melisseleg

HE SAID OR THE PARIS PARADIGM

by Adam Nayman

To pilfer a phrase from a colleague, Rick Solomon's *One Night in Paris*—or, as it's more commonly and less punningly known, the Paris Hilton sex tape—is likely a vital work of “skinema verité.” I say “likely” because, despite numerous anonymous entreaties to my email account (o spam filter, where art thou?) I have resisted the urge to download it. I'd wager my Internet connection is fast enough that, if I so desired, I'd be privy to the coital fury of our most ubiquitous pseudo-celebrity in a matter of seconds but I'm just not interested. Of course, this indifference speaks more to my own tastes than to the potential appeal of the material. While Paris' starring video is unlikely to win awards at festivals, it does provide a jumping off point for discussing the relationship between sex and documentary, which is, not at all coincidentally, the subject of “Show Me Yours,” one of this year's centerpiece Hot Docs programmes.

I feel dirty giving *One Night in Paris* any more ink, but the underlying reasons for its infamy (celebrity fetishism, voyeurism, and other, even stickier, -isms) are compatible with many of the issues probed by the films in the Hot Docs line up. Both Monica Treut's *Didn't Do It For Love* (1997) and Christine Fugate's *The Girl Next Door* (1999) are concerned with professionally exhibitionistic female subjects—iconic 60s sex icon Eva Norvind

and contemporary porn goddess Stacy Valentine, respectively—but while *One Night in Paris* was (ostensibly) a source of embarrassment for its star, the women profiled in these documentaries strive to be the authors of their own exploitation.

The Norwegian-born Norvind, who moved from New York to Mexico at age ten and became a big-screen sex kitten in her teens before making a name as one of America's leading dominatrixes, speaks candidly in *Didn't Do It For Love* about her various fetishes and peccadilloes. At age 54, she's a grandmother who publicly dreams of urinating next to Madonna and generally rails against propriety. As an advocate for freedom of expression, she's persuasive, but Treut's film never makes the mistake of identifying too strongly with its subject: the frustrated lovers, friends and family members left in Norvind's wake indicate that her stream-of-consciousness outspokenness has its serious drawbacks. The crucial point of *Didn't Do it For Love* seems to be that Norvind's lifelong tendency to express herself through sex and little else isn't image construction or mere opportunism. She's the real deal.

As compelling as Norvind's story is, I actually prefer *The Girl Next Door*, and not only because its subject has been profiled in the full bloom of her voluptuousness. Director Christine Fugate is one sharp customer. Given access to document the activities of a world-famous porn star, she trains her camera on the banalities and disappointments of Stacy Valentine's day-to-day existence. Of course, they're not your garden-variety banalities: attending adult-film awards shows as a nominee and undergoing plastic surgery to get a leg up on your colleagues aren't events in everybody's day-planner. But by emphasizing these clearly unsexy elements (the up-close plastic surgery sequences are a different kind of hardcore), Fugate ensures that Valentine's humanity is privileged even as those around her routinely treat her as an object.

Pretty much anybody who agrees to have a documentary made about them, from Eva Norvind and Stacy Valentine to decidedly less sexy folks like Fred “Mr. Death” Leuchter, Jr. or Tammy Faye Bakker, is to some degree an exhibitionist. Even those sainted godfathers of “direct cinema,” the Maysles brothers have asserted that their unforgettable *Grey Gardens* subjects, Big and Little Edie Beale, exaggerated their natural eccentricity when in front of the camera. Neither Eva Norvind nor Stacey Valentine would dispute that they thrive on the attention their lifestyles invite, but what makes them different from a media sponge like Paris Hilton is that they're upfront about what they're peddling.

Adam Nayman is a freelance writer in Toronto. He would like to thank Tanya for keeping a straight face during his semiotic digressions on the Paris Hilton sex tape.

Noelle Elia seeks to anthropomorphize positive emotions through smart 'n sexy creative expression. She's also on the prowl for an *Inside Deep Throat* poster.

That may be why the films themselves aren't even within shouting distance of being sexy. As a general rule, the documentary form is not especially conducive to sensuality. It's all talking heads but no bodies, informational voice-over without poetry. Fantasy is sexy but good journalists, and documentarians, should reveal the magician behind the curtain. Both *Didn't Do It For Love* and *The Girl Next Door* should be applauded for the tact, rigor, and sensitivity with which they approach their potentially succulent subject matter, dry it out, and thus blue-ball our expectations. The consequence of their job well done, however, is that there's no turn-on whatsoever. Any five minutes of Claire Denis' sublime 2002 romance *Vendredi Soir*—which, come to think of it, could also appropriately be titled *One Night in Paris*—is far more arousing than these comparatively explicit films, because its aesthetics are designed towards pleasure rather than reportage. The moment sex becomes intellectualized, as it is in these documentaries, or in the features of Catherine Breillat, any sort of primal interest becomes disengaged. Call it the mental equivalent of a cold shower.

It could be argued, perhaps, that porn films are a form of documentary reportage. The sex is real, rather than simulated, which might qualify as a kind of cinema vérité. But the construction of a surrounding fiction, however tenuous (like that dude without a shirt knows how to fix a photocopier!) is the sticking point. Pornography, as Breillat argues in her excellent 2004 meta-film *Anatomy of Hell*, is a matter of point of view. Images of the human body are not inherently pornographic—it's the intention behind the gaze. Which is not to say that a film like *Vendredi Soir* is merely elevated pornography, but rather that its agenda as art nullifies any attempt at an objective representation of sexuality.

But what about *One Night in Paris*? The sex is real, there's no attempt at constructing a narrative, and from what I hear, it's devoid of aesthetics—they just hit the record button and got down to business. If it's not quite pornography, what is it? Maybe the unholy spawn of sex and documentary: do-it-yourself exhibitionism with no ambitions towards art and, if its authors are to be believed, never intended for widespread use as an educational tool. Suddenly, I'm just a little bit interested. The Paris Paradigm? Now that's hot.



I'LL SHOW YOU MINE.

Didn't Do It For Love

By Noelle Elia

"NO ONE LISTENS TO CLEVER DEBATE WHEN THEY'RE LOOKING AT NIPPLES."

—*The Observer*

"DOCUMENTARIES ARE THE LAST REMAINING LIBERAL MEDIA FORM."

—*The Washington Post*

The slogan, "Is documentary the new porn?" is all the rage these days. Are documentaries sexy? Are docs on sex arousing? Did *Born into Brothels* win the Oscar over *Super Size Me* because it's a sexier film? After lengthy Al Green/Grace Jones-infused contemplation on this vast philosophical quandary, I have concluded docs can be sexy, but not enough of them are. Pinpointing exactly what makes a film, a person or a song "sexy" is like an erotic Delphic riddle: slippery, mysterious and highly subjective. Taste is relative. "What's hot" changes with the seasons; what once was transgressive is now simply fodder for Reality TV run amok.

As a salve for our libidinous imaginations, this year's Hot Docs Documentary Festival offers "Show Me Yours," a retrospective of sexually-themed films. There are two Kirby Dick features—

Private Practices: The Story of a Sex Surrogate (1986) and *Sick: The Life and Death of Bob Flanagan* (1997). Watching Bob stave off death through extreme sexual and creative expression still moves me after all these years. It's a hot-blooded love story in all its idiosyncratic splendor. *O Amor Natural* (1997) by Heddy Honingmann is a potential audience favorite, steeped in saudade (nostalgia and unfulfilled desires): elderly Brazilians reflect on their sex lives while reciting erotic poetry on the streets of Rio. A trendy doc theme—housewife lured by *Hustler*, plastic surgery and Vivid dreams—compels Stacy Valentine in *The Girl Next Door* (1999) by Christine Fugate. *Didn't Do It For Love* (1997) by Monica Treut is dominated by Eva Norvind/Ava Taurel's "variously sexually liberated lives." EvalAva poses the quintessential self-reflexive question: "I often wonder what of 'me' is in this film and if 'I,' who 'I' consider 'me,' am going to be present ever." It's all about representation, baby.

If pornographers claim to be the first indie filmmakers, are "docographers" the new boundary-breaking trailblazers? Documentary and porn make compatible bedfellows—they're both inherently voyeuristic and exhibitionistic—and each seeks to satisfy our innate curiosity and fly-on-the-wall urge. No matter how "natural" it may seem everyone knows there's a camera rolling. Pornography, in essence, is a kind of documentary filmmaking—those people really are having sex—so crisp distinctions become hazy. Quite the "who's doing whom" semiotic wet dream, all gazes and guises. While cruising Google I was reminded that, "on PBS you can watch documentaries about porn without feeling guilty." And with *Real Sex* going into its 11th season, we have HBO to thank for much of the mainstreaming of the deliciously déclassé.

As a legit voyeur, you can indulge in racy biographies of pleasure pioneers, exposés on dozens of deviant lifestyles, softcore experimental art snacks, the ever-popular "porn vs. academia" bent, gay, lesbian and trans-gendered issues, the moral majority vs. the mainstream, various historical/socio-political angles, the list goes on and on. Documentaries on sex are like lovers—some are fantastic while others are merely forgettable.

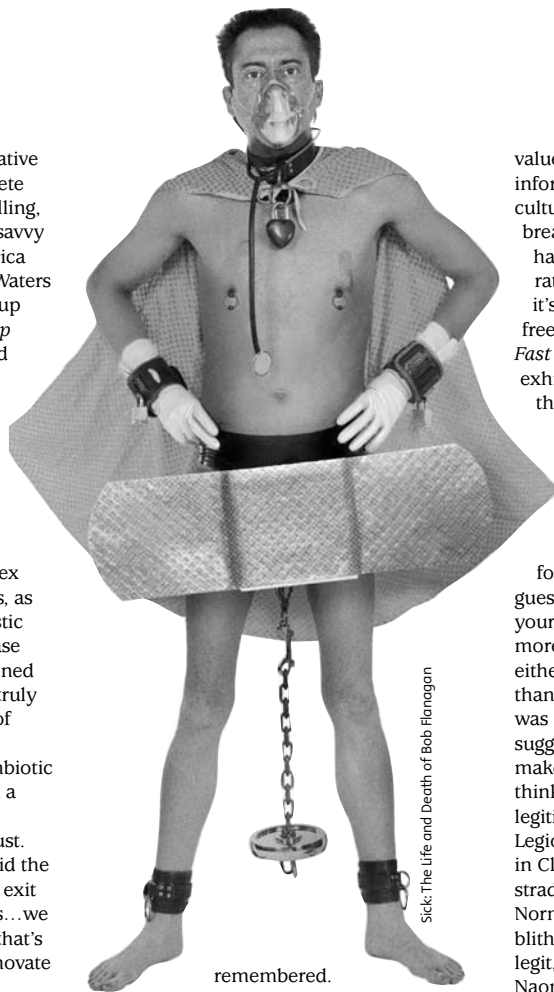
Inside Deep Throat (2005) is my newest flame. This is the latest bonbon from Fenton Bailey and Randy Barbato (*The Eyes of Tammy Faye*; *Party Animal*)

and it's one helluva fun and informative joyride. It delivers the goods, complete with a nice after-glow: great storytelling, stellar music, snappy graphics and savvy editing, and access to the likes of Erica Jong, Gore Vidal, Larry Flynt, John Waters and Dr. Ruth. Norman Mailer sums up both films nicely by saying that *Deep Throat* "was a giggle. America would sell its soul for a giggle." You can always count on a good doc to get the energy moving.

What I find sexy in life and in documentary has evolved as I have, as an artist, an intellectual, a sex-positive feminist and pleasure activist, and as a filmmaker. I have more stringent expectations: complex sensual/ideological wants and needs, as well as multi-layered aesthetic/stylistic likes and dislikes. I'm harder to please because my taste is persnickety, refined and often irreverent. A mon avis, a truly sizzling documentary is chock-full of flavorful sustenance: unique visual landscapes, colorful characters, symbiotic sounds and a damn good story. Add a healthy dash of irony and humility. Intelligence and great style are a must. Fashion designer Giorgio Armani said the goal for his latest collection was "to exit from my own clichés, my own rules...we all must conquer the inertia." Now that's sexy—breaking free, pushing to innovate and create the unknown.

Thank heaven for the gems that plunge us deep into the crimson heart of human experience, veering from the conceptually safe and aesthetically narrow. Savor these delicacies: *Notebook on Cities and Clothes*, Wim Wenders (1989); *No Sex Last Night*, Sophie Calle (1992); *Fast, Cheap and Out of Control*, Errol Morris (1997); *Tina in Mexico*, Brenda Longfellow (2002)*; *Rivers and Tides: Andy Goldsworthy Working with Time*, Thomas Reidelsheimer (2002); *Searching for the Wrong-Eyed Jesus*, Andrew Douglas (2004); *The White Diamond*, Werner Herzog, (2004). Each one singularly satisfies an insistent, powerful hunger within me. Films with passionate, strong points of view, they fulfill their dharmic duty by expanding and altering me for the better.

Gazing out at the sparkling horizontal sweep of a late-winter skyline in midtown Toronto, I know a documentary is sexy when it reeks of pure creativity, traveling beneath the obvious surfaces. A sexy doc stimulates the senses, is full of flair and savoir faire, and demands to be



Sick: The Life and Death of Bob Flanagan

remembered.

Like true love, it stands the test of time. It's a "where to from here" aphrodisiac, grounded in the real world while simultaneously daring to dream beyond it. Inspired creativity is a real turn-on. Optimism is titillating. Intelligence is adored. Attention to detail, seductive. Wit and irony are always appreciated. Genuine curiosity sparks things up and emotional risk-taking is hot! So shed the shackles of dry documentaries and embrace sexy docs today!

RESPONSE TO NOELLE

By Adam Nayman

Firstly, I have a truly shameful admission: despite numerous opportunities, I haven't seen *Inside Deep Throat*. I probably should, because it's a study of a seminal work, because the reviews are good, and because directors Fenton Bailey and Randy Barbato are sharp customers. That said, neither *Party Animal* nor *The Eyes of Tammy Faye* strike me as particularly sexy—I don't recall anything better-than-TV production

values. But, as filmmakers, they are funny, informative, and attuned to the pop culture frequency. I agree with you that breaking free is sexy, and that while I harbour no lion-tamer or naked mole rat fetishes (at least not that I know of) it's still true that a galumphing, near free-associative film like Errol Morris' *Fast Cheap and Out Of Control* is

exhilarating, and thus, more of a turn-on, than a format-conscious documentary that's explicitly about sex. Seems we've been spanking the same theoretical monkey (the porn-as-doc-question) and, perhaps disappointingly for what is

intended as a saucy little back-and-forth, we're in all kinds of agreement. I guess the one major sticking point is that your list of successfully sexy docs is far more expansive than mine, which means either that I'm even more persnickety than you or that I need to get out more. I was somewhat taken aback by your suggestion that watching documentaries makes us "legit voyeurs." I happen to think my voyeurism is already pretty legitimate, whether I'm watching the Legionnaires run through their exercises in Claire Denis' *Beau Travail*, or Betty straddling Rita in *Mulholland Drive*, or Norman Bates watching Marion Crane blithely disrobe in *Psycho*. (They're too legit, in fact, to quit, especially where Naomi Watts is involved.) The idea that documentary mainstreams the previously outré or déclassé is true, I guess: not even David Lynch could or would stage some of Bob Flanagan's self-masochistic tableaux. Yet I don't feel the need to be validated in my Peeping Tom tendencies, and PBS' intimation of a guiltless guilty pleasure seems about as exciting as one of their pledge drives.

What I do like about a movie like *Paris is Burning*, Jennie Livingston's early 90s exposé about New York City "drag balls" is that it resists the temptation to ennoble its subjects—or pander to its audience. It assumes that we'll recognize that the drag queens' voguing is informed by a passionate desire to engage with a harshly closed-off society on their own terms, and doesn't belabour the point by having them express that desire verbally. The film's gaze is transparent in the best way, because it allows us to see without directing us how we should watch. This, I think, should be the goal of any documentary, sexy or not. *Fahrenheit 9/11* lost me the moment Michael Moore felt compelled to add narration over the

footage of Dubya at his moment of crisis: his craven expression spoke more eloquently than any superimposed stream-of-consciousness.

Hence, my reversal of position on *One Night in Paris*: in light of our correspondence, I'm fascinated by the promise of seeing somebody who acts deceptively self-aware for a living get caught (literally and figuratively) with her pants down, without any calculated reality-television framework to mediate the irony. Tell you what: let's both promise to download it and we'll confer as to whether it's either a bold opening salvo in a new "skinema verité" movement or just a badly-lit home movie with naughty bits.

SHE SAID...

By Noelle Elia

Why didn't I admit that it wasn't good for me either? Why the red-hot white lie? My sass-o-meter reading for "Show Me Yours" was noticeably limp—the selection resembled made-for-TV dinner-docs rather than a sensually-charged realist's feast. How I feel watching a film is my gauge, and like love, there's no precise formula. I know I need to be stimulated by innovative storytelling. Oh, to be steeped in nuance, teased by the veils of cinematographic seduction, to relinquish control and surrender. C'est vrai, a few minutes of Claire Denis' *Vendredi Soir* gets the blood flowing more sublimely than three hours combined of *Didn't Do It For Love* and *The Girl Next Door*: Though I do love *Sick*. No conceptual tricks, but the film's got Bob and Sheree—that's plenty. I may not be into pain, but hope is dope; and I'm addicted to humanity's enduring ability to astonish and amuse.

Like bawling my eyes out during *The White Diamond*: falling crazy in love with the story, the people in it, and with Werner Herzog yet again. I willingly succumbed to being wrapped in layers of emotion: the transcendent glory of dreams realized, the



Vendredi Soir

release of guilt and sorrow, the expansive silence of breathtaking, natural beauty. Once the film was over, I was totally spent, happily exhausted.

A documentary can dazzle by celebrating a precise moment of time. *Paris is Burning* crystallizes, with glitter and grit, the twilight of New York City before its Guiliani-Disney sterilization. I love *Little Sister's vs. Big Brother* for capturing one bookstore's noble, relentless fight against censorship, and because one of my favorite writers, the recently trans-generated Pat Califia, is in it.

Sometimes a doc is sexy because of a lingering, isolated memory: In *Under Wraps*, the Museum of Menstruation—run by a middle-aged man in the basement of his suburban home—stands out. In *Erotica*, meeting a top-ranking Parisian mistress who also happens to be the wife of esteemed author, Alain Robbe-Grillet, was a revelation. Such Chanel-chic deviance, I was filled with indiscreet imaginings and a strange sort of envy. In *Tongues Untied*, the body heat prevails; in *Nitrate Kisses*, it's the artistry of Barbara Hammer.

The fiercely anti-porn, NFB-produced *Not a Love Story* was originally banned in Ontario for its apparently crude content. However, as an aficionado in *Screwed* asserts, "a world with no porn is a world with no imagination." Annie Sprinkle's *Herstory of Porn* is a sparkly tour de force and must-see for all aspiring pleasure activists. *Fetishes* is classic Nick Broomfield—watching him negotiate access amid adult diapers and chains in an exclusive Manhattan House of Domination. And *Porn Star, Sex: The Annabel Chong Story* and *Angelyne* all energetically pump away as no-frills, fluffy docs.

Paris-based artist Sophie Calle's *No Sex Last Night* remains my favorite sexy documentary. I saw it years ago but still remember how it made me feel: fragile, empowered, impatient and humbled. The film unnerved me with its sheer willingness to risk disclosure, to be so intimately privy to the unraveling of love. I left hungry for realness—both erotic and emotional.

Which is why I can't cough up any ironic repartee about Paris Hilton. Poor thing was caught shoplifting recently, trying to swipe her lil' skin flick. Was it a desperate attempt to reclaim her pseudo-private life or a cute publicity stunt? Instead, I'll take The Paris Paradigm. Just the other night, while writing this piece, I received a phone call from Paris. Across the Atlantic, a man played me Leonard Cohen's "Dance me to the end of love." Imagine that on film...s-e-x-y! **POV**

POV'S

SE XXXY

dox primer

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The Queen (1968)

Frank Simon

Not a Love Story (1981)*

Bonnie Sher Klein

The Times of Harvey Milk (1983)

Robert Epstein

Chicken Ranch (1983)

Nick Broomfield

Paris is Burning (1990)

Jennie Livingston

Tongues Untied (1991)

Marlon Riggs

Split: Portrait of a Drag Queen (1992)

Ellen Fisher, Andrew Weeks

Nitrate Kisses (1993)

Barbara Hammer

Forbidden Love (1993)*

Lynne Fernie, Aerlyn Weissman

Fetishes (1996)

Nick Broomfield

Under Wraps (1996)*

Teresa MacInnes

Erotica (1997)*

Maya Gallus

Herstory of Porn (1999)

Annie Sprinkle/Scarlot Harlot

Sex: The Annabel Chong Story (2000)

Gough Lewis

Pornstar: The Legend of Ron Jeremy (2001)

Scott Gill

Bad Girl (2001)*

Marielle Nitoslawa

Little Sister's vs. Big Brother (2002)*

Aerlyn Weissman

*Canada

— Noelle Elia