

# LOOKING AT DOCUMENTARIES

EDUCATIONAL RESOURCE

This project was made possible with the support of the Department of Canadian Heritage through the Canadian Culture Online Strategy



Canadian  
Heritage

Patrimoine  
canadien

Canada

hotdocs

OUTSPOKEN.OUTSTANDING.

WWW.HOTDOCS.CA

# LOOKING AT DOCUMENTARIES

## 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

# 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.<sup>1</sup> 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)

---

<sup>1</sup> 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.

## 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.

Bruzzi, Stella. *New Documentary: A Critical Introduction*. London and New York: Routledge, 2000.