

FROM SOUP TO NUTS (AND BOLTS) The International Documentary Congress

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More than 750 individuals attended the International Documentary Congress, a first-time event, held in Los Angeles last October 21-23. The International Documentary Association (IDA), which presented this three-day congress along with the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, went out of its way to bring in a wide range of panelists from 17 countries who were

Rob Epstein (*The Times of Harvey Milk*), Renee Tajima (*Who Killed Vincent Chin?*), Trinh T. Minh-ha (*Surname Viet, Given Name Nam*) and many others took part. The event culminated in an awards dinner, in which a special Lifetime Achievement Award was presented to Walter Cronkite.

The greatest strength of the Congress was the juxtaposition of panels giving concrete information alongside those that dealt with ethical and theoretical issues. Perhaps the most informative panel was that which opened the congress: Find-

tary production Mike Cascio also said the network needs to see something in writing ("not a phone call"), but noted a short treatment of one or two pages would suffice. The producer should also include biographical information and spell out why he or she would be the best person to make the film. "The single base factor of whether a documentary gets on A&E is subject matter," Cascio stated. "There are three basic things A&E is doing right now and looking for: historical documentaries, which can be one at a time or a limited series; contemporary journalistic documentaries; and occasional nature and adventure shows."

Andrea Taylor, director of media projects at the Ford Foundation, said that the foundation does give money to media, but the projects must relate to one of the six areas Ford is interested in. These include international affairs; education and culture; governing and public policies; rights and social justice; rural poverty and resources; and urban poverty. While the Ford Foundation will consider funding any stage of a production, it never funds more than 20 to 30 percent of the entire cost. Additionally, the foundation looks at the ethnic and gender breakdown of the staff submitting the proposal.

Representatives from NEH, ITVS, CPB, PBS, HBO, and TBS ("a consortium of initials," quipped one filmmaker) rounded out the panel. (They are the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Independent Television Service, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, the Public Broadcasting Service, Home Box Office, and Turner Broadcasting System.) Whereas the cable networks had a general air of optimism regarding the work of independents, the others stressed the high degree of competitiveness.

Unfortunately, the next panel—Funding in the Global Marketplace—did not prove to be as informative. The five panelists, representing filmmakers, buyers, and programmers, seemed either discouraging or beyond reach. Mick Csaky, an independent producer from London, works way beyond the scope of most of the assembled film- and videomakers. He talked about taking his initial seed money (about \$10,000-12,000) and using it to fly around the globe (Japan, Europe, US) to get further commitments. Additionally, he tries to sell a 12-part series rather than a single piece.

The representative from Japan's public station NHK reported that it had participated in more than 20 coproductions in 1992. It's a situation that they'd like to increase, he noted, but by contribut-

ing equipment rather than money. Francois Levie of Belgium, a producer and authority on European fundraising sources, was less encouraging. She lamented the fact that every filmmaker in her country eventually must go to the television channel Canal Plus in France for funding. Since Canal Plus won't cover all the costs, it's necessary to approach France 2 and then go to the film markets, selling the work again and again—a process familiar to many US producers. On top of it, the documentary must have a distinct style, one that takes on the identity of the producer's country and can still be translated into at least eight languages.

A panel dealing with censorship brought together American and foreign filmmakers whose experiences were quite different. Patricio Guzman, who had once been imprisoned in Chile's National Stadium, recounted how he had to smuggle footage out of Chile, which he later edited into *The Battle of Chile*. Guzman, now a resident of Spain, sees censorship in the broadest sense, blaming the abundance of fiction films for removing us from reality. "We live in a dictatorship of fiction that asphyxiates us," he said. He also questioned the fact that filmmakers had begun to make "weird" documentaries to compete with fiction.

Marina Goldovskaya, a filmmaker who teaches at the University of Moscow, has a different take on censorship. She said, "There's no censorship at all" in today's Russia, but because of that, a new problem has arisen: now that the information barriers are down, everyone can say anything they want to say, and much of this information is reported in the media, whether reliable or not. Leonid Gurevitch, who is with the Associate Soviet Kino Initiative, added that censorship of the dollar is worse than censorship of the state.

In a panel called *Rocking the Boat*, which concerned itself largely with social documentaries, Michael Moore chastised filmmakers for being too serious and alienating a large part of their audience. Annoyed by the comic tone that Moore adapted, Guzman accused him of trying to turn the Congress into a cocktail party. Moore responded that he wasn't trying to be "silly," but to encourage documentarians to "lighten up a little bit" and stop being so removed from the people they wish to reach.

In general the Congress was anything but removed or silly. It addressed serious issues and concerns of documentarians as well as providing a rare opportunity to meet and network with other filmmakers whose speciality is the nonfiction form. The Congress was organized to mark the tenth anniversary of IDA. Harrison Engle, the IDA board of directors' chair, says they will probably do another congress at some point, though there are no plans to make it an annual event. "There's talk of future congresses," he said, "but certainly not this year." Then he added, "There's so much to discuss, and three days were not enough. It should have been a week long."

Karen Kramer is a documentary filmmaker living in New York.



"Funding in the American Market" panelists (L-R): Denise Baddour (Discovery), Michael Cascio (A&E), Karen Fuglie (NEH), Donald Marbury (CPB), Mary Jane McKinven (PBS), John Moss (HBO), Vivian Schiller (TBS), John Schott (ITVS), and Andrea Taylor (Ford Foundation).

Courtesy International Documentary Association

diverse in gender, ethnicity, and aesthetic orientation.

The congress was a real who's who of the documentary field. Foreign documentarians serving as panelists included Su Xiaokang (China), Jean Rouch (France), Marina Goldovskaya (Russia), Masami Goto (Japan), Patricio Guzman (Chile), and Dennis O'Rourke (Australia). From the US, filmmakers such as Michael Moore (*Roger & Me*), Bill Miles and Nina Rosenblum (*The Liberators*), Jonathan Stack (*Damned in the USA*),

ing Money in the American Marketplace. Nine funders from the major documentary TV showcases and foundations gave nuts-and-bolts advice on how to submit proposals, what their funding levels are, what they look for, and more.

Denise Baddour, who is with acquisitions at the Discovery and the Learning Channels, said they receive 2,000 proposals a year—all highly competitive. One reason why is that this organization's funding is on the high side, with top-end budgets for hour-long projects ranging from \$400,000 to \$600,000. Film/videomakers must submit their ideas in writing and sign a release letter, Baddour advised—a point echoed by the other panelists. The release letter—a bone of contention with many filmmakers—basically protects the Discovery Channel (but not the filmmaker) in the event that the station was already considering the same idea.

Arts & Entertainment's director of documen-