



Ask

Peter Broderick

Doc guru Broderick came to Toronto to talk independence to Canadian filmmakers.

What's his message?

IT'S TEN MINUTES to show time. The NFB's John Spotton Cinema in Toronto is full. There's excitement in the air. Everyone here has been eagerly awaiting this event. Those who couldn't make it in person have been reassured that they can see the live webcast. But it's not a film people are here to see and the audience is comprised mostly of filmmakers. They have come to hear Peter Broderick speak.

Peter Broderick is a thought leader; a forward thinking strategist, accomplished consultant, sought-after speaker—someone the filmmaking community can count on to identify new ideas and developments in film distribution to its attention. He works directly with filmmakers to create innovative distribution plans. Broderick also shares his experiences via web bulletins, so all can benefit from what he sees. But what really sets Broderick apart from the pack is his advo-

cacy for one very significant principle: filmmaker independence. The Spotton seminar, another one at TIFF (Toronto International Film Festival) in September, all of the bulletins and articles on his website plus an interview conducted for this article all point to one thing: consistency in message. And that is why everyone here is so keenly watching.

Broderick, dressed casually, goes about calmly setting up his laptop on the podium. Seems that all is in order, so he turns his attention to technical matters. How is the lighting at either end of the stage? How far can he go before getting lost in the shadows? Are the audio levels OK? This is not micro-management on his part; these are actions of a man who clearly knows that to succeed, the message needs to be clearly seen and heard. Pragmatism. By the time he begins speaking everyone is accustomed to his unassuming presence.

BY JAMES BUFFIN



MARISA MURGATROYD

After thanking the organizers, Broderick makes his first offering. “What I’d like to do to start, is ask if there’s anybody in the room who has resources that they’re willing to share with others. It could be money, or equipment, or facilities, or expertise. There will be a break this afternoon, then there’ll be the dinner break, so if there’s any networking you can be doing during that time...” He then goes on to give those with offerings an opportunity to introduce themselves to everyone else in the room.

After a recap of other seminars he’s led recently, Broderick states, “I’ve always wanted to get the audience more involved. So, I’m going to start and talk about two examples and then we’re going to go into improv mode and I very much want you to participate. For me the idea is, involving the audience is not what just makes these things work better, it’s also the metaphor for the kind of distribution we’re involved in now. The phrase I like is ‘harnessing the audience.’”

Broderick’s polished and inclusive style

had taken him on a speaking circuit that covers North America, Europe and the South Pacific. His approach and methodology is so successful that he’s been invited to talk at big events such as Sundance, Cannes and TIFF. Most recently he was keynote speaker at IDFA (the International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam).

Broderick’s adventures in distribution began several years ago. “I was running a finishing fund called Next Wave Films,” he tells me in an interview for POV. “It started in 1997 and went for five and half years. When it started, traditional indie distribution was reasonably healthy and each year it seemed to get worse. And finally in 2002, the Independent Film Channel, which financed Next Wave, said ‘time’s up, we’re not going to be able to keep supporting it because the advances on distribution have declined.’ They weren’t going to be able to revolve the money in the fund from the front end; they were going to have to wait for the back end, so it turned into a pumpkin. So I had an immediate incentive,

as Next Wave disappeared, to look at what was the main cause of its demise. I did an informal research about the state of distribution and I found two things. One, that traditional distribution was worse than I thought and I had a pretty bad opinion of it before I started my research. But I also found another area where newer things were starting to happen and that was very exciting to me.”

These were boom years for independent video makers: the introduction of affordable cameras and desktop editing programs opened up new opportunities—for production.

“The barriers to production have continued to fall...nobody could really stop filmmakers from making movies. Filmmakers might not be able to make the historical epic, but certainly they can make a movie.”

And so, while people flocked to the nirvana of digital filmmaking, something else came to Broderick’s attention: the catch.

“As the barriers to production fell, the barriers to distribution stayed where they

were and in some cases rose a little higher. So then the question became, ‘how are filmmakers going to get movies into the world?’ That, to me, seemed an exciting area to explore.”

Here is why Broderick is so valuable an ally: he’s committed in spirit to the practice of independent filmmaking, but is detached enough that he’s able to step back and take an analytical, strategic view of his area of specialty in the industry and then jump back in, with new ideas and refreshed enthusiasm. All the while, filmmakers have kept plodding away at projects, trying to make sense of it all *and* keep on top of the changes. Peter’s gaze never seems to leave the bigger picture.

Perhaps here lies the reason why filmmakers are so keen to hear Broderick speak: now that distribution has become almost universally accessible, how can indie films make money? This point is especially relevant to documentarians, given the current international trend of broadcasters away from factual programming and towards entertainment, sports and reality shows.

“Here we are in early 2010 and distribution is the central issue, I think, for filmmakers these days. Not that financing isn’t important; not that having a team of people and a great script to make a movie isn’t essential, but you can have both of those things and without a realistic and effective distribution strategy, it’s for nought. So distribution just seemed to me to become the most important thing that I could focus on.”

Broderick’s dedication to empowering filmmakers extends beyond working directly *with* them—he also writes articles *for* them.

In September 2008 he published an article titled, “Welcome to the New World of Distribution.” In it, he describes an “Old World” financing model where documentarians are primarily funded through “...a hierarchical realm where filmmakers must petition the powers that be to grant them distribution.” In this model, filmmakers’ scant resources are tapped by having to dedicate an enormous amount of energy away from the practice of their craft and towards the appeasement of gatekeepers. In exchange for this privilege, the filmmaker gives up a large portion of the financial rewards.

But wait, there’s hope in Broderick’s New World model, one where filmmakers take responsibility for exploring new areas.

“Life in the New World requires them to work harder, be more tenacious, and take more risks. There are daunting challenges and no guarantees of success.”

One of the main aspects to this model is hybrid distribution. It’s a term coined by Broderick in his article, “Declaration of Independence: Ten Principles of Hybrid Distribution.” It refers chiefly to splitting rights with distribution partners (plural, region by region, *including domestic*) and retaining the right to make direct sales, as opposed to signing an all-rights deal with a single distributor, educational or otherwise. This leaves the filmmaker in control of a flexible distribution strategy, with a more leveraged position to achieve profits; in short, it makes them more independent.

It also includes a direct access to a view-

whelmed at the number of great possibilities that are before them: all with practical examples. You can see some of them in the bulletins section of his website, www.peterbroderick.com

Another notable thing about Broderick’s thinking is that he draws on other disciplines to anticipate what might work in indie filmmaking. It’s no secret *now* that many are watching the music industry to predict the future of the film business, but how many were doing this three years ago? Be honest. Flatter yourself if you did, but realize this: individually, there have been examples of success in one area or another, but what Broderick does is aggregate the information about



Peter Broderick’s expertise at guessing the future makes him a much-sought-after speaker from (left to right) Berlin to Tihany to Toronto.

er’s methodology, as opposed to viewers being reached via a distributor, as in an Old World model. Social media plays significantly into this equation. Crowdsourcing (ways to include the audience in content creation and funding) is also key here.

To break the ice when he spoke at TIFF last year, Broderick even donned a three-point hat while reading his Declaration of Independence. Of course, the laughter temporarily alleviated the tension in the room. In the time Broderick spoke, you could see the light go on for many people—they went from being overwhelmed by their lack of knowledge on how to market films using the internet and social media to being over-

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LEFT: UTE LANGKAFEL © BERLINALE 2009 / RIGHT: RAPHAELA NEHAUSEN

Sound familiar? It should, because this is what many indie filmmakers are doing now. Broderick identified this almost three years ago, then stood up and pointed it out.

Some filmmakers that Broderick was involved with took a big leap of faith by rolling out free content on the internet. Common knowledge would dictate that this would kill DVD sales, but instead, dedicated audiences bought DVDs because they

and the ways in which an audience can interact with a filmmaker and his or her work...In some cases it could be just buying a DVD, but it goes all the way across the spectrum to what you might call creative collaboration where the individual is sending in suggestions, ideas, images, effects—whatever could be incorporated in the film so the film is kinda crowdsourced in that way. I think the old idea of ‘audience’ was

very much top down; major studios decided what all of you were going to see and ‘you just loved what they gave you.’ (laughs) That’s a way of thinking and it’s very similar to the traditional broadcast model where you have a TV station and it sends things across whatever geographical region it reaches. I think the old broadcast top down models are being undercut and so it’s really about how you can reach and harness the audience for its ideas, suggestions and money.”

When Broderick spoke at the True/False Film Festival in Missouri last year, he donned a turban and used a crystal ball to improvise possible distribution strategies with audience members. It was, of course, natural to ask during the interview, given his reputation for helping create successful distribution strategies, if there are any new trends, ideas, movements—right now—that filmmakers should be aware of.

Broderick cautions, “You’ve gotta be careful when you extrapolate and what lessons you learn.”

He adds, “There is a model that I learned about the other day which I like a lot. Let’s say you’ve made a documentary about hunger; well, there are organizations across North America that are trying to reduce it or end it. So if those organizations could use the film for a fundraiser, then they could split the revenues with the filmmakers. For example the organization would keep two thirds or three quarters of the money and the filmmaker would get the rest. And then the organization, in addition to making money, is generating more awareness about the specific aspect that the film covers and they’re maybe attracting

people to the organization that have never been there before. I like the idea of creating this kind of fundraiser module—if you did it in Iowa, the people living in Colorado could say, *hey you know that could work for us* and the people in Massachusetts could do it as well.”

At the core of Broderick’s thinking seems to be the principles of audience inclusion, interactivity and the intention of creating win-win-win scenarios.

“I think that filmmakers have only begun to scratch the surface of how to do this...I just think that there are so many opportunities out there. I mean, if your site is not just a Canadian site or a US site but is actually a global website and can track an audience from around the world, then I think you’d be *crazy* not to have a way for those people to contribute some content to the website. It just seems to me a no-brainer.”

Back at the NFB’s Spotton Cinema, the day has progressed well. Broderick points out to his audience: “When you’re thinking about how to get people to your website, make sure there’s something worthwhile for them when they get there so that they can tell other people about it. And then when you talk about putting stuff on YouTube or going viral with different things to attract people to your website, please remember that you don’t have to start with a huge number of people. If you’re building a mailing list, start small. Take your mailing list really seriously. Let me ask, how many people in this room have a meaningful mailing list...(crowd hems and haws)...a meaningful list is really important. You have to treat people well. Don’t email them every other day and tell them that your short film got into another festival. Those people can be hugely important.”

Broderick only writes for his website when inspired. To become his client, you have to fill in a form on his site because he only takes on projects when he believes he can make a fresh contribution. The documentary community is fortunate to have an ally with such passion, integrity and generosity. If you get a chance to see Broderick speak, be sure to show up with something meaningful to share because for the foreseeable future, that’s the name of the game. **POV**

James Buffin is an independent filmmaker based in Toronto. Current projects include *Fa’a Samoa*, about post-tsunami Samoa, *Jingle Dress*, about intergenerational healing from Native residential school experiences and *Chasing With Heart*, about a humanitarian storm chase team in Nebraska.



offered special features unavailable anywhere else. Filmmaker retention of direct DVD sales rights is key to the success of the Hybrid Distribution model.

The mere mention of DVDs in this interview stops Broderick in his tracks. That DVD sales are plummeting, world-wide, is no secret.

“I don’t have a simple answer. I think that DVD sales are still gonna be significant for years to come. I also believe that digital revenues will increase over time. What concerns me is I think there may be a gap between where the sales of DVDs have fallen but digital revenues have not risen enough that they will make up for that lost revenue.”

Uncertainty. Freedom. Risk. Independence: the ups and downs of a New World. It’s suggested that the risk of filmmakers rolling out free content on the internet requires a lot of trust. Broderick’s response?

“The filmmaker has to trust the audience. And the audience has to trust the filmmaker. But there’s also another idea that’s beyond trust, which is interaction