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Uplift Interrupted at 2011 DocuWeeks

The festival struggles valiantly to make sense of the world

By Ernest Hardy Wednesday, Aug 10 2011

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"I wish I had good news," says the poet [Li-Young Lee](#) in the documentary "Poetry of Resilience." "You know, to say that [the human] spirit is resilient"—pause—"some days I feel that spirit is not so resilient." Though Lee's perspective is ultimately global, he's speaking first of the fallout within his own family from the horrors they suffered during China's Cultural Revolution, the ways in which those horrors deeply and permanently scarred them individually and as a unit. But he's also elegantly shorthanding the conversations both in and between many of the films in this year's DocuWeeks film festival, which features a particularly strong lineup of shorts and features for its 15th anniversary. With a primary thematic focus on cultural, political, religious, and class wars, as well as their (human, spiritual, and economic) costs, there's an often palpable struggle for the work to arc toward the uplifting and affirming, even as rose-tinted glasses get crushed.

"Poetry of Resilience" is writer-director [Katja Esson](#)'s artful, engaging 40-minute short documenting a gathering of poets who survived genocide in Rwanda, the atom bomb in Hiroshima, the Nazis in Poland, and wars or deadly political strife in Vietnam, Nicaragua, Iraq, and Palestine, among other places. The writers use their poetry not only to bear witness to these atrocities, but also to examine internal scars that are often beyond healing. It's moving in its own right but achieves unexpected potency when juxtaposed with *To Be Heard*, a feature co-directed by [Roland Legiardi-Laura](#), [Edwin Martinez](#), [Deborah Shaffer](#), and [Amy Sultan](#). *Heard* is, in many ways, a standard-issue item for contemporary American documentarians—turn the cameras on X-number of troubled inner-city youths (with their absent dads, crushing poverty, and domestic and neighborhood violence) as they stitch together self-esteem while dreaming of stardom on the poetry circuit. A big-time competition looms, natch, and the question burns: Will our young heroes slay their demons in time to snatch the trophy?

The team behind *Heard* doesn't even try to avoid the clichés that have sprung up around this kind of film (real life does throw one unexpected wrench), but you're still slowly pulled into the kids' worlds and their struggles, rooting for them even as you see the setup. It's not only interesting to



To Be Heard

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compare the filmmaking in these two docs, but also to contrast the formulaic performing and writing styles of the poets in *Heard* to those of their elders in "Resilience." The younger poets' trigger-reflexes toward the commodification and "performance" of self, and their naked pursuit of stardom, speaks volumes about what modern America teaches its youth (all of us, really) about being an artist and a human being.

Also recommended: *Darwin*, an exquisite look at a small California town (35 residents) populated by eccentrics whose politics, complex histories, and day-to-day life is the stuff that used to comprise novels; the short "Maya Deren's Sink," a musing on the late filmmaker's life and creativity that not only features clips from her groundbreaking work, but also replicates her style in the telling; "Barber of *Birmingham*," an inspiring short that traces America's evolution from the violently segregated South of the 20th century to the place that elected *Barack Obama* as president, all through the eyes and experiences of a magnetic 85-year-old black barber; *Unfinished Spaces*, a witty survey (and dismantling) of Cuban politics, from Batista to the present day, through a look at the near-mythological School of the Arts; *The Boy Mir: Ten Years in Afghanistan*, in which the young hero from the award-winning *The Boy Who Plays on the Buddhas of Bamiyan* stumbles into adulthood against the backdrop of war, making you laugh and breaking your heart in equal measure.

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2. [The Smurfs](#), 21.0 mil, 76.2 mil
3. [Cowboys & Aliens](#), 15.7 mil, 67.4 mil
4. [The Change-Up](#), 13.5 mil, 13.5 mil
5. [Captain America: The First Avenger](#), 13.0 mil, 143.2 mil
6. [Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows - Part 2](#), 12.2 mil, 342.8 mil
7. [Crazy, Stupid, Love](#), 12.1 mil, 42.2 mil
8. [Friends With Benefits](#), 4.7 mil, 48.5 mil
9. [Horrible Bosses](#), 4.6 mil, 105.2 mil
10. [Transformers: Dark of the Moon](#), 3.0 mil, 344.1 mil

Movie Title, Weekly Earnings, Total Earnings

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[Beastly - Trailer](#)
Release date: 03-04-2011

[Season of the Witch - Trailer](#)
Release date: 01-07-2011

[Highwater - Trailer](#)
Release date: 08-27-2010

[Takers - Trailer](#)
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