

The 10 Best Film Documentaries of 2008

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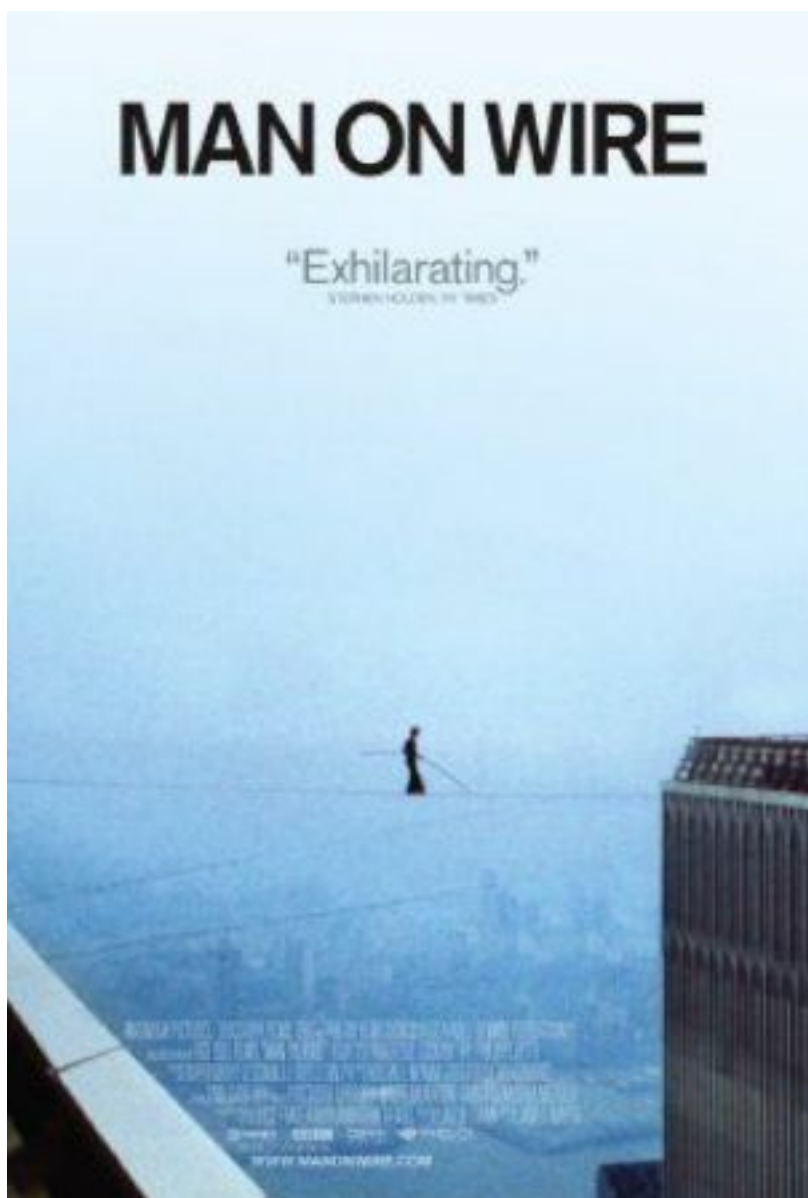
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CHICAGO – One of the most wonderful things about the world of documentary film is the complete unpredictability of the form. It seems much easier to look at a list of upcoming works from major and minor narrative directors and know what's going to stand out at the end of the year than to even attempt the same thing with an upcoming batch of documentaries.

Critics will tell you that they go into every film with a blank slate of opinion, but it's naive to think that we don't have different expectations for the next Coen brothers film than we do for the next Uwe Boll piece of "work." (You were expecting a different word to end that sentence, weren't you?) And most years shake out with a healthy mix of cinematic veterans and relative newcomers delivering movies of a somewhat predictable baseline of quality with a few healthy surprises sprinkled in between.

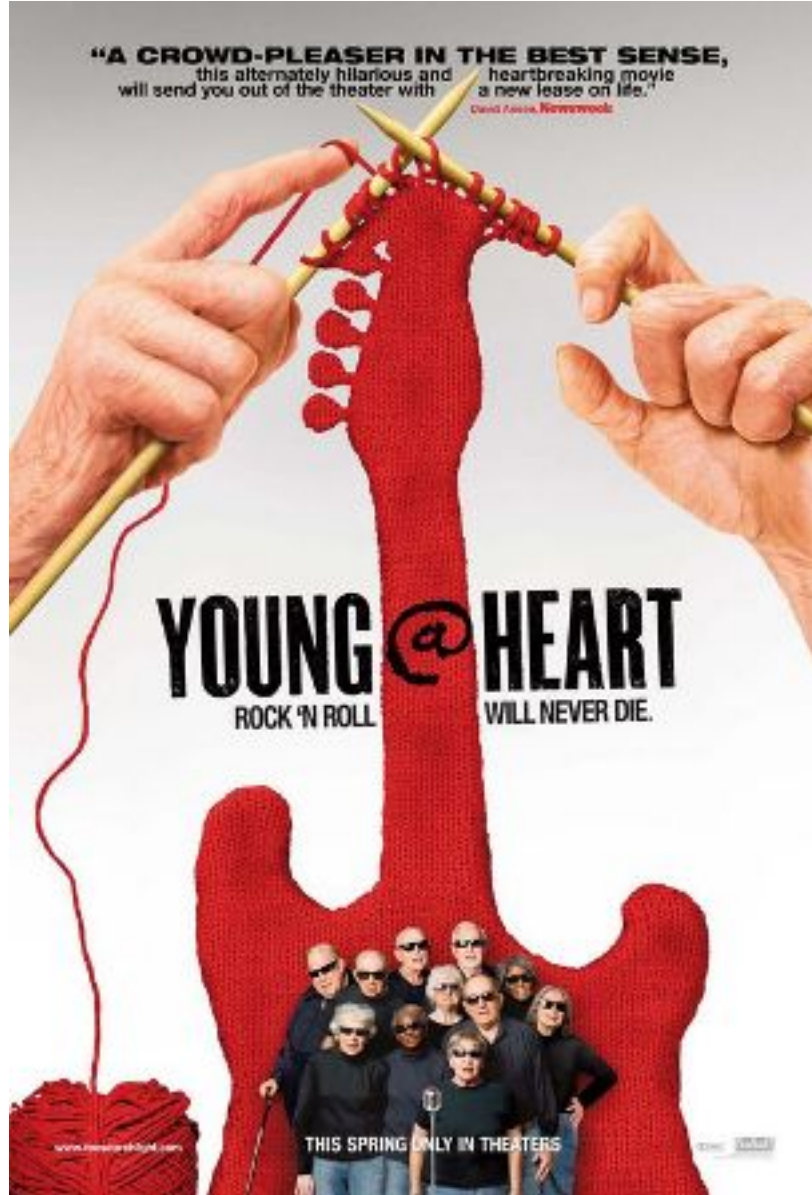
However, with rare exceptions, the world of documentaries usually follows much different and less predictable rules. Big names like Martin Scorsese, Bill Maher, Errol Morris, Morgan Spurlock, and last year's Oscar winner for "Taxi to the Dark Side," Alex Gibney, all released documentaries this year that didn't make the cut for the ten best. Meanwhile, newcomers with unpredictable subject matter that ranged from personal accounts of tragedy and triumph to international stories of controversy and climate change made 2008 one of the better years for non-fiction film in a long time. And none of us saw it coming.

Runner-ups: "American Teen", "At the Death House Door", "Flow", "Gonzo: The Life and Work of Dr. Hunter S. Thompson", "Kurt Cobain: About a Son", "Religulous", "Roman Polanski: Wanted and Desired", "Shine a Light", "Standard Operating Procedure", and "Surfwise."



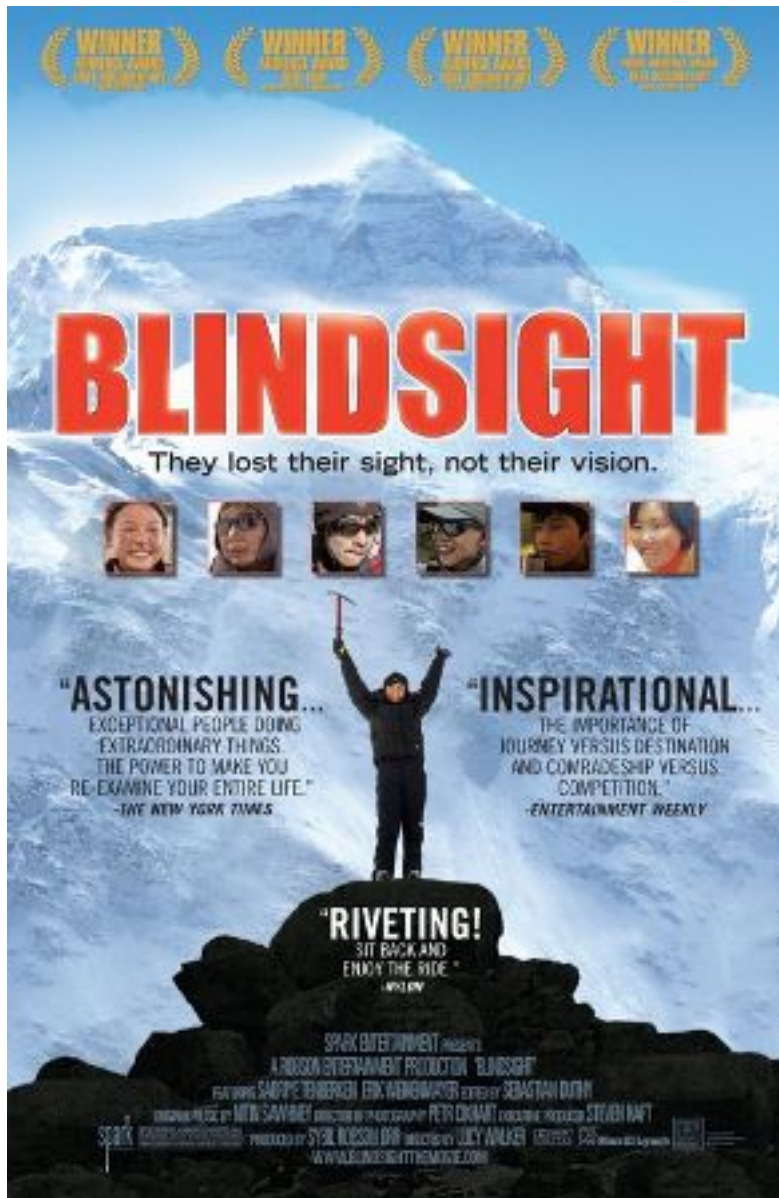
6. “Man on Wire”

James Marsh’s “Man on Wire” tells the story of Philippe Petit, a man who strung a wire between the towers of the World Trade Center on the morning of August 7th, 1974, and pulled off the artistic crime of the century. Petit had been building toward the event for months, working out details of the crime and assembling the team that would pull it off. Actually, he had been dreaming of the towers for years and spent eight months planning his specific performance of a lifetime. The people who pulled the Frenchman off the roof had no idea how to deal with him. Was he a criminal? Crazy? Both? Using archival footage and recent interviews with Petit, Marsh brings the completely unique story of “Man on Wire” to life.



5. “Young @ Heart”

Audiences will never forget the Young at Heart Chorus of Northampton, MA. With an average age of 81, they don’t sing your typical choir songs, choosing instead to perform works by artists as diverse as James Brown, Coldplay, and even Sonic Youth. When an elderly man who has just lost a good friend sings Coldplay’s “Fix You,” the emotional impact is impossible to deny. Only the most bitterly cynical critic would deny that the chorus brings a new layer of life experience to their music. Director Stephen Walker never makes his “Young@Heart” feel like exploitation, choosing to chronicle one heartbreaking year in the life of the chorus. And, quite simply, the Young at Heart Chorus rocks. You haven’t lived until you’ve heard an octogenarian sing “I Feel Good.” You will too.



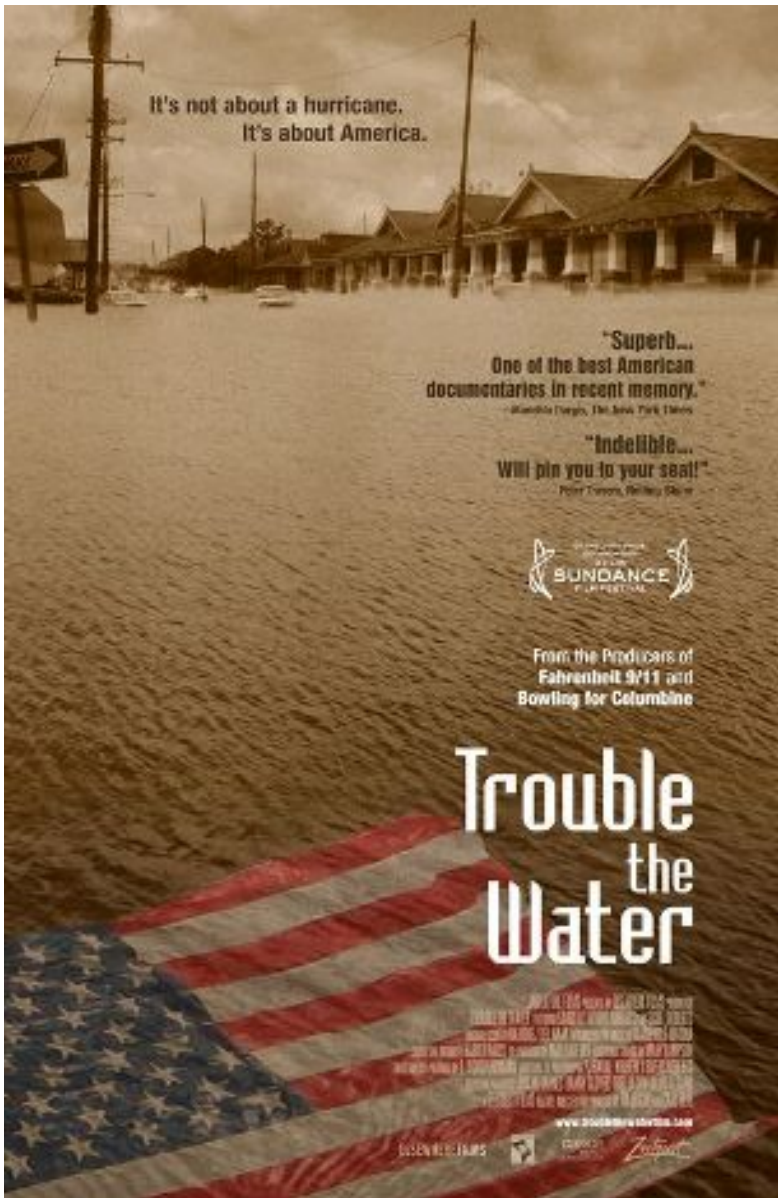
4. “Blindsight”

What did YOU do today? “Blindsight” is one of those films that forces the viewer to reassess what they consider an accomplishment. The story of six Tibetan teenagers climbing the breathtaking peaks of the Himalayas would be fascinating in and of itself if they were just average climbers, but they also happen to be blind. Shunned by a society who believes that blindness is equitable to being possessed by demons, the teens set out to climb the 23,000-foot Lhakpa Ri on the north side of Mount Everest. Blind climber Erik Weißenmayer may be the leader of this inspirational crew, but Sabriye Tenberken is one of the documentary characters this year that has stuck with me the most. Blind herself, she started a school in Tibet for visually-impaired children and her conflict over wanting to protect them while also letting them reach for the peak is the heart of “Blindsight.” Like “The King of Kong,” “Spellbound,” and the other great docs of recent years, “Blindsight” is the kind of documentary that makes you want to know more as soon as it ends. You want to know what these people who you just spent two hours with are doing today. And you take them with you as you leave the theater, knowing that your bad day probably isn’t as rough as you first thought.



3. “Up the Yangtze”

One of the most haunting films of the year was Yung Chang’s emotionally and historically resonant “Up the Yangtze.” The Three Gorges Dam project in China is dislocating two million people who live along the Yangtze River. Imagine two million people being forced to uproot their lives, their history, and their ancestry and move to higher ground because of a hydroelectric dam. Now imagine those same people getting jobs on a boat for tourists who want to say goodbye a large chunk of the world before it changes forever. Rarely has a film so vividly captured a country in transition and the lives changed by it. These people aren’t just saying goodbye to the world they’ve always know, they’re giving tours of it. “Up the Yangtze” is one of the most underrated films of 2008, documentary or narrative.



2. "Trouble the Water"

My immediate reaction to the existence of "Trouble the Water" was shock that it could accomplish anything that Spike Lee didn't already do in his incredible mini-series "When the Levees Broke." "Trouble the Water" is not what you think it's going to be. It's not a political indictment of how awfully the Bush administration handled the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina (although there is a little of that in there) and it's not a story of what happened to the city of New Orleans afterwards (although that's represented by the one story in the film). "Trouble the Water" is a first-person, handheld account of what happened in August of 2005, and it completely defies traditional explanation. The aspiring rapper who holds the camera through most of "Trouble the Water" brings the viewer both an understanding of the chaos and the triumphant assertion of will to survive that followed that no other filmmaker could possibly recreate.



1. "Dear Zachary: A Letter to a Son About His Father"

"Dear Zachary" is the most emotionally devastating film of 2008, but what makes it the best documentary of the year is that it's also unspeakably inspiring. What Kurt Kuenne found when he picked up his camera to chronicle the life of his slain best friend, Andrew Bagby, was both unspeakable evil and unbending good existing together in the same story. It turned out that the woman who killed Andrew, her former lover, happened to be pregnant with Andrew's son, Zachary. "Dear Zachary" starts as a cinematic love letter to a father who will never know his son, but it evolves into so much more than just another series of talking heads or courtroom twists and turns. What's remarkable about "Dear Zachary" is what's remarkable about all great documentaries - the way its director assembles the footage into an experience that rivals and even surpasses most fiction. "Dear Zachary" provides the full range of human emotions. Kurt Kuenne produced, directed, wrote, and edited "Dear Zachary," and he crafted his true story into something that a lesser filmmaker would have turned into just another true crime story, an overlong episode of "48 Hours Mystery." The story of Andrew and Zachary Bagby and everyone whose life they shattered has inherent drama, but it took a talented man like Kuenne to craft it into the powerful film that is "Dear Zachary." I can't wait to see what he does next.



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