

Neoliberalism, crises, and solidarity: Hot Docs in focus

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[W]hat would be able... to contain and counter the pressure neoliberal social and political transformations have put upon communal and artistic life – capture it and turn it into a form of aesthetic activism? If such an activity – such a form of activism in the face of capital-induced ecological catastrophe and social disintegration – would turn out to be possible, it would need to be more than a form of resistance alone. It would be a veritable form of resilience, a form of art that nurtures and fosters our possibilities for change, for thinking and living otherwise, and for moving beyond the deadlock of the social system we currently live in.[1]

Introduction

With the remedial statement above in mind, I wonder – where do the institutions that foster and feature artistic activity fit in? And more to the point: What is a film festival's purpose in this age of turmoil, and how does it fit into the pressure cooker of neoliberalism the authors mention?

The current ontological status of many film festivals is unstable: for some it is defined by evolution or transition, and others, by crisis and upheaval. For Toronto's mighty Hot Docs Canadian International Documentary Film Festival, years of apparent stability careened into shaky standing last year when North America's largest documentary festival announced a

surprise massive deficit, experienced the biggest collective resignation of programmers in its history, and grappled with activist-organised ‘counter-festival’ events during its thirty-first run. Troubling news continued, including placing the festival’s unique cinema dedicated to documentary for sale in November 2024. In terms of economics and politics, Hot Docs is not the only festival to experience challenges and hardships in recent years, but it was the remarkable combination of the convergence of the two forces at the staging at one of the most important annual documentary events that I explore[2] as a representative case of a once grassroots festival following the mainstream path to the commercial cliff’s edge.

In the process of attending, researching, and writing about Hot Docs for the past fifteen years, I have charted the trajectory of this leading documentary institution from humble origins, to impressive heights of influence and repute, to the Great Implosion of 2024. Along the way I have asked myself and others this question: What is Hot Docs, and what should it be? The conversations I have had with supporters, detractors, investigators, and bystander publics have roughly mapped on to other discursive fragments at so many festivals dotting the international landscape, where concerns around cultural politics and political economy are front and center.

The festival world is undoubtedly experiencing some turbulence. In the last two years alone Toronto International Film Festival lost its deep-pocketed top-tier sponsor Bell (prompting the name change of Toronto’s iconic TIFF Bell Lightbox); IDFA faced a crisis of support over its messy mishandling of an opening night banner proclaiming support for Palestine; most recently an international boycott was organised against the Berlinale, called forth by the Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel (PACBI).[3] At many other festivals audiences have raised critical attention to what is perceived as a double standard around engagement on Ukraine versus Palestine. In Canada, commentators have described a ‘shift’ in corporate sponsorship at arts events, which some estimate as ‘risk management’, as company brands are imbricated in rising contentious cultural politics at festivals – whether the Royal Bank of Canada and big oil or Scotiabank and weapons for Israel.[4] For instance, Canada’s most prestigious literary award, the Giller Prize, was pressured to drop Scotiabank as its main sponsor. Former winners, including internationally-renowned author Michael Ondaatje, published a letter that contextualised the ongoing arts sponsorship upheaval, describing ‘a serious fracture’ that has impacted ‘myriad festivals’ brought on by ‘massive corporations whose money fuels

so many of these groups'.[5] The tumult causing such deep divisions is symptomatic of neoliberalism's devastating capture of art and culture: when arts organisations become dependent on big banks can they truly build resilience to ongoing 'capital-induced ecological catastrophe and social disintegration' as mentioned in the epigraph?

Add to this mix non-fiction storytellers and the values stakes intensify. There is a sense within the documentary community of an unsettling feeling of disconnect between some of our arts and cultural institutions and the urgent need to 'contain and counter' the corruption of creativity and the social contract. The Giller winners signal this when they argue: 'Countless arts festivals and organizations should not have to choose between financial ruin and ethically grotesque sponsorship arrangements.' While they argue for artists to pressure their representative organisations, scholars can contribute by critically probing these turbulent institutional waters. What follows is a contribution that positions the embrace of neoliberalism and refutation of solidarity at Hot Docs as major causes of the festival's current precarity.

Research at, beside, and beyond the festivals

Film festival studies offers a bountiful array of institutional interrogations and analyses. While much of the scholarship is focused on other important elements of these cultural phenomena, some has attended to the polyolithic layers of politics and power germane to all institutions. Ann Vogel's comprehensive monograph engages with these strata, including those of inequitable labour division, while ultimately taking '...a step back from the specter of neoliberalism' in order to 'focus on festivals as economic actors rather than occupants of the non-profit sector'.[6] De Valck's work has invaluable deepened and broadened the scope of the field in terms of geopolitics, industry, and history, while also exploring the economisation and 'increased influence of business logics at film festivals'.[7] Sendra and Petty's recent *Alphaville* issue on film festivals and decolonisation clearly engages with politics and power – scholarship that is in conversation with analyses foregrounding colonialism's bedfellow: neoliberalism.

My own research looks at the adoption of De Valck's 'business logics', or what I call a 'neoliberal ordering logic' at Hot Docs. The festival's standing as one of the top three documentary festivals in the world and its image as a

socially-engaged *audience festival* make it an exemplary site for exploration. Further, documentary festivals do not receive the same scholarly attention as their fiction festival cousins, and as such are evermore worthy of scrutiny.[8] As an active member of the documentary community I write for and about, I consider some of my research practice-based, which helps ‘identify gaps in the knowledge which is not related to film festivals as such but to film history, contemporary film practices, cultural or national identity, or a range of other subject areas’.[9] And despite my often-critical perspective regarding the direction the festival has taken, I have benefited from long lasting relations with Hot Docs workers and administrators, including programmers and board members.

The current moment of manifold inter-connected crises suffusing our collective experience – the destructive effects from which manifest in, at, and around film festivals – calls for interrogations of these film phenomena through intersectional relations of politics and power. Nancy Fraser writes about the relationship between crises and neoliberalism as one in which ‘...the system’s contradictions incline it not only to economic crises but also to crises of care, ecology and politics, all of which are in full flower today, courtesy of the spell of corporate bingeing known as neoliberalism’.[10] Indeed, Fraser is right to mix *care* into the politics and power frame, a term that has found new purchase since the COVID-19 pandemic wrought havoc on communities, institutions, and sociality. De Valck et al foreground what they call ‘aesthetic resilience’ as both tool and armour in opposing neoliberalism.[11] I alight on *solidarity* as the defence system needed in the fight against the global neoliberal order, a concept in close relation to both care and resilience.

My research problematises the mainstreaming of documentary culture and the commercialisation of documentary cinema in the festival world, with Hot Docs as case study. The festival was founded in 1993 by the Canadian Independent Film Caucus (CIFC)[12] as a vehicle for independent documentary filmmakers to convoke their own community in their own space, share their work with each other (and eventually others), innovate away from television talking head broadcast modes, and lobby government and other bodies to provide much-needed support. The first of its kind in Canada, from the beginning it was run by and for makers, and was engaged in community-building, documentary advocacy, and social solidarity. Over the years it grew in stature, size, and economic footprint – from a few dozen audience members to hundreds of thousands, and from a \$10,000 budg-

et to 2024's revenues of \$7,743,382 (inexplicably, given the deficit announced that year, Hot Docs had a nearly \$2M surplus in 2022).[13] It went from staging a small program of exclusively Canadian films (18 titles in the first edition) to steadily increasing American – and to a lesser extent – international, works (the 2025 program includes 25/113 Canadian films). It should not surprise that the festival's (com)promising path to mainstream success has been minted with entertaining, 'commercially viable' docs from the US – the superpower of monied movies.

The logic of commercially-oriented festivals

It is well-understood that money changes art – for better or worse, depending on the art and one's perspective. But how does a commercial logic change art and cultural institutions? Max Haiven has written extensively on the art/money dyad, arguing that money and art have always been entangled, in one way or another. For him it is about power: 'Money has always been a kind of public conspiracy or a collective hallucination, one that too often reproduces the interests and wealth of the ruling class.'[14] Market rule and commercial values, elite power and control – these interlocking elements make up the social, political, and economic force of neoliberalism.

Jeremy Gilbert describes neoliberalism as 'a complex assemblage of institutions, practice and beliefs' that is geared toward 'the overall strategic aim of strengthening the power of finance capital, private corporations, and asset-holders at the expense of workers, consumers, citizens, tenants, students, patients, and all of the democratic institutions built up to represent their interests over the course of the first seven decades or so of the twentieth century'.[15] In short, neoliberalism is all about money and the market – including at festivals crumpled by its grip.

I had the privilege[16] to attend Hot Docs in order to conduct my final field research during its 31st instalment.[17] Things at first seemed business-as-usual. The daily cocktail meet-and-greets continued apace, beaming speeches were delivered, corporate sponsorships flickered, and workers, volunteers, filmmakers, and dealmakers hustled about. Cracks in the veneer inevitably appeared however, as the newly-hired president Marie Nelson told a major media outlet the festival was broke and its future uncertain.[18] Then, just as the festival was about to launch, ten programmers quit, mainly citing a toxic work environment. Several board members also packed their

bags. Then came the grassroots-organised reaction to the festival's muted response to the then-seven-month slaughter in Gaza. Then an open forum took place in which members of the board were unable to answer key questions around governance, transparency, and solvency. Hot Docs was in full crisis mode.

When a structuring logic of neoliberalism takes hold of an institution it produces what I call *institutional pathologies*. For the purposes here, I will mention three kinds, as they relate to the kinds of solidarity I discuss below. The first concerns unfair labour practices, something several workers have detailed as a major issue at the festival. As an example, in 2024 (the same year the deficit was announced) Hot Docs paid an employee between \$250K-\$300K, which was very likely Nelson's salary – a massive disparity from managerial salaries, never mind rank and file.[19] The second is the incorporation of pecuniary support from big finance and other 'ethically grotesque' top-level sponsors. In some cases, activists have called this 'art-washing', which signals a company's attempts to paper over such grotesque activities with positive associations that art and culture events bring. Corporate support is much more than money however – the intrusive business tentacles of neoliberalism beget formations like *faux agnostic stances* on contentious issues or worse – status quo politics that uphold elite interests. The third is fealty to the growth doctrine, perhaps the most recognisable of all neoliberalism's economic doxa. There exists a pronounced festival fidelity to the neoliberal myth that annual growth equates to success: each year commercial-oriented festivals announce increases to their programs and budgets, expansion of their markets, signalling quantity is quality.

Curator and independent researcher Aaron Zeghers has called this matrix the Film Festival Industrial Complex.[20] This complex is part of a pathological pattern across the Canadian political and cultural landscape from the 1970s onward, which traces neoliberalism's steady command of society – from institutions, to art and communication, to everyday life.

Neoliberalism is both an economic and cultural shaping force, and the above institutional pathology-producing features point to both an imperilled political economy *and* cultural politics at Hot Docs. In Gilbert's words '...neoliberal policy and ideology have promoted a culture, and an "affective regime"'. [21] Festivals – as spectacular events and commerce cornucopia – are susceptible to the 'anti-solidarity logic [that] has animated neoliberalism across a vast range of social and cultural spheres'[22] and as such constellate a vast network, a rhizomatic affective regime, of film industry and recep-

tion sites. While festivals do important work building audiences and opportunities for filmmakers while enriching cinephilia, the unmeasured costs behind the benefits of such work should be addressed, if for nothing else than the ‘transforming potential of cultural criticism’.[23]



Fig. 1: Toronto filmmaker Ali Kazimi reads a speech as part of a No Arms in the Arts ‘counter-festival’ event near the Hot Docs Bloor Cinema on opening night of the 31st edition, 25 April 2024. Image courtesy of the author.

A pronounced absence – solidarity and Hot Docs

While there is abundant theory on neoliberalism, there is much less on solidarity. Gilbert offers a concise definition: ‘[A] consciousness of shared interests.’[24] I frame solidarity, in part, as a sense of mutual recognition and bond with others facing an adversarial situation. This feeling of boundness[25] is collectively acted upon with joint agency toward a convergence of interests and constitutive politics.

Scholars have argued that neoliberalism emerged in part as a response to the solidarity movements of the early-to-mid twentieth century, and as such solidarity is the antidote to neoliberalism’s destructive impacts on culture and politics. For this reason and because in particular documentary

film festivals are loci ripe with potential for vigorous stagings of politics-beyond-the-screen, I consider it an essential concept. At Hot Docs 2024 Astra Taylor gave a talk on solidarity and film where she told the audience the following:

A film can shift perception. It can even sometimes persuade, but it doesn't build power ... A film can assist in that project, but it cannot be the entirety of that project.[26]

Taylor was promoting her new co-authored book *about* solidarity, whilst speaking at a documentary festival ensnared by neoliberalism[27] – the circumstances were significant. In their book the authors link solidarity with 'forging new communities, developing shared visions, and building power to push for social change'.[28] Documentary festivals offer an opportunity for such solidarity work to take shape.

Festivals convoke communities that gather to exchange, learn, celebrate, and collaborate. Those orbiting the documentary sphere are well-aware of the alarming crises we face. At documentary festivals we learn about the intricacies of myriad problems on screen, and we often feel moved by intimate and dramatic stories abounding with emotion and action – then the lights come up. We look at each other, some of us bursting with anger, sorrow, a rawness of knowing and feeling. We are then quickly ushered out of the cinema to carry on: to have a meal or a drink, check the socials, pay bills – perhaps Google the film's topic. Commercial festivals and neoliberal logic facilitate a kind of political defanging: from cultural consumption to agitation to re-integration.

Think of festivals that might create fertile spaces for connecting on-screen politics with on-the-ground politics. They exist of course – but imagine a more influential festival like Hot Docs, whose motto is 'Outstanding, Outspoken', as that bridge-builder, that custodian of shared interest, care convergence, and activated response. Imagine solidarity-building as part of the 'normal' festival experience. Imagine 'relationships outside of the frame of white neoliberal capitalism [that] encourage more dynamic interactions that result in real social change, rather than the kind of competitiveness that has blighted the international film festival circuit to date'.[29] Imagine a festival politics that utilises the pain and pleasure of cinema for organising around social justice – a grounded institutional bulwark against neoliberalism's magnetic market pull that helps social power build and affective resilience flourish.

In this last section I imagine two kinds of solidarity that Hot Docs could be engaged in. The festival is well-positioned to pivot toward ‘containing and contesting’ neoliberalism, and many in the community believe it would only bolster the organisation’s popularity and reputation, while injecting a fighting spirit in the increasingly empty signifier ‘impact’.

Arts/anti-war solidarity

Commercial and mainstream festivals collaborate with large corporations in order to fund their activities. Those partnerships may service the sponsors as various forms of ‘washing’ – from green to sports to art. Filmmaker Ali Kazimi was one of a series of speakers at a vigil for murdered journalists in Gaza (organised by the group No Arms in the Arts) on the festival’s opening night, next to Hot Docs’s Bloor Cinema. In his speech to the crowd Kazimi connected Scotiabank’s investment in Elbit Systems, who provide munitions to Israel, to arts sponsorship: ‘Scotiabank’s sponsorship of Hot Docs is a form of artwashing ... and is using our cultural institutions to paper over its blood-soaked investment in Elbit Systems.’[30] Artwashing is but one PR tool in the neoliberal propaganda toolbox, and like greenwashing effective responses entail solidarity organising. Several such ‘counter-events’ happened around Hot Docs that edition – organised by artists and arts workers.[31]

Hot Docs made a miscalculation that year, like many other festivals in 2024.[32] Despite the efforts of those who campaigned for months behind the scenes, festival management decided not to do what it did when Ukraine was invaded – there was to be no special spotlight on Palestine, no talks, no events, and barely any films programmed on or from Palestine. In this regard the festival conformed to an international (double) standard of ‘se-



lective humanity'[33] – whereby the 'affective regime' contracted and fell silent on the genocide in Gaza. So much for 'outspoken'.[34]

Fig. 2: Members of the documentary community took to the streets near Hot Docs headquarters at the festival in 2012 to protest cuts to the arts by the Conservative government – a spontaneous act of solidarity for all those working in the arts, without support from the festival itself. Despite pressure, Hot Docs chose to remain mostly silent as the very industry and community it served was under threat. Image courtesy of the author.

Labour solidarity

Labour solidarity has remained exogenous to Hot Docs. Last year a former worker shared with me a spreadsheet tracking the dozens of employees who had exited the organisation in just one year's time.[35] Workers and board members have detailed a toxic workplace, tyrannical management, unreasonable demands, selective/problematic politics, lack of onboarding, and unavailable financial numbers. When the ten programmers drew attention to these pathologies – including 'a lack of respect for protocol and business communication; the dismissal and/or diminishment of team members' voices and breaches of contracts across various programmes'[36] – Hot Docs responded by saying they would come back (they did not).

Questions and concerns about mismanagement, pay inequity, and labour conditions were either sidelined or approached in a manner typical of a major brand dealing with an image problem. This was a moment to show humility. To adjust and reflect. Instead, the neoliberal logic whirled on – problematic practices, politics, and sponsors were downplayed, and the status quo was fortified. Perhaps it would be productive to see last year's turmoil as an opportunity for the festival – for starters, to embrace de-growth and admonish massive pay gaps between workers and management. Maybe the festival could surprise with a historic pivot and join with the many Toronto actions and events that happen every year for the 1st of May – a day that occurs during the festival and is dedicated to labour solidarity, the arch adversary of neoliberal economics.

Conclusion – solidarity and collective becoming at festivals

I am arguing for a reorientation and reimagining of documentary festivals like Hot Docs – where the logic of neoliberalism is replaced with solidarity. Gilbert argues that the ‘logic of solidarity is one of shared becoming’ and ‘a vector of transformation’.[37] Hot Docs has eschewed the notion of a shared becoming for its heterogeneous community and instead has adopted a managerial ethos and organisational approach modeled from the anti-solidarity ordering logic of neoliberalism. From labour practices to ‘grotesque’ sponsorships to outsized growth (most notably marked by last year’s president’s salary), the festival has pursued a commercial pathway at the expense of workplace equity, ethical economics, and social power. Neoliberalism and its individualising, privatising, and commercialising regime works assiduously against solidarity and social power, which results in the containment of documentary’s political potential, rather than enabling and sustaining it.

The Great Implosion of 2024 suggests that Hot Docs, by minimising or ignoring a collective will for a different kind of festival, has weakened both the community it serves and the institution itself. Thus, we find ourselves at the beginning: What should a film festival be and what should it do? Perhaps a future Hot Docs will be a champion of progressive politics, social equity, independent art, and building ground-up social power to fight the innumerable on-screen problems featured in some of the films it screens. Perhaps it will be instrumental in building a more fair, just, and equal society through fomenting and championing resilience and solidarity both on the screen *and* on the ground. The festival may find itself more relevant and resilient as a result.

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Notes

- [1] Ieven & Steinbock & de Valck 2021, p. 1.
- [2] Here and in my forthcoming monograph based on my PhD, using Hot Docs as a case study, which will be published by McGill-Queen's University Press.
- [3] From the statement: "The Berlin International Film Festival is complicit in the German government's partnership in Israel's genocide in Gaza and fails to protect filmmakers standing in solidarity with Palestinians." More here: <https://filmworkersforpalestine.org/#strikeberlinale>
- [4] Source: <https://www.cbc.ca/arts/commotion/can-canada-s-cultural-festivals-survive-without-corporate-title-sponsors-1.7156865>
- [5] The whole letter is here: https://www.thestar.com/opinion/contributors/an-open-letter-from-michael-ondaatje-madeleine-thien-and-six-other-giller-winners-its-time/article_cdf4e514-7785-11ef-ad58-cf9ef660f459.html. Scotiabank eventually decreased some of its financial investments in Elbit Systems, the munitions manufacturer supplying the Israeli military, and as the authors of the letter say: 'It is likely that Scotiabank's public relations team will never admit public pressure had anything to do with their investment arm's decision to cut its stake in Elbit Systems, though that is very hard to believe. Regardless, the right thing to do – for both this bank and other corporations engaged in the same kinds of investments ' is to divest entirely.'
- [6] Vogel 2003, p. 3.
- [7] De Valck 2014, p. 74.

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- [8] Huth & Huth 2025
- [9] Ostrowska & Falicov 2025, p. 18.
- [10] Fraser 2022.
- [11] Ieven & Steinbock & de Valck 2021.
- [12] Now the Documentary Organization of Canada.
- [13] Source: <https://invertedpyramid.org/index.php/spotlighthotdocs/hot-docs-2015—2022-financials/>
- [14] Haiven 2018.
- [15] Gilbert 2023, p. 22.
- [16] My employer, The American University in Bulgaria, awarded me with a small research grant to complete my fieldwork at Hot Docs in 2024.
- [17] I would like to acknowledge and thank the festival for providing me with a complimentary pass so I could attend screenings and social gatherings to conduct my research – in particular Heather Haynes, who is now the Director of Programming. A critique of an institution is not necessarily a critique of the individuals working at the institution.
- [18] At the time the festival was \$2M in debt, a figure that has now increased to \$2.6M, according to CRA reports.
- [19] Thank you to Aaron Zeghers for his indispensable work collating and analysing financial data on festivals, including Hot Docs, with the Inverted Pyramid project. More here: <https://invertedpyramid.org/index.php/festivals/hot-docs/>
- [20] Zeghers discusses his argument at length in this recorded talk: <https://www.youtube.com/@aaronzeghers1590?app=desktop&cbrd=1>
- [21] Gilbert 2011.
- [22] Gilbert 2023, p. 23.
- [23] Lafky 1999/2000, p. 8.
- [24] Gilbert 2023, p. 26.
- [25] Boundness is a term used by Lisa Beard (2023).
- [26] Taylor 2024.
- [27] For a filmic exploration of neoliberalism, see Richard Brouillette's 2008 political documentary *Encirclement: Neoliberalism Ensnarcs Democracy*.
- [28] Taylor & Hunt-Hendrix 2023, p. 7.
- [29] Dovey & Sendra quoted in Johnson 2024, p. 11.
- [30] Kazimi 2024.
- [31] Pro-Palestinian encampments were also taking place during the festival, at the nearby University of Toronto campus.
- [32] There is not enough space here to detail the numerous festivals that have succumbed to pressure concerning the genocide in Gaza. For more on this, and in particular the controversy at IDFA, read Dunja Jelenković's (2024) article here: <https://www.alternator.science/en/long/words-matter-film-festivals-and-territorial-conflicts/>
- [33] See: <https://www.alternatives-humanitaires.org/en/2024/11/27/ukraine-palestine-a-comparative-anatomy-of-selective-humanity/>

- [34] At the same time a handful of international festivals bucked this trend and firmly held their ground by raising the issue at their events, including Dokufest in Kosovo. See: <https://balkaninsight.com/2024/08/07/kosovo-dokufests-spotlight-on-palestine-takes-festival-into-sensitive-territory/>
- [35] I know of still more employees who were told they would be hired back for Hot Docs 2025, only to find out last minute they were out of a job.
- [36] *POV Magazine* covers the programmers' letter in detail here: <https://povmagazine.com/departed-hot-docs-programmers-speak-up/>
- [37] Gilbert 2023, p. 29.