

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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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.

FURTHER READING

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