

filmcomment

>>art of the real

In its 20-year mission to bring nonfiction film to the masses, PBS doc showcase *P.O.V.* favors an up-close-and-personal approach/By Paul Arthur



Hence *P.O.V.* has become synonymous with “personal perspective.” Recently, it seems that almost every broadcast has a “family” hook—in 2005 the stated theme was “sons and fathers”; the following year it was “family and faith.”

Given a couple of spunky crusaders and an underreported, visually gripping inequity, the formula can work brilliantly. Broadcast last year, Vicki Funari and Sergio de la Torre’s *Maquilapolis: City of Factories* explores the confluence of heedless pollution and economic exploitation in Tijuana’s giant manufacturing facilities run by multinationals like Sony and Sanyo. Smartly relying on subjective diary footage taken by two untutored female organizers, the film bristles with anger, despair, hope, and a healthy dollop of self-conscious humor.

Public Interest

CONGRATULATIONS ARE IN ORDER ON THE 20TH ANNIVERSARY OF *P.O.V.*, public television’s premier showcase for American independent documentaries. Launched in 1988, or just ahead of the explosion in theatrical releases, *P.O.V.* has at once benefited from and helped fuel the mainstreaming of socially committed nonfiction. Unlike doc divisions at HBO and other networks, *P.O.V.* does not initiate projects but acquires broadcast rights for completed, or mostly completed, work. With over 250 programs under

its belt, the series sports an impressive list of Oscar, Emmy, and Peabody award winners and has presented key works by top-notch directors, including Frederick Wiseman, Michael Moore, Errol Morris, and the Maysles Brothers (albeit often in the guise of belated, “classic” broadcasts). To mark the anniversary, PBS, in partnership with ace distributor Docu-rama, has issued a 15-DVD box set; if not exactly a greatest-hits collection, it encapsulates the series’ heady thematic and formal breadth.

In the early Nineties, *P.O.V.* was thrust into the harsh glare of our reactionary culture wars, courtesy of noted libertarian Jesse Helms, after broadcasting Marlon Riggs’s cantata to black male homosexuality, *Tongues Untied* (91), which was partly financed by an NEA grant. The ensuing congressional furor led to yet another attempt to defund public TV and, perhaps as important, established the series’ reputation as a forum for stylistic innovation. Indeed there have been, in addition to a swarm of terrific movies, occasional stabs at cutting-edge patronage: Stephanie Black’s essayistic dissection of the Jamaican economy, *Life and Debt* (01), and Monteith McCollum’s quirky avant-doc hybrid, *Hybrid* (02), are two sterling examples. That said, despite claims by folks like *P.O.V.* founder

Marc Weiss and longtime executive director Cara Mertes that the series relentlessly “pushes the envelope,” its vanguard reputation is largely unearned.

P.O.V. CAME LATE TO THE FIRST-PERSON documentary party and has generally eschewed more intellectually rigorous idioms such as the political essay or historical compilation. Especially over the last decade, a loose generic formula has emerged in treating a spectrum of issues from environmental depredation to immigrant labor to disability rights and school prayer. Built around the portrait of a single dynamic figure or small group of interrelated subjects, typical *P.O.V.* offerings pair interviews with observational scenes; they also tend to make minimal use of factual intertitles and expert talking heads. In other words, urgent present-tense problems are “humanized,” exemplified by individuals in local contexts whose plight may or may not adequately reflect what is at stake politically on a national or international scale.

This year’s *Prison Town, USA*, by Katie Galloway and Po Kutichins, takes a similar approach to the boom in California’s corrections industry but epitomizes what happens when the focus is too narrow or the problem too complex for a braid of (admittedly sympathetic) stories. Because *P.O.V.* prefers not to burden viewers with the tangled roots or spiraling ramifications of a given social ill, *Prison* makes an end run around the state’s draconian sentencing laws for nonviolent offenders, the paradox of rising prison populations amidst falling crime rates, and the swamp of racism underlying America’s criminal justice system. In the end, we have met some engaging prison guards and former inmates, through whose eyes an important topic has been nearly refracted, yet we come away with as many questions as when we started.

It is not that *P.O.V.* necessarily suffers from a lack of nerve—although its tepid coverage of globalization, a key political flashpoint since the Nineties, might involve fears of offending a PBS patron like agribiz titan Archer Daniels Midland—but that it succumbs to the lure of disseminating docs with progressive themes to the widest possible audience. Hence I’d be shocked if in today’s climate PBS went to bat for the kind of provocative genre-buster epitomized by *Tongues Untied*. By way of contrast, *Frontline*, since 1983 PBS’s flagship current-affairs series (drawing from both in-house and independent producers), has had few qualms about attacking corporate domination, albeit within rather stodgy visual formats.

AN ARENA IN WHICH THE SERIES’ social bona fides are rock solid is the promotion of creative diversity. For starters, women filmmakers are represented in nearly half the total programs broadcast since 1988, a commitment probably unequaled in any other sector of our media landscape. The recruitment of filmmakers of color, queer filmmakers, and artists with disabilities has, not surprisingly, been a crucial plank in the *P.O.V.* agenda. Yes, encouraging “marginalized voices” is a cause to which even troglodyte politicians pay lip service, but *P.O.V.* has gone much further. As doc scholar Pat Aufderheide points out, the series’ greatest legacy is less its individual films than the creation of an electronic public space, “where people go not only to get what they want to see, but also find out what other people are up to, what they think they need and are upset about.”

To this end, fostering community outreach initiatives—including study guides for films shown in schools, churches, and so on—and an interactive “Talking Back” component, in which taped viewer responses are occasionally broadcast in a continuing virtual dialogue, extend in practice a communitarian ethos often found in the films themselves. Throw in a mentoring program for emerging filmmakers and issue-based online discussion boards, and the modest prospectus of personalized storytelling suddenly widens into a model of what documentaries have always aspired to in their public impact: becoming direct—instead of just symbolic—catalysts for social change. Here’s to *P.O.V.*’s next 20 years! □