

Shadows

The same blustery day that visitors made their way to Park City for the opening of this year's festival, George Bush was sworn into office. This concurrence raised the question of what Sundance's often liberal, social-issue-oriented documentary competition would have to offer so soon after the left's activist, agitprop filmmaking failed to sway the electorate.

While the competition included the usual run from the hiply entertaining to the historically important—with a few stops along the way for the triumph of the human spirit—the documentaries that focused on current issues forwent the high dudgeon and slapdash stylings of the election's political offerings in favor of a simpler, more personal, if no less pointed approach. Most were built around vivid human subjects who convincingly conveyed their perspectives through emotional details.

Eugene Jarecki's *Why We Fight*, a pointed examination of the costs of American militarization, took the competition's jury prize. The film uses a rich, panoramic approach to take on the military-industrial complex, the alienation of the U.S. public from foreign policy, and the exploitation of the country's concept of freedom and patriotism, interweaving commentary from the likes of Gore Vidal and John McCain with man-on-the-street interviews, Fourth of July picnics, air shows, and a handful of carefully selected personal stories. Framed against a simple dark background, a Vietnam vet who lost a son in the World Trade Center towers explains that he was a supporter of our presence in Iraq until Bush denied making previous statements about Iraqi involvement in 9/11. The officer's incredulous "What the hell did he just say?" is the film's most potent illustration of the human betrayals behind the current conflict.

A different combination of the personal and the political could be found in Ellen Perry's *The Fall of Fujimori*, a portrait of the former Peruvian president, his rise to power, and subsequent restoration of order to a country crippled by drugs, inflation, and terrorism. His methods ranged from secret tribunals and bent election rules to good old-fashioned bribery. Perry's film makes adroit use of archival footage and interviews to paint a vivid picture of the era. But, despite the director's incredible access, Fujimori remains an elusive presence. Perry doesn't shy away from tough questions, but her interviews reveal only an accomplished politician, always ready with a seemingly reasonable answer. The film's tantalizing hints of the real Fujimori come in brief glimpses from other quarters, such as video footage—shot by the ex-president's son—of Fujimori and his chief of secret police, Vladimiro Montesinos, looking up from a potentially damaging strategy session to ask jokingly if the camera sound is running.

Fujimori wasn't the only shady character on display in competition. Several films grappled with evasive or inaccessible subjects whose personalities remained out of focus even when they took center stage. *The Devil* and Daniel Johnston, Jeff Feuerzeig's reverential portrait of the mentally troubled indie



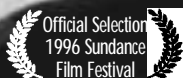
Top to bottom: *Romántico*, *The Fall of Fujimori*, and *The Devil* and Daniel Johnston

AWARD WINNING Asian Cinema



"...mysterious, lurid, appetizing and ultimately shocking..."

— Peter Stack,
San Francisco
Chronicle



Director Chul-Soo Park's award-winning thriller uncovers the shocking story of two women who live across the hall from each other. Strange obsessions with food encompass the relationship that develops between them as we learn the shocking secret of what happened to the woman in apartment 302.

"...refreshingly candid, involving, funny and offbeat..."

— Janet Maslin,
The New York Times



Director Tony Chan's engaging story of an illegal immigrant working at a Chinese restaurant in New York and its employees. Kitchen mayhem, irate customers and potential romance unfolds as Robert, a waiter in the restaurant, desperately searches for a way to stay in the United States.

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festivals: Sundance singer/songwriter, purposefully reinforces the enigma of its subject and results in a portrait of a living ghost, little seen even by those committed to telling his story. There is plenty of talking-head participation from family, friends, and those who have attached themselves to Johnston's talent, but while the film hits almost every mental speed bump along his trip to musical greatness, it's more concerned with Johnston the legend than Johnston the person. Ultimately, the film reveals more about the people surrounding the singer than the man himself. Throughout, Johnston's supporters extol his greatness while reacting to his erratic behavior with incredulity. "Daniel is in a mental hospital, and I have a bidding war between two major labels . . . This



Why We Fight

is a deal I had been working on for the past 30 years," goes a typical refrain. Johnston himself is only represented through his art, including a wealth of old audiotapes, short films, videotaped or recorded live performances, and animated drawings. Committed Johnston fans have been rejoicing about the film for months, but those not already enamored of his music may find it a daunting introduction.

Greg Whiteley's *New York Doll* takes a completely different approach by portraying its subject as tragic hero rather than musical genius. The film is a gentle account of the last months in the life of bassist, former bad boy, and recent Mormon convert Arthur "Killer" Kane as he prepares for a reunion with his old band. In a way that may frustrate fans of the seminal mid-Seventies glam band, the film skims the history of the New York Dolls, relying on Kane, some

backstage interviews at the reunion gig, and a few jaunty animated charts to tell their back story while skipping inconvenient aspects of the subject entirely. But *Doll* is clearly not intended as a band history, and, despite the brief stretch of time covered in the film (and some serious sync problems), there's enough of Kane's presence to provide a portrait of a man who mellowed toward the end of his life and enjoyed a brief period of redemption and reconciliation. It's a plot line as hard to resist in real life as it is in fiction.

Far from the glamorous lights of the big time, another musician, Carmelo Muñoz Sánchez, was the subject of Mark Becker's *Romántico*, the most strongly drawn and finely shaded portrait in the festival. The film follows Carmelo and his buddy Arturo as they play the streets and taquerias of San Francisco, providing a vivid illustration of the dismal circumstances, relentless hustling, and persistent loneliness of illegal workers. Becker does much to enhance the romance of his subject, shooting beautifully on 16mm and employing generous amounts of slow motion. Just when you think the film is falling into the trap of wallowing in its subjects' heroic misery, Carmelo returns to his home in Salvatierra, Mexico, and an engaging and sympathetic individual begins to emerge from a sociological case study.

Defying the expectations of those looking for a simplistic tale of noble poverty, Becker allows us to see how Carmelo contributes generously to many of his own difficulties. In San Francisco, he longs for his family; once home, he doesn't always get along with them and constantly worries about money. The film relies heavily on voiceover interviews from Carmelo, who has a singular and complex take on his own circumstances. By letting him guide us through his own story, *Romántico* calls attention to the ways in which the personal is political while remaining a memorable miniature of a man who is heartbreakingly human in the face of life's daily challenges. □

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