

LOOKING AT DOCUMENTARIES

EDUCATIONAL RESOURCE

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TEACHER'S GUIDE

This viewing and teaching guide sets out a few key questions that are designed to help teachers include the study of documentary film in their curriculum. By this, we mean to outline how documentaries can be used to complement more traditional pedagogical tools, such as books, handouts, etc. While audio-visual material may already be a resource, this study guide aims to support the teacher who is interested in developing a more critical dialogue about documentary film in his or her classroom.

The key questions are:

- Why are documentaries worth watching?
- What types of documentaries are there?
- How are documentaries different from fiction?
- What should we look for in a documentary?

Common terms or key ideas useful in discussing documentary are highlighted in bold.

Education package written by Alexandra Anderson

WHY ARE DOCUMENTARIES WORTH WATCHING?

Documentaries Tell Us About the World

You can find documentaries about almost any **subject**: rock stars, politicians, ethnic groups, things that happen in far-off countries, events from the past, scientific explorations—the list goes on and on. Documentary films add a new level of information to the study of history, sociology, geography, biology, etc. Often documentaries humanize a subject, that is, a subject is discussed through a personal story. This makes the subject more alive, more interesting and easier to understand.

Documentaries Make the Past Come Alive

Almost by definition, documentaries focus on events that happened in the past. For this reason, a longer-range perspective can be trained on a subject, hindsight being a particularly powerful documentary optic. In *Fog of War* (2004), Errol Morris elicited a dramatic admission of regret from Secretary of Defence Robert McNamara for his role in escalating the Vietnam War, 40 years after the key events took place. Strong characters, interviewed well, form the backbone of many documentaries and help bring history alive.

Re-creations or **dramatizations** are also very effective at taking the audience back to moments in the past. Errol Morris's *Thin Blue Line* (1989) used stylized re-creations to call attention to discrepancies in the case against Randall Adams, a drifter who had been found guilty of shooting a Dallas policeman more than 10 years earlier. The film was so successful that it forced the re-opening of the case and the exoneration of the accused.

Documentaries usually have more time to research and develop an idea than do newspapers and daily television news broadcasts. Ken Burns has made numerous series for the American PBS network. Burns's *The War* (2007) about World War II, *Jazz* (2001), *Baseball* (1994) and the *American Civil War* (1990), to name a few, use a treasure trove of interviews and **archive** material to illuminate and bring history to life. The films rely on years of **research** and the gathering of material that news broadcasts just can't do.

The ability to look back and to reprise earlier periods is used very effectively in the *Up* series (*Seven Up!*, *Seven Plus Seven* and all the way to *49 Up* as of 2005). Every seven years, Michael Apted and his team have returned

to the same cross section of the British population and documented their passage from childhood through to mid-life. Each film uses clips from previous films to create the effect of time travelling through someone's life. This is a particularly powerful documentary perspective.

Documentaries Are Windows Into Hidden Worlds

Documentaries aren't just interested in events in the past. Documentary cameras take the viewer **behind the scenes** to reveal the story behind the headlines or to reveal stories that don't even make the headlines. Documentaries take us into far corners of the world or corners of our own cities and neighbourhoods that we would never otherwise see. In *Warrendale* (1967), Alan King went to the outskirts of Toronto to bring a camera into a group home for disturbed teenagers. The film shocked the CBC so much that they refused to air it. In *Gimme Shelter* (1970), Albert and David Maysles followed the Rolling Stones on tour. Their cameras caught an altercation where one audience member was stabbed and later died. In the film, a very distressed Mick Jagger tries to calm the crowd down and later we see a more composed Jagger watching the film of himself and the stabbing as captured by the documentary camera. Documentaries allow an audience to jump across time and to see different perspectives of an event.

Documentaries Humanize Complex Stories

In *Afghan Star* (2008), Havana Marking focuses her camera on the Afghan equivalent of *American Idol*. Her film follows the finalists in a national, televised singing competition where the winner is selected through cell-phone voting. The process is familiar to all of us, but the background of war and the influence of Islamic fundamentalism add a specific Afghan spin. The film is entertaining and educational at the same time, as it gives us a window into a country that is far away and hard to comprehend even if it is in our newspapers daily.

In *Capturing the Friedmans* (2003), the filmmaker used an extensive collection of home-movie footage and present-day interviews to re-trace the events that led to a father and son being accused and found guilty of

paedophilia and child abuse. The interviews with family members are mostly sympathetic to the accused but the filmmaker balances this with the court findings and events that followed the trails to weave a complex, subtle and ambiguous web around these dramatic events.

Documentaries Show What Can't Be Seen by the Human Eye

Some of the most popular documentaries are nature documentaries. Films such as *Winged Migration* (2001), *March of the Penguins* (2005) and *Sharkwater* (2006) use the latest camera technology, filmed over a long period, to show us the natural world in a way we could never see on our own.

Nature documentaries are particularly effective at giving us the **behind-the-scenes** look that documentaries use so well. Titles from David Attenborough's BBC series reveal that the producers are well aware of this appeal (to voyeurism) and this function of their films. Titles such as *The Private Life of Plants* (1995) and *The Secret Life of Elephants* (2009) pique our curiosity but also promise to reveal in-depth information about the natural world.

WHAT TYPES OF DOCUMENTARIES ARE THERE?

We have already talked about the different subjects that documentary can address. From nature to history, politics, social and cultural subjects, there isn't anything that can't be a documentary subject. But beyond subject, there are different **styles** of documentary. These different styles have distinct **approaches** and **cinematic elements** that set them apart from each other.

A very common style, particularly on television, is the **expository or essay style**. The approach in an essay-style film is investigative and academic. It is investigative because the film collects evidence, academic because it presents an argument or point of view on a subject. The cinematic elements of an essay-style documentary can include interviews, a presenter in vision and/or voice-over narration with supporting images and visual sequences.

Another popular style is the **observational style**, often called *verité* or "fly on the wall." As the name implies, the approach is very hands-off; the camera follows action that is beyond the control of the filmmaker. The impression created is of a story unfolding in chronological order. If the filmmaker has a point of view, it is hidden in this narrative structure. The cinematic elements include hand-held camera work; subjects speak to each other, not an interviewer; the structure is in a story format.

An offshoot of the observational style is **the interactive or reflexive style**. The dominant idea in this documentary approach is that the filmmaker is not trying to hide that a film is being made; in fact, the people in the film are seen interacting with the film crew and/or the documentary includes information about the production. Cinematic elements include the filmmaker in vision or on the soundtrack discussing the film and interacting with the subjects. Usually, these films are made with a fluid, hand-held camera style and shots are held a longer time than in essay style. As in the observational style, these films follow a seemingly chronological narrative structure that lead to an ending that is often difficult to predict. The notion of this unpredictable ending aligns it as closely as possible with life itself.

Another type of documentary that should be mentioned is the **performative** documentary.¹ In this type of

documentary, the filmmaker, who is the subject of the film, undergoes some sort of physical or visceral process solely for the purposes of the film. Morgan Spurlock's *Super Size Me* (2004) would be considered a performative documentary. Cinematic elements include the subject speaking directly to camera or in voice-over in the first person.

Most documentaries fit into one of these categories but many fit into more than one. Expository techniques can be used in observational-style films and aspects of interactivity (between subject and filmmaker) can be included in all types of documentary. But for our purposes, it is useful to categorize films as it helps us understand how different documentaries work.

Examples of (predominantly) **expository- or essay-style** films:

RIP: A Remix Manifesto (2008)

Second Skin (2008)

Invisible City (2009)

Black Wave: The Legacy of Exxon Valdez (2008)

Cry from a Dairy of a Métis Child (1986)

Examples of (predominantly) **observational-style** films:

Daughter from Danang (2002)

Spellbound (2002)

Capturing the Friedmans (because of the predominance of home movie footage) (2003)

Grey Gardens (1975)

Examples of (predominantly) **interactive- or reflexive-style** films:

Cats of Mirakatani (2006)

Unfinished Diary (1986)

Examples of (predominantly) **performative** films:

Alwyn (2009)

Super Size Me (2004)

Tarnation (2003)

Grizzly Man (2005)

Complaints of a Dutiful Daughter (1994)

¹ The types of documentaries discussed are adapted from Bill Nichols' *Introduction to Documentary* (Indiana University Press, 2001). Nichols divides documentaries into "modes." These modes are: expository, observational, interactive, reflexive and performative. For his more nuanced and theoretical treatment of the different documentary forms see p. 138.

HOW ARE DOCUMENTARIES DIFFERENT FROM FICTION?

This question is not as straightforward as it might first appear. It is probably not helpful to see documentary as the **opposite** of fiction—even though the term **non-fiction** is often used to describe the form—because this leads us to absolute terms such as, one tells the **truth** and the other makes things up.

But it is helpful to see the two dominant film forms (fiction and documentary) in relative terms. It is fair to say that all documentaries aspire to tell a truth about the real world while fiction is not constrained by the real world. Fiction creates a world for its story to inhabit; documentary finds its story in the world we live in.

However, while all documentary films have a **subject**, not all of them have a clearly identifiable story. By **story**, we mean a set of characters that move through events in a forward direction compelled by a series of actions and reactions. Of course, the best stories also have an arc, suspense and a satisfying ending. Fiction films are usually carried by a story; while, in documentary, the story is sometimes replaced by a **structure**, by which we mean the order facts and opinions are placed in the film. Because documentaries deal in facts we can say that documentaries arrive at a truth in a more evidentiary way than do fiction.

But we have to be careful when we are talking about truth. It is crucial when watching documentaries to be aware of the **intentions** of the filmmaker and to test their ability to convince you of the truth they are trying to convey. We will talk more about this in the section that follows.

Another key distinction between documentary and fiction is that all the **characters** that appear in a documentary are representing themselves or, if they have been identified as actors, they are playing someone who **existed** at some point. Characters in fiction are not limited to this; they can be entirely made up. For documentary makers this is a key distinction because it raises **ethical questions** in regard to how they treat their subjects and how they represent them in the film they make.

Reality television is a relatively new, hybrid form, one that straddles documentary and fiction. It takes its characters from documentary and its story from fiction. The people who participate in reality television shows are representing themselves. The circumstances in which they find themselves are either created by the producers or are made more “dramatic” by the demands of the genre. For example, a series about home decorating will use real people and real houses but impose “unreal” deadlines and use unusual design choices to heighten the tension around the outcome. Competition-based reality television shows share another common element with story-driven documentaries: the unpredictable ending.

Ultimately, the distinction between the genres—fiction, documentary and reality television—rests with the audience and **what the audience expects** from each genre. The audience does not expect fiction to have a direct relationship with reality. The audience enjoys reality television because they understand that reality is being “managed” but only up to a certain point. The audience might not be aware to what extent reality is managed in documentary, but they always expect documentary to convey information or a point of view about the world we live in.

WHAT SHOULD WE LOOK FOR IN A DOCUMENTARY?

As we mentioned earlier, it is important to watch all films and media with an eye to the **intention** that lies behind the film or video, i.e. why did the filmmaker make this film? Every documentary reflects a **point of view**. Even if the filmmaker has tried to present a balanced perspective, there will always be some sort of **bias** at work. But bias shouldn't imply deception because even the most rigorous scientific experiments include a bias, that is, certain parameters are established for an experiment while others are excluded. Having said that, bias can be difficult to detect in documentary because of the overt realism of its images. Bias would be more readily discernable if the viewer could see what the filmmaker chose to leave out but, of course, this is usually not possible. The bias is easier to detect if the audience knows the **context** in which the story of the documentary takes place. For instance, in *Bowling for Columbine* (2002), Michael Moore compared what he described as an American obsession with guns and security to the more peaceable and trusting attitude of Canadians. He demonstrated this by testing the front doors of houses on a downtown Toronto street. While he seemed to find many of the doors unlocked, the Canadians who watched the film at its premiere at the Toronto International Film Festival were skeptical about Moore's evidence because they knew that many people in downtown Toronto and throughout Canada lock their front doors and have concerns about security. When questioned after the film, Moore assured the audience that the majority of doors they tried were unlocked and this is what he chose to emphasize in the film. He didn't think his comments about Canada were misleading even if the evidence he chose to show was limited to one street on a warm, summer afternoon because his larger point was valid and the argument he was making was about the United States. He added that if Canadians were worried about security in their country, they should make their own documentary about that subject.

Whether you feel that is a satisfactory response, the bias and the intention of Michael Moore's films, like *Roger and Me* (1989), *Bowling for Columbine* (2002) and *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004), are often more obvious than most documentaries. That is largely because Moore presents his argument through a personal **narration** and

indeed in many argument-driven or campaigning films the filmmaker presents his purpose, point of view and bias in the **soundtrack**.

Other times, the filmmaker's words are not heard in the film and his or her **intention** isn't so obvious. In *65 Red Roses* (2009), filmmakers Lyall and Mukerji follow a young woman with cystic fibrosis as she waits for a life-saving lung transplant. The soundtrack is taken up entirely with interviews of the main character and her family and friends. Any factual information is conveyed through typed **inter-titles**. The filmmakers are obviously sympathetic to their subject and the audience is drawn in, hoping that the young girl survives her wait. The film's argument could be described as in support of organ donation but that is never overtly stated.

When you watch a documentary you should ask whether the filmmaker is sympathetic or critical the subject. This is sometimes called the voice of the documentary; in what tone is it addressing its subject? I.e. critical, sympathetic, impartial. And in what tone is it speaking to the viewer? I.e. strident, humorous, authoritative, tentative.

Sometimes it is not that easy to tell. In *Kids and Money* (2006), Lauren Greenfield interviews a group of young girls from a wealthy pocket of Los Angeles about their shopping habits. There is no spoken narration from the filmmaker but because the filmmaker has chosen to concentrate on a very specific and privileged group of teenagers, the film could be read as an indictment of the lifestyles of the rich and their questionable parenting skills. But the film never states that intention and, in fact, one can also read a certain sympathy for her subjects emanating from the filmmaker. Girls in the film speak about the pressures to keep up with the fashions and the spending habits of their peer group. Greenfield's **camera angles** are always level with the **eye-lines of her subjects**; no one is ever looking up or down; the girls speak openly, an indication that the filmmaker has won their trust. In the end, the viewer could conclude that the film is criticizing the wider consumer culture and its effect on young girls in every income bracket. In this case, the filmmaker has chosen to let the voice of the documentary be more tentative and the intention more ambiguous, allowing the viewer to come up with her or his own interpretation.

In order to assess the argument or point of view of a documentary, it is important to notice the **choices** that have been made by the filmmaker, particularly in regard to what has been included and what has been left out. An interesting exercise is to try and think of could have been included in a film that would have presented an alternative point of view or weakened the film's argument. In order to do this, it is important to do research on the subject of the documentary to gain a wider and more in-depth understanding of the **context**.

As in *Kids and Money*, the intention of a documentary can often be determined by looking at **cinematic choices** the filmmaker made in conveying his or her point of view.

The **soundtrack** is a very good place to start: is there a narration? Who is speaking it? What role do interviews play in the documentary? Are conversations between characters included? What effect does this have? Do the subjects ever speak to the filmmaker? What effect does this have?

And very important: what role does **music** play? There are no right answers.

How the images are presented should also be analyzed to determine the intention of the filmmaker. We have already discussed camera positions and eye-lines in relation to the subject. Other things to consider are shot size (close-ups, medium shots and wide shots) and camera movement.

Close-ups usually alert the audience to a detail that the filmmaker thinks is important. A **medium shot** usually stands in for the scope of human vision so it lends itself to a more impartial, observational stance. A **wide shot** usually provides information about the context and the relationship of the subject to his or her environment.

The shooting style or **camera movement** can also be a revealing indicator of the intentions of the filmmaker. If the camera is **static** and significant action happens within **the frame**, we can assume that the subjects are complicit in the filming and the director has asked that certain action be carried out especially for the filming. Even if the camera is moving but the action is largely contained within the frame, we can assume that the **action is being staged for the camera**. This doesn't necessarily imply that what we

see is not honest or accurate, but the spontaneity and the uncontrollable nature of real events have been restrained by a director's hand. If the camera is **following the action**, we have to assume that the director is controlling it less and therefore has a more ambiguous and perhaps more impartial intention.

To add to what has been specially filmed, documentaries can also include archive of past events, news footage, photographs, home movies, headlines from newspapers and images of text. These elements serve as **evidence** and add to the veracity of the documentary. The **editing** of the images is probably the most significant indicator of the filmmaker's point of view: what is included, what is left out, what is juxtaposed, what is compared and the **order** in which the information is placed reveals what the filmmaker considers important and propels the documentary to the conclusion the filmmaker has decided upon.

Even so, there is no right or wrong way to read a documentary; audiences come from diverse cultures, economic backgrounds, distinct genders and national contexts and all these factors play into how a documentary is read and understood.

What is important is to **read** the documentary, looking for the different elements described in this booklet. The filmmaker has interpreted reality and, in turn, the viewer is expected to interpret the documentary. Dai Vaughn, writing about documentary described it this way: "Film is about something, whereas reality is not."

FURTHER READING

Nichols, Bill. *Introduction to Documentary*. Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2001.

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