

# 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 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.

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.