



“Fantastic Machine” Turns the Camera on Itself in Eye-opening Documentary

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PARK CITY, UTAH – JANUARY 23: (L-R) Directors Maximilien Van Aertryck and Axel Danielson attend the 2023 Sundance Film Festival “Fantastic Machine” premiere at Prospector Square Theatre on January 23, 2023 in Park City, Utah. (Photo by Jerod Harris/Getty Images)

By Peter Jones

Long before the world gave birth to YouTube and a population of 45 billion cameras, mankind was already amused by its own reflection. Enter the still camera, the film camera, and a worldwide web that has proven how prophetic Andy Warhol was when he predicted everyone would be famous for 15 minutes.

The documentary *Fantastic Machine*, which premiered January 23 at the 2023 Sundance Film Festival, is a film — about film — that questions not just the nature of “documentary” evidence and the “truth” of a photographic image, but the very art of filmmaking itself. The screening was followed by a Q&A with the co-directors.

Per the title, the earliest movie camera was a “fantastic machine,” according to England’s King Edward VII, who was arguably the first beneficiary of a “deep fake” when a clever filmmaker staged and filmed a phony coronation — some days prior to the actual event — with a taller actor and pomp and circumstance that never actually happened.

Fantastic Machine is a documentary cavalcade of historic clips that tell the story of the camera and how it has been used and abused to document, exploit and create “reality,” especially as it pertains to depictions of that strange human animal that produced the technology.

“For 10 years, we’ve been collecting footage that we’ve stumbled on that speaks to the relation between humans and cameras and the impact they have on human behavior,” says co-director Maximilien Van Aertryck. “OK, let’s make a film. The images came first.”

Concern about this hi-tech “sorcery” is nearly as old as the camera itself. In an early television broadcast, Ireland’s president wonders out loud where it all will lead, likening TV to atomic energy in its potential for both good and irreparable harm.

The frame — still or film — only captures so much.

“If you really understand how a camera works — it’s light being reflected into this box... and the picture is reality, but it’s also how the person carrying the camera wants you to see reality,” Van Aertryck says.

For example, a striking photo of a dead Haitian girl clutching picture frames in the wake of a devastating earthquake was for a time the stuff of award-winning journalism — until the world panned out and saw another still of all the other photographers capturing the same image like dispassionate paparazzi. Then there are the armed ISIS fighters who playfully flub the script while shooting a propaganda film.

Even more chilling is seeing the smiling Leni Riefenstahl proudly re-watch *Triumph of the Will*, her infamous Nazi propaganda film, proudly likening her cinematic images of marching German soldiers to the artful “ballet” she had ventured to recreate.

Finally, there are the YouTubers going viral for falling off tables or models barely balancing on the scaffolding of a skyscraper. One influencer fell asleep on camera and still garnered 200 viewers.

“We think that it’s very effective when talking about very serious things to use humor because that makes you respond to it in a way,” says co-director Axel Danielson.

One likely cannot walk away from this documentary without questioning how “fantastic” this camera thing really is — until one remembers that *Fantastic Machine* is, well, a film.

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