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Bob Butler and I churn out an awful lot of column inches about documentary *film*. But try to see it from our *P.O.V.*

On the whole, documentaries are works of passion and vision, usually slaved over for years by an underpaid artist who secretly dreams of making real money directing features. Usually the ones I see are really good, because I review only the ones that air on television. That means they've had to compete against hundreds of other documentaries for a precious spot on a schedule, usually on PBS, HBO or Sundance Channel.

No documentary showcase has done this longer and produced as wide a variety of selections as "*P.O.V.*," which begins its 21st season this week on PBS. Once again, Kansas Citians are fortunate to have a public TV station willing to air the *series'* entire four-month run, at 10 p.m. Tuesday nights on KCPT. In other cities, station managers like to pick a few from the tree, something I wouldn't dare do with a collection as varied and consistently excellent as "*P.O.V.s.*"

Here, for starters, are the first few *films* sent to me from this season:

."*Traces of the Trade*" (10 p.m. Tuesday). Katrina Browne must have known she had a heck of a story for her very first *film* project, because she went all-out, shooting on two continents and in Cuba. Then again, it is her story, the story of her ancestors — one of New England's most prosperous and upright families — and how they built their fortunes on the backs of slave labor. With nine relatives and a camera crew, she headed out on a fact-finding tour to learn some ugly, long-hidden truths about her family. Her *film* refuses to rush into the safe harbor of white guilt or to disown the illegal acts of the forefathers. There's an understanding that if they'd been there 250 years ago, they might have looked the other way.

."Election Day" (July 1). When I say "going to vote," what do you think of? You probably have a mental image of standing on a tiled floor in a room with too much overhead fluorescent lighting, handing your driver's license to Grandma. But how about these images: a Republican handing out bags of candy to poll watchers in heavily Democratic Chicago. A human-rights observer from Australia hovering at a precinct in inner-city St. Louis. Director Katy Chevigny stitched together *video* shot at 11 election sites in November 2004 for this engaging *film*.

."The Ballad of Esequiel Hernandez" (July 8). It had been 27 years, Kent State to be exact, since a member of the U.S. military had killed an American citizen when 18-year-old Hernandez was gunned down by a Marine. At the time of his death, he was watching his family's flock of goats with a .22 rifle on his family's ranch in Texas, just a few yards from the Mexican border that the Marines were guarding against illegal immigrants. His death didn't devastate just the Hernandez family but also the Marines whose mistake cost an American innocent's life. Not that Bill O'Reilly and his fellow travelers would deign to watch anything on the Pinko Broadcasting Service, but if they really think our troops should be doing more of this kind of border defense, they should watch Kieran Fitzgerald's *film* first.

."The Last Conquistador" (July 15). "In a way, I've developed my own trap," says sculptor John Houser about the massive, 34-foot-high statue of Don Juan de Onate, the 16th-century Spaniard who explored modern-day New Mexico and is often called "the last conquistador." Houser's "trap" is less about creating an 18-ton work of public art — though it did take him nine years to finish — so much as grappling with all that Onate represented: not just ambition and exploration but subjugation, cruelty and violence. When news gets out that El Paso, Texas, has commissioned the monument, critics link Onate to a "genocide" of Native Americans. By not taking sides in this dispute, the filmmakers allow Houser's work to stand on its own merits.

."9 Star Hotel" (July 22). You think America has issues with illegal labor? Israeli filmmaker Ido Haar would like you to see what's in his native country: young Palestinian men, fed up with the poverty and corruption in their own country, spilling over into Israel to work on construction projects there. Desperate, hard-working and charmingly idealistic, they are willing to undertake border crossings as perilous as any seen on the Rio Grande. In a way, this *film* is encouraging because it *shows* us that we aren't so special after all, and maybe by reaching out to other countries grappling with an undocumented work force, we can find our way out of this mess.

And there's more on the way after that: an insider view of the unique machine politics in Japan, a restored version of the 1969 classic "Johnny Cash: The Man, His World, His Music," and a chronicle of the dramatic prosecution of onetime Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet in 1998.

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*Highlights: P.O.V, film, public TV, series, films, Traces of the Trade, video, shows*