

People, Places, Power

A Review of the KDocsFF 2023 Social Justice Film Festival

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Returning to a fully in-person program after a two-year pandemic-induced pivot online, KDocsFF 2023 marked twelve years and an eighth annual festival by delivering its most ambitious program of social justice-oriented documentary films to date. Vancouver's VIFF Centre played host to the diverse yet cohesively curated official selection of 25 films screened in two theatres over five chilly days (22–26 February). Festival-goers who braved the snow were rewarded with a generous roster of keynote speakers, film-makers, and other notable guests attending in person or streaming in from locations as remote as Berlin and Kansas. This year's welcome introduction of double-feature pairings allowed for deeper explorations of shared themes and some riveting and lively joint panel discussions (Fig. 1).

The theme of this year's festival was "People. Places. Power.," which KDocsFF Founder and Festival Director Janice Morris explains, "[d]erives from the ways in which speaking back to injustice is always rooted in the power of individuals and their unbreakable ties to place and space." For such a potentially all-encompassing theme, the KDocsFF team put together a commendably focused program of films that—in this reviewer's eyes—offers vital and complementary perspectives on some key political issues of our times, including how digital technology challenges yet also reinforces age-old power structures; how the colonial exploitation of land and natural resources alienates and sickens the human body and spirit; and the complex ways that communities transform, contest, and give meaning to the places they inhabit.

The opening night double feature explored how virtual spaces of the internet increasingly distort—and intrude



Fig. 1 | KDocsFF 2023 showcased 25 films over five days at the Vancouver International Film Centre. Faiz Alriaz/Vandem Media, 2023.

into—the political and embodied spaces of people's lived realities. Introducing *The YouTube Effect* (2022), director Alex Winter recounts his utopian optimism during the early days of the internet, describing how he found "legitimate community" in new social spaces carved out by users of peer-to-peer music-sharing services like Napster. Two decades on, the wild, liberating potential of the internet has given way to an attention economy that monetizes distraction and divisiveness, corralling our social interactions through the advertising-clogged domains of a handful of corporate tech behemoths, such as Google, Meta, and Twitter, whose massive fortunes allow them to evade meaningful regulation. With an



Fig. 2 | KDocsFF 2023 Opening Night Joint Panelists Alex Winter, Carol Todd, Guylaine Maroist, and Avriel Epps-Darling discuss *The YouTube Effect* and *Backlash: Misogyny in the Digital Age*. Faiz Alriaz/Vandem Media, 2023.

entertaining blend of outrage and wry humour, *The YouTube Effect* documents how the video-hosting giant progressed from cat videos to social engineering. The “effect” in question ranges from the steady erosion of usability in pursuit of profits—what cultural critic and science-fiction author Cory Doctorow terms the “enshittification” of the internet—to the fostering of toxic online echo-chambers and the worst of our antisocial impulses.

Maroist and Clermont-Dion’s *Backlash: Misogyny in the Digital Age* (2022) zooms in on a particularly worrisome part of this phenomenon: the ways social media facilitate and even encourage the age-old scourge of misogyny. The film chronicles online misogyny through a series of vignettes—a woman of colour harassed out of home and political office by targeted bigotry, culminating in physical threats; teenage girls driven to self-harm by sexploitation and revenge porn; a cohort of medical students stalked online with threats and abuse by a male peer using social media “sock puppet” accounts. The internet poses a specific challenge to the documentarian: how to bring visual interest and drama to subject matter that often plays out in lines of text on touch-screens. *Backlash* rises to the challenge, deploying a recurring device where real-life victims of online misogyny gaze for sustained periods directly into the camera, with the words of abuse and threats they suffered superimposed on the screen, printed on objects and signs within the shot, or even scrawled directly on the women’s skin. The powerfully confrontational tone of the film carried over into an intense and moving joint-panel discussion featuring Carol Todd—mother

of Amanda Todd, the BC teenager who brought cyberbullying’s devastating toll to national attention after her death by suicide in 2012 (Fig. 2).

The opening night’s films almost convinced me to log off from the internet for good, but three documentaries later in the week make the case for staying online. Drawing on smartphone camera footage of incredibly bloody clashes between police and public during the 2018 “yellow vest” protests in France, David Dufresne’s captivating *The Monopoly of Violence* (2020) questions whether the heavy-handed tactics that authorities used against the *gilets jaunes* (not to mention bystanders caught up in the fracas) violate the very principles of democracy they are supposed to defend. Dufresne’s approach is to assemble panels of citizens—including police representatives, injured protestors, journalists, and public intellectuals—and let the cameras roll as they debate the legitimacy of various police tactics captured on amateur video. The footage is grim stuff: people blinded and mutilated by “non-lethal” riot-control weapons, vicious beatings delivered by (and occasionally upon) police, youths rounded up en masse and forced to kneel in stress positions for hours on end. This material solicits some tense and revealing confrontations between impassioned panel members, interspersed with insightful academic analyses delivered by sociologists, invoking philosophers of power such as Michel Foucault, Pierre Bourdieu, and Max Weber. The film conspicuously omits any details about the political context of the yellow jackets protest—a shrewd decision that Dufresne confirmed in the post-screening discussion is intended to prevent the audience’s



Fig. 3 | KDocsFF 2023 Keynote Speaker and Joint Panelist David Dufresne introduces his film *The Monopoly of Violence*. Faiz Alriaz/Vandem Media, 2023.

sympathies for one side or the other from swaying their judgment on the abstract question of the “correct” role of violence in democracy (Fig. 3).

The panel discussion for *The Monopoly of Violence* delved into the question of *sousveillance*, the idea that technology such as smartphones and the internet allows citizens to turn the gaze of surveillance back on the powerful, holding them to account and exposing abuses of authority. *Sousveillance* is a central concern for two other films in the program, including the festival’s informal headliner, the Oscar-winning *Navalny* (2022). Daniel Roher’s HBO/CNN-produced documentary about the poisoning of Russian dissident and would-be political rival of Vladimir Putin, Alexei Navalny, has the pacing and plot of a nail-biting political thriller, featuring a charismatic anti-corruption activist, attempted murder via poisoned underwear, and an audacious online investigation that implicates Russian security operatives, setting up an unbearably tense confrontation at the film’s climax. The drama is almost enough to distract from some important questions that the film only touches upon: the character study focuses on Navalny’s everyman credentials (charming, devoted husband and father, video gamer), but reveals little about his actual political beliefs or objectives, permitting the subject himself to address and deflect legitimate concerns about his documented involvement with nationalist movements in Russia. *Navalny* portrays Bellingcat—the online investigative journalism collective that pulled off the remarkable investigation into Navalny’s poisoning—as “data nerds with laptops,” without exploring the presumably significant fact

that they are funded by NATO-aligned organizations like the National Endowment for Democracy. There’s little doubt that Alexei Navalny is an incredibly brave person whose ongoing persecution is an unjust suppression of dissent, and my hope is that future documentaries about him prioritize analysis over spectacle. Throughout the week, the KDocsFF panel discussions provided an invaluable opportunity for the audience to pick up conversations that documentaries started; that there wasn’t a panel for *Navalny*, with its clear relevance to a war in Ukraine that is at the forefront of public concern, seems like a missed opportunity.

The second film to engage with *sousveillance* is Sushmit Ghosh and Rintu Thomas’s *Writing with Fire* (2022), which follows a group of journalists who work for *Khabar Lahariya*, an all-women newspaper in India. As Dalit women living in the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh, the journalists inhabit the most precarious intersection of gender and caste discrimination. Traditionally considered “untouchables” in India’s caste system, Dalits typically live in impoverished conditions, restricted to the lowest-paying and least prestigious jobs, with—as the documentary reveals in harrowing detail—crimes against them as severe as sexual violence and murder routinely going unpunished (if even investigated in the first place). Provided training and smartphones by a UN-funded New Delhi non-profit organization dedicated to women’s literacy, the *Khabar Lahariya* journalists face huge risks to investigate and publish news stories that matter to their communities and to expose crimes and injustices in such stark terms that authorities and politicians are forced



Fig. 4 | KDocsFF 2023 Panelists Jennifer Baichwal, Melissa Lem, and Hans Forstbauer (with Carey Gillam on-screen) discuss *Into the Weeds: Dewayne “Lee” Johnson vs. Monsanto Company*. Faiz Alriaz/Vandem Media, 2023.

to respond. Ghosh and Thomas’s extraordinarily moving debut feature provides a humbling reminder that the smartphones that many of us take for granted—or even decry as a source of distraction and social disengagement—can be life-transforming tools of sousveillance and empowerment in the hands of some of the world’s most oppressed people.

Speaking truth to power is an increasingly dangerous profession: the Committee to Protect Journalism report that at least 67 journalists were killed in 2022—many in direct retaliation for their work—an increase of 50% from the previous year (Archie). *The Cost of Freedom: Refugee Journalists in Canada* (2021) profiles three journalists who were granted refugee status in Canada after their lives came under threat for works published in their home countries of Mexico, Syria, and Turkey. James Cullingham’s film gives each journalist time to tell their own stories, each one unique but with common traumatic beats: the frantic blur of fear and flight, the wrenching pain of leaving homes and loved ones behind, and then the arduous and often depressing struggle to rebuild a life in a place where—no matter how welcoming or safe—their knowledge, language, and life’s work are not recognized. Listening to the journalists describe relocation as a form of existential rupture recalls Edward Said’s description of exile as “an unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted” (173).

The same traumatic rift—it seems to me—looms large in Luke Gleeson’s *DŌNE YIINJETL: The Scattering of Man* (2022) and Heather Hatch’s *Wochiigii lo: End of the Peace*

(2022), a pair of documentaries by First Nations filmmakers about the damage to land, water, and peoples wrought by two hydroelectric dam projects in British Columbia. In the joint panel discussion, Hatch, of the Haida Nation, and Gleeson, a member of the Tsay Keh Dene Nation, make compelling points about the true costs of a colonial attitude that views the earth as a resource to exploit rather than a home to respect and sustain: people are one with the land, and if we poison and disfigure it, we inevitably do the same to ourselves. This point is exemplified in Jennifer Baichwal’s outstanding *Into the Weeds: Dewayne “Lee” Johnson vs. Monsanto Company*, which documents the investigation and court battle to prove that the biggest chemicals firm in the world has suppressed evidence that its “miracle” glyphosate-based herbicide (marketed as Roundup) causes cancer in humans. The film explores the human cost of unchecked agricultural chemical usage through an intimate and painful portrait of plaintiff Dwayne “Lee” Johnson, who developed non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma after being doused in Roundup in a groundskeeping accident. The informative and entertaining panel discussion—featuring a passionate contribution from Chilliwack-based organic farmer, Hans Forstbauer—explored strategies to fight the financial and political might of the chemical industry and the ways that sustainable farming practices can be adapted to meet the global population’s growing agricultural needs (Fig. 4).

The epitome of colonialism’s exploitative evils is found in slavery. *A Story of Bones* is a deeply sad documentary about the discovery of the remains of thousands of “freed slaves” during



Fig. 5 | KDocsFF 2023 Panelist Moira Wyton (moderator), Sarah Blyth, Trey Helten, Norma Vaillancourt, and Colin Askey discuss *Love in the Time of Fentanyl*. Faiz Alriaz/Vandem Media, 2023.

an airport construction project on Saint Helena, part of the British Overseas Territory in the South Atlantic Ocean that served as a waypoint during the transatlantic slave trade. The documentary follows Namibian-born environmental officer Annina van Neel's campaign to identify the bodies, provide them a respectful final resting place, and memorialize their place in Saint Helena's history. Though van Neel's efforts garner support from locals and international solidarity with supporters of the African Burial Ground memorial in New York, sufficient funding from the British government is delayed and never fully materializes. van Neel's despair becomes palpable as she seems to realize that, for many people, the remains of enslaved Africans are part of a shameful past they'd rather forget than take responsibility for. Parallels can be found in Colin Askey's *Love in the Time of Fentanyl*, a documentary about a safe and welcoming drug-use facility for the marginalized inhabitants of Vancouver's Downtown East Side. Millions of dollars pour into gentrifying developments in Vancouver each year, but barely a trickle is spent on the city's scandalous public health crisis of overdose deaths caused by a criminalized drug supply adulterated with benzodiazepines and powerful narcotics like fentanyl, paired with a lack of sanitary, monitored places where people can safely use. The Overdose Prevention Society (OPS) was born of the compassion and desperation of community members who saw their friends and neighbours dying and understood that nobody else would do what needed to be done. Askey's film shadows OPS workers as they care for their clients, offering glimpses into the life events that

brought them to the community and conveying the immense toll it takes when each day is a Sisyphean struggle to ward off death. Some of the most poignant scenes feature the growing numbers of memorials that cover the walls and alleyways—graffiti artworks, personal messages to lost loved ones, simple lists of names. A few streets away, affluent clientele browse the boutiques of luxury retailers, oblivious to their proximity to such a sacred site (Fig. 5).

The cumulative effect of over two dozen social justice documentaries—even ones as consistently excellent as these—can test an audience's emotional resilience! It was therefore most welcome that the final day of KDocsFF 2023 celebrated the endurance of the activist spirit and the defining role of the creative arts in communities, bringing the festival to an upbeat, energizing conclusion. A late addition to the program, Carmen Pollard's punchy short, *Militant Mother* (2021), pits a group of women from Vancouver's Raymur neighbourhood against the Canadian National trains that routinely blocked the school commute of neighbourhood kids in 1970. The locomotives proved no match for Carolyn Jerome's band of mothers whose determined track blockades forced the company to concede. Teresa Alfeld's *Jean Swanson: We Need a New Map* (2021), a study in tenacity about Vancouver's most well-known anti-poverty political activist, was a repeat showing from KDocsFF 2022. Jean's presence on the panel was justification enough for the reprise, and it was moving to witness so many in attendance pay tribute to her inspiring example of public service. Finally, a second repeat from last year,

Spencer Wilkinson's *Alice Street* (2020) chronicles the saga of the Alice Street mural—a vast work of street art designed to honour and represent the diverse and storied communities of one of North America's most artistically fertile neighbourhoods in Oakland, California. Alice Street mural artists Desi Mundo and Pancho Pescador—who were in town collaborating on a Vancouver mural with KPU Artist- and Writer-in-Residence Brandon Gabriel—joined the panel to detail how their Alice Street mural project sparked a philosophical exploration of what it means to represent a community through art and helped spark a larger mobilization in Oakland against gentrification (Fig. 6).

A message I took from *Alice Street*—that art is a conversation within community rather than a representation standing outside it—is one I took from KDocsFF 2023 as a whole. The program of films felt like a revealing conversation, one I'm looking forward to rejoining in 2024. ■



Fig. 6 | KDocsFF 2023 Closing Night Joint Panelists Teresa Alfeld, Carmen Pollard, Brandon Gabriel, Desi Mundo, Pancho Pescador, Jean Swanson, and Spencer Wilkinson discuss *Militant Mother*, *Jean Swanson: We Need a New Map*, and *Alice Street*. Faiz Alriaz/Vandem Media, 2023.

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