

RIDM responds to the *Crazy Horse* controversy

On November 11, two days after the opening of the 14th edition of the Montreal International Documentary Festival (RIDM), the event's organizers received a letter calling into question the selection of *Crazy Horse*, Frederick Wiseman's documentary about the famed Parisian cabaret, as the festival's opening film.

Signed by 20 filmmakers, producers and cinephiles, as well as nine other individuals who had not seen the film but supported the idea of a public debate on the topic, the letter expressed the group's shock and outrage at the programming choice. They called the film an "indulgent and sexist work" and found the selection all the more perplexing since its status as the opening film left no room for discussion after the screening. Accusing the RIDM team of using tired marketing ploys to draw people in, the letter calls for a public discussion about the "representation of women onscreen."

While the RIDM team is completely open to such a debate, they also believe the issues raised in the letter go far beyond the question of the representation of women in film. Below, we will address the criticism of the film itself, which we believe is grounded in a surprising interpretation of the role of a documentary filmmaker. First, we want to address the direct accusations made against our programming team's work.

RIDM is particularly proud that this year's festival includes a retrospective of the work of Frederick Wiseman, one of the most significant figures in the history of cinema. More than a year in the making, the retrospective is unquestionably one of the festival's highlights. This summer, we learned that Wiseman had recently completed *Crazy Horse*, and were intrigued by the possibility of screening the film at the festival. After seeing it, we chose it as the opening film – a perfectly sensible decision on promotional grounds, given the upcoming retrospective. But we also chose the film on cinematic grounds which had nothing to do with exploiting women's bodies in order to attract viewers. Indeed, if we had seen this a crass, poorly made work, incompatible with RIDM's mission, we would never have made it the opening film.

In fact, *Crazy Horse* is completely in line with Wiseman's past work. True to the filmmaker's form, the documentary observes the famous Paris cabaret during the ten weeks leading up to the opening of a new show. As in his previous films about the performing arts, Wiseman alternates between backstage scenes and performances. The letter accuses Wiseman of not offering a critical point of view, and claims his direction serves to reproduce the sexism inherent in the *Crazy Horse*. Whether the cabaret itself is a sexist establishment that profits from a questionable attitude toward women is certainly a subject worthy of debate, as is the decision to make the establishment a documentary subject. However, it is an entirely different matter to ascribe the establishment's perspective to the filmmaker, on the grounds that Wiseman is not openly critical of his subject. This interpretation assumes a vision of documentary filmmaking with which we strongly disagree. True to his ethical principles, Wiseman seeks first and foremost to reveal the inner workings of an institution, without explicitly passing any judgment. Wiseman has never been a polemicist. His approach is more anthropological in nature, taking an in-depth look at a subject and allowing viewers to draw their own conclusions. Even so, his films are not completely neutral. In *Crazy Horse*, for example, the placement of the casting scene toward the end of the film is an editorial decision that reveals a critical point of view toward the double standard at work in the cabaret. Some may say *Crazy Horse* is disappointing and is not on a par with Wiseman's best films – an opinion we fully respect and accept. However, we reject the letter's argument, which is founded on a highly debatable interpretation, and a narrow, dogmatic vision of the documentary filmmaker's role.

As the letter notes, the RIDM has always aimed to showcase the work of women filmmakers and shed light on societal issues affecting women. That is why we are open to discussing the representation of women with the signatories. Nevertheless, we wish to express our surprise and concern in response to the letter's apparent wider



agenda. On opening night, we would have been more than happy to engage with any audience members who were disappointed or offended by the film. We can only express our disappointment at the signatories' decision to quickly escalate the matter, and to seek outside support in order to give political weight to their action. Given that one in three people who signed the letter have not seen the film in question, the criticism appears to be more of an unsettling dogmatic reaction than a considered response in the spirit of freedom and openness that the RIDM represents. It is important to stress that the festival's mandate is to offer a selection of cinematic works with diverse and challenging themes and aesthetic approaches. The selection process does not give carte blanche to any and all excesses, but is the result of a strong editorial approach grounded in the recognized expertise of the festival's programming team.

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