ACR Film Festival: the Last Picture Show

Belk, Russell
Robert Kozinets

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Film Festival 2010

The Last Picture Show
Russell Belk and Robert Kozinets, York University

Unlike the movie theater in Peter Bogdanovich’s *The Last Picture Show*, the 2010 ACR Film Festival will not be the last. But after 10 years of co-chairing the Festival, we have turned over the reigns to the very capable hands of Marylouise Caldwell and Paul Henry. Over the past 10 years we have seen videographic consumer research grow, mature, and ripen into something quite amazing. Both the quality and quantity of consumer research videos have grown over this period. The North American ACR Film Festivals have shown more than 125 films and the ACR Conferences in Europe, Latin America, and the Asia Pacific have developed their own exciting and locally-flavored Film Festivals as well.

From its inception, the North American festival itself has always had strong international representation among filmmakers and topics. If one of the challenges of consumer ethnography is to make the strange familiar and the familiar strange, consumer videography has excelled in meeting this challenge. Many of these films have found their way into classrooms and a number of them have been included in special DVD issues of several journals as well as into print journal article and chapter form. With its origins in an ACR Special Session in 2000, the Film Festival is now an ACR institution. We hope that no one could imagine a future ACR that did not offer researchers the option of representing our knowledge of consumer in an audio-visual format. As industry increasingly embraces videographic techniques for representing consumer realities and portraying their marketing research findings, it is useful for our field to follow suit and, in many ways, lead the charge towards finding new, rich forms for understanding the consumer.

The format of video and video editing over this period has been non-linear and digital throughout the past decade. Technologies have evolved and have driven the costs of video storytelling down to quite affordable levels. Thanks to the conference chairs, at the 2010 ACR Film Festival we not only had trailers available on the conference hotel CCTV, but also on the conference web site. For the upcoming Beijing ACR Conference in 2011 we will be receiving and reviewing (jurying) Film Festival entries on the Internet. ACR Films over the past decade have gone from standard definition analog VHS tapes to high definition DVDs. Camcorders have become smaller, cheaper, and more sophisticated. Digital still photography cameras are no longer so still. These technologies have also become ubiquitous as even the convergent technologies of mobile phones are capable of capturing high definition video. And editing equipment and software that would have been prohibitively expensive for the individual videographer two decades ago is now inexpensive or included free with computer operating systems and cameras. But it is not just technologies that have changed, so have the skills of filmmakers. We don’t mean by this that the ACR videos have been produced by film school graduates (although a few have), but rather that ACR members have learned from practice, by watching other ACR films, through videos on YouTube, Vimeo, and similar sites, and from occasional consumer videography workshops and classes. Over the past decade, we have witnessed dramatic improvements in the quality of Consumer Research Videography as a field. We have been fortunate to watch as several stars of the field emerged and excelled in this medium.

The medium of video has allowed experimentation with different ways of representing consumer behavior. Resulting films have varied from two and one-half minutes to ninety minutes. They have represented consumption on every continent. No doubt the medium is best used when there is behavior to be shown rather than the talking heads of interviews. Many of these stories are allowed to unfold without much narration or voice-over, but “voice-of-god” storytelling has not disappeared. Much more use is now made of video montages, quick-cuts, music, and other cinematic devices for sustaining audience interest and managing the pace and flow of the video. These techniques too have evolved and kept pace with what’s on TV and what’s on the Internet. Some films have had amusing topics and approaches while others have been deadly serious. Interestingly, both of these extremes have resulted in award-winning films.

We have had a People’s Choice Award from the first ACR Film Festival, but over the past six years we have also had a Juror’s Award. The latter award also has a monetary prize, thanks to the generosity of Gary Bamossy, Alladi Venkatesh, the Center for Consumer Culture, and the University of California, Irvine. The criteria for evaluating submitted films and the Juror’s Award have also evolved over the first decade of ACR Films. We have described these criteria in several papers (Belk 2006; Belk and Kozinets 2006a, 2006b; Kozinets and Belk 2005). They include the “Four Ts” of topical, theoretical, theatrical, and technical considerations.

This year’s ACR Film Festival showed ten films out of 19 submitted for a 53 percent acceptance rate. The films are a good example of the geographic and cultural diversity noted above. The films focus on consumption phenomena in Botswana, Brazil, China (Tibet), Japan, Qatar, and the United States, with filmmakers from Australia, Brazil, Canada, Japan, Norway, Qatar, Spain, and the U.S. As noted in the abstracts below, the topics were equally diverse, ranging from Twitter, videogamers, and World of Warcraft to Green Consumption, AIDS in Africa, Beer in Montana, Japanese tea ceremonies, Arab Gulf homes, and Shangri-La.

This year for the first time, both the People’s Choice Award and the Juror’s Award went to the same film: “Walk the Talk, Talk the Walk,” by Marylouise Caldwell, Ingeborg Kleppe, and Stephen Watson. Congratulations go to these filmmakers for their powerful and moving film about a competition for positive role models for HIV positive men in Botswana. It is fitting that we should turn over the film festival at this time in its history to one of its top award-winning film-makers. We are looking forward to the next decade of successful ACR Film Festivals.