

NINA MOINI: A new film that documents Operation Metro Surge premiered at the prestigious Venice Film Festival in Italy this past weekend. The 25-minute documentary, called *They're Here*, captures scenes in the Twin Cities during the height of the Trump administration's immigration enforcement surge this past winter.

Joining me now are two people who are part of the film, who are both based in Minneapolis. Rachel Lauren Mueller is the director, producer, and cinematographer. Thanks for being here, Rachel.

**RACHEL
LAUREN
MUELLER:** Hi, thanks so much for having me.

NINA MOINI: And thanks as well. Adam Mellion, co-producer and researcher, here with us. Thanks for being here, Adam.

**ADAM
MELLION:** Thank you.

NINA MOINI: For anybody who lives here, I got to watch the documentary. For anyone who lives here or saw it, you see it and you think, yep, I saw that. I saw that. But you were on a world stage, now, there in Venice, and so many people have so many questions, it seems, about Minnesota. Rachel, I wonder what that's like, having this world premiere on such a grand, big stage and raising this kind of awareness.

**RACHEL
LAUREN
MUELLER:** Yeah, I mean, it has been overwhelming. It's been thrilling, the exact kind of reception, that kind of stage that we wanted to have the premiere on. So I co-directed the film with Laura Poitras, who has extensive experience on the world stage. She won the Golden Lion at Venice in 2015 for her film, *All the Beauty and the Bloodshed*. And so she's a familiar face here.

But this, for me, it was my very first time. We premiered the film yesterday evening. It was programmed with several other shorts. And we had a standing ovation at the end of the evening, which, I can just say, brought me to tears. It feels extremely meaningful to bring a film that I've worked so hard on that is so literally very close to home, to a world stage and have it received by an audience with such-- I think they kept it close to their hearts. People were very moved. And that's just the best thing you could ask for with a piece of art.

NINA MOINI: And it wasn't that long ago that this enforcement campaign happened, known as Operation Metro Surge, or what it was called by the federal government. Why was it important for you to put this film together, for your whole team to put the film together so quickly, Rachel?

**RACHEL
LAUREN
MUELLER:** Yes, so I think, really, the most important piece for Laura and I, as we were dealing with the materials, as we made the film, that really was the best for the materials. And so it emerged that that was a short film. We felt like we were able to say what needed to be said in that medium.

And of course, at the same time, we were really considering the urgency of the moment. And being able to make something that continues to be relevant in contemporary times was also absolutely important as well, though, I would say, we were driven by the art first. The added bonus of it continuing to be relevant in our current political climate was excellent as well.

NINA MOINI: Adam, I mentioned that you both live in South Minneapolis. I wonder at what point you realized, I should really start to document what's happening? And were you thinking about consciously and intentionally documenting, as everything was going on? Because for folks who don't know, the film uses your own footage, but also footage from others, from observers, dash cam. When did you think, I got to start putting some stuff together, Adam?

ADAM MELLION: Well, this came about because I actually have worked for Laura Poitras for the last seven or eight years as a researcher and a fact-checker. And I happened to be at an event with her the day that Renée Good was murdered. And so she had been following very closely what was happening here and said, hey, do you know anyone that can start shooting footage right away? And Rachel was just the perfect person.

So all I did, in that sense, was connect the two of them. And they were off to the races in discussing the parameters of the film and how they envisioned it. And then throughout, I've been still a researcher and a producer of the team. It's Rachel and I that were on the ground in Minneapolis-- so doing anything I could to support her and to support the film generally.

NINA MOINI: And Rachel, how did you decide, I mean, what to include? Because I bet you had a lot more footage than the 25 minutes.

RACHEL LAUREN MUELLER: Oh, absolutely. The process of making a documentary requires gathering hours and hours, if not hundreds of hours, of footage. I don't know if we have hundreds of hours of footage, but there was a plethora of things. I was out filming every single day for almost three months.

NINA MOINI: Wow.

RACHEL LAUREN MUELLER: We made choices about the footage based on really what felt cinematic. We really believe in the power of cinema to de-normalize violence specifically. That's what we aim to do with this film. And a lot of what we were considering-- especially because there is this crowdsourced nature to the footage, we've got footage from a lot of different places-- it's really reflective of the way that the movement happened in Minneapolis.

We would look at this footage and consider, are there moments here that have a sense of emotion to them that feel like cinema and that is different than the news cycle, the news media, that can show us something different, that can really help us move beyond a space of intellectualization and the ways that we think about these numbers and the figures into a space that's much more visceral?

So that was a large part of how we got to our footage. I would say, additionally, we talked very early on about using the genres of horror and horror dystopia to really get at something that is more true and, as we were viewing the footage, things that felt like they could be in a horror film.

So, for example, the film starts with dash cam footage that was shot by a person. Her pseudonym is Liz Lemon. She is following ICE in her vehicle, and she has a dash cam. And you follow her through these idyllic winter streets of Minneapolis. It's snowy. You hear these dispatch calls.

And at the end of the scene, there's a monster, this ICE agent that pops out of a window and points at her house. And that scene, really, to us, is emblematic of the kind of genre trope that we were going for that isn't about hyperbole or exaggeration. In fact, it gets us closer to the truth. So those were some of the considerations we had when we were putting together the footage.

NINA MOINI: Adam, what would you add to that, just talking about what different genres were, I guess, inspirations or came out naturally for this?

ADAM MELLION: Yeah, I mean, it's not just horror. There is an almost sci-fi element. Some of what we're getting at is that there are these invaders. They're almost alien-like invaders. And the concept of juxtaposing these aliens in our city to what they considered, quote, unquote, "illegal aliens" was definitely top of mind. But it's this often faceless force. They're wearing masks. We don't know who they are. They're abducting our fellow neighbors. And so that sort of sci-fi element is also there.

And it does come through. It has a strong throughline of anxiety. And few people that we've screened it for, including at Venice, have left the building not in tears. I think, for people in Minneapolis in particular, it's a very-- [LAUGHS] I wouldn't say this lightly, but kind of traumatic experience to relive what happened this past winter.

NINA MOINI: Rachel, what do you hope for audiences in Minneapolis, in Minnesota, to take away from it, and also, global audiences?

RACHEL LAUREN MUELLER: Yeah, locally, I really hope that this film-- as Adam said, I think it is difficult to watch, but I'm hoping that it also reminds the people of Minnesota about the hope of resistance. It was very important to us in the film to show the really robust and sophisticated countersurveillance that was happening, and the ways in which neighbors organized amongst each other to keep each other safe.

And there's a statistic at the end of the film. We say that there's tens of thousands, if not hundreds of thousands, of people within the Twin Cities that volunteered their time in order to keep their neighbors safe. And as a result of that, we postulate that 80% of ICE agents withdrew in March. 80% of ICE agents did withdraw in March. And our hypothesis is that that's, in large part, due to the efforts of the people of the Twin Cities.

And that's a really hopeful message that I want people to sit with and feel and feel it as a victory, that resistance can have an impact. That's what I'm hoping for the people of the Twin Cities. And I think on a global stage, both the sense of resistance and that that can be hopeful, and also, an understanding of the level of terror that immigrant people in the United States are living with in the United States right now. I think I'm not sure people really understand what is at stake for our immigrant communities.

NINA MOINI: And just lastly, Rachel, will this have a US or a Minnesota debut? Or when can people here look out for it?

RACHEL LAUREN MUELLER: Absolutely. So it will play for the first time in the United States at Camden, the Camden International Film Festival in Maine. Shortly thereafter, it will play at the New York Film Festival. And shortly thereafter, we will be having a screening in Minneapolis. We are not being public about the date yet, but it will be in early October. So if you're able to follow, follow the title of the film. It's called *They're Here*. We'll make sure that it's on all of the media platforms when we're able to release the date.

NINA MOINI: Rachel and Adam, thank you both so much for your time and for sharing your work with us. We really appreciate it.

ADAM MELLION: Thank you.

RACHEL Thank you so much for having us on the show.

LAUREN

MUELLER:

NINA MOINI: You're welcome. Rachel Lauren Mueller and Adam Mellion are both part of the new documentary, *They're Here*.