



# 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.

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# 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.

## FURTHER READING

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

Rabiger, Michael. *Directing the Documentary, Second Edition*. Boston: Focal Press, 1992.

Vaughn, Dai. *For Documentary: Twelve Essays*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995.

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