

SEARCHING for TRUTH



SEWING WOMAN (1983) was a study of filmmaker Arthur Dong's mother who immigrated from China. The mother's narration to this picture in the film was, "One day we had a family picture taken and sent it back to our son waiting in China. We loved our American children but we never felt like a complete family. So, we had our first son's portrait plugged into the picture, and that was as close as we could get to being a whole family." *Sewing Woman and family, San Francisco 1953. Courtesy of DeepFocusProductions.com.*



Director Michael Apter originally chronicled the lives of a group of seven-year-old British children in 1964 in *Seven Up* and visited them every seven years, documenting the changes in their lives in subsequent films. This photograph from *49 Up* reflects three of those now grown-up children holding photographs of themselves from each seven-year period. Photo courtesy of Granada TV.

DEAR EDUCATOR:

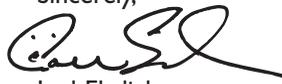
Curriculum specialists Young Minds Inspired (YMI), in cooperation with the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, is proud to present this newest addition to our series of study guides that focus on different branches of the Academy. In this guide, students will learn about documentaries. The kit has been designed for students in high school English, language arts, visual arts and communications classes. As former teachers, we know that these critical-thinking activities capitalize on students' natural interest in current films and the excitement generated by the Academy Awards®.

The Academy, organized in 1927, is a professional honorary organization composed of more than 6,000 motion picture craftsmen and women. Its purposes include advancing the art and science of motion pictures, promoting cooperation among creative leaders for cultural, educational, and technological progress; recognizing outstanding achievements; and fostering educational activities between the professional community and the public. Academy members are the people who create movies—the cream of the industry's actors, animators, art directors, cinematographers, costume designers, directors, film editors, documentarians, make-up artists, composers, producers, sound and visual-effects experts, writers and other contributors.

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Sincerely,



Joel Ehrlich
President and former teacher



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PROGRAM COMPONENTS

1. This instructional guide
2. Five student activity masters
3. A four-color wall poster for classroom display
4. A response card for teacher comments

TARGET AUDIENCE

This program has been designed for students in high school English, language arts, visual arts and communications classes.

PROGRAM OBJECTIVES

1. To enhance student interest in and knowledge about the motion picture development and production process
2. To encourage students to use critical thinking as they learn how documentary filmmakers work
3. To engage students in an exploration of film as an art form and a medium of communication
4. To help students become more media literate

INTRODUCTION

The first Academy Awards were handed out on May 16, 1929, not long after the advent of "talkies." By 1930, enthusiasm for the ceremonies was so great that a Los Angeles radio station did a live, one-hour broadcast, and the Awards have enjoyed broadcast coverage ever since. The number and types of awards have grown and changed over the years to keep up with the development of the motion picture industry. Awards of Merit—Oscars—are presented in each (or in subdivisions) of the following categories: acting, animation, art direction, cinematography, costume design, directing, documentary film, film editing, foreign language film, make-up, music, best picture, short film, sound, visual effects and writing. In an age when awards shows seem as common as nightly news programs, the Academy Awards are unique because the judges—the approximately 6,000 Academy members—are the top filmmakers from around the world. The question, "Who gets the Oscar?" is decided by a true jury of peers. The awards process provides a wonderful opportunity to teach your students about the many craft areas and the many communications techniques that play a part in creating a motion picture. Filmmaking is by nature a collaborative process, with each creative area supporting and being supported by the others. Because our space is limited, this kit focuses on documentary films.

SELECTING FILMS FOR STUDENT VIEWING

Students may select the films they wish to view for the following activities, or you may wish to suggest films that are appropriate.

The following films have won Academy Awards for Documentary Feature, are available on DVD or VHS and may be suitable for your students: *Prelude to War* (1942), *The Titan: Story of Michelangelo* (1950), *Kon-Tiki* (1951), *The Living Desert* (1953), *The Silent World* (1956), *The Anderson Platoon* (1967), *Woodstock* (1970), *The Hellstrom Chronicle* (1971), *Scared Straight!* (1978), *He Makes Me Feel Like Dancin'* (1983), *The Times of Harvey Milk* (1984), *American Dream* (1990), *Maya Lin: A Strong Clear Vision* (1994), *When We Were Kings* (1996), *Murder on a Sunday Morning* (2001), and *Born into Brothels* (2004). Other

features that have been nominated for Academy Awards for Documentary Feature include *Four Days in November* (1964), *The Sorrow and the Pity* (1971), *Brooklyn Bridge* (1981), *Streetwise* (1984), *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years/Bridge to Freedom 1965* (1987), *The War Room* (1993), *Mandela* (1996), *Colors Straight Up* (1997), *4 Little Girls* (1997), *Buena Vista Social Club* (1999), *LaLee's Kin: The Legacy of Cotton* (2001), *Spellbound* (2002), *Winged Migration* (2002), *Super Size Me* (2004), and *Tupac: Resurrection* (2004).

The following films have won Academy Awards or have been nominated for Documentary Short Subject and may be of interest to your students. Although some are available on DVD or VHS through video stores and online outlets, many others are available only by contacting the filmmakers, who can be located through an Internet search: *Close Harmony* (1981), *Sewing Woman* (1983), *Women—for America, for the World* (1986), *The Living Sea* (1995), *Alaska: Spirit of the Wild* (1997), *Thoth* (2001), *Twin Towers* (2002), *Chernobyl Heart* (2003), *Ferry Tales* (2003), and *Hardwood* (2004).

Several of the titles above and other documentary films on DVD or VHS can be rented or purchased at www.facets.org.

For a complete list of Academy Award winners and nominees, check our Web site: <http://www.oscars.org/awards-database/index.html>

ACTIVITY ONE

DOCUMENTARY BEGINNINGS

Documentaries tell stories about real events and real people using, for the most part, actual images and objects. They record what is currently happening in the world or explore what has already taken place. They introduce viewers to ideas, people and experiences they otherwise might not have encountered or challenge them to question what they already know. Like fiction films, documentaries can be funny, moving, disturbing, thought-provoking or entertaining.

Some of the first films ever made were documentaries. In 1895, French inventor Louis Lumière developed the cinématographe, a small, lightweight, hand-cranked camera that allowed him to film spontaneously any interesting event he encountered. He called films such as *Feeding the Baby*, *Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory*, and *Arrival of a Train at the Station* "actualities."

The cinématographe could also be used to print exposed film and then to project it. Lumière employees traveled around the world, recording familiar and exotic scenes. One-minute films such as *A Gondola Scene in Venice*; *Fifty-ninth Street, Opposite Central Park*; *A Scene near South Kensington, London*, and *A Snow Battle at Lyon, France*, were shown at venues in Europe, Asia and the Americas. The popularity of Lumière's short films inspired Thomas A. Edison and other film enterprises around the world to acquire portable film equipment like the cinématographe and make their own actualities.

For audiences in the 1890s, seeing real life on film was brand new and thrilling. Watching *Arrival of a Train at the Station*, spectators screamed and dodged as the filmed train moved from long shot to close-up, looking as if it could burst through the screen. Sometimes, however, real life alone was not dramatic enough to meet audiences' new expectations, prompting

non-fiction filmmakers to fake scenes when real footage was not compelling or did not exist.

In 1898, J. Stuart Blackton used cardboard ships, cigarette smoke and an inch of water to create his film *The Battle of Manila Bay*. The faked footage was presented as actual newsreel film of a Spanish-American War sea battle and was accepted as such by audiences.

Nanook of the North, considered to be the first full-length documentary, has several staged scenes. Robert Flaherty's 1922 silent film involved a group of Inuit living on the coast of Hudson Bay, just below the Arctic Circle. Much of what Flaherty captured on film entailed restaged traditional activities, such as a walrus hunt. If a sequence did not meet Flaherty's expectations, he did not hesitate to ask his subjects to repeat it.

Because the re-created activities were based on the memories of his subjects, Flaherty felt the resulting film was truthful in spirit. Re-enactments have also been used to make a point. Filmmaker Errol Morris used re-enactments of eyewitness testimony for his 1988 film *The Thin Blue Line* to demonstrate the unreliability of memory.

Re-enactments are a controversial technique, however. Digital technology can make it difficult for the audience to distinguish visual effects and re-enactments from the real thing; some documentarians feel that clearly identifying such sequences is crucial to maintaining a documentary's integrity.

Unlike newsreels and news broadcasts, which present superficial coverage of current events, documentaries examine a subject in depth and over time. For this reason, the footage of President John F. Kennedy's assassination, shot by Abraham Zapruder, is not considered a documentary, although it does document a tragic moment in history.

Documentaries can be made on any topic, no matter how large or how small. Many of the documentaries discussed below fit into several categories. War documentaries are often both political and historical. Documentaries about personal experience can also make a political point. Films documenting scientific discoveries may have a historical component.

Discuss with your students what they think makes a film a documentary. Ask them if they have ever seen any documentaries, and if so, have them describe the films and share their thoughts and feelings. Have your students list some topics that could be the subject of a documentary and ask them what about that topic makes it appropriate for documentary treatment.



NANOOK OF THE NORTH (1922) Photo from the Margaret Herrick Library Collection, AMPAS.

SUPPLEMENTAL ACTIVITY

Have your students make a one-minute “actuality” on film or video about some aspect of their lives.

ACTIVITY TWO

MAKING *a* DOCUMENTARY

Documentaries employ many of the same devices as fiction films to hold the audience's attention. Story, point of view, structure, cinematography, editing, music and style all have an important place in documentaries, just as they do in fiction films.

All documentaries require a strong story, one with a beginning, middle and end, compelling characters, and emotional impact. A documentary filmmaker must determine the subject

of the film, its theme, how the story or stories in the film will convey that theme, the characters, their goals, the conflict and the resolution. These decisions are usually made and revised throughout the filmmaking process.

In Barbara Kopple's 1976 film *Harlan County, U.S.A.* tension comes naturally from the subject matter—striking coal miners fighting to win the right to unionize. *Super Size Me* is the 2004 film about what happens to director Morgan Spurlock when he eats nothing but McDonalds' food for a month. Suspense builds as his health deteriorates over the course of the film. Spurlock also uses humor to make a serious point about the epidemic of obesity in the U.S.

Strong characters can be found in many places. Recent documentaries have featured such intriguing characters as kids from different backgrounds and cities competing in a spelling bee (*Spellbound*, 2002); the former Harlem Globetrotter father of filmmaker Hubert Davis (*Hardwood*, 2004); dolphins (*Dolphins*, 2000), or former Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara (*The Fog of War*, 2003).

Narration—off-camera commentary—is used to voice letters and other written material; to join together visual images, interviews and archival material; to provide transitions between scenes, or to set the stage for a scene. It is also used to indicate re-enactments. Narration is generally written after the film is completed to ensure that the words and pictures work together.

Sound may be recorded on location during filming or added after filming is completed. Location sound adds credibility and immediacy to the film, but the sound track may also be





re-recorded, or re-created and edited in later. Narration, music and sound effects may also be added during post-production. Contrast between sound and image or between sound and silence is an effective way to build tension. Silence can also underscore an emotional moment or allow the audience to focus closely on what the person or people on camera are saying or doing.

PART A

Documentaries can approach their subjects objectively, in a seemingly unbiased way, or subjectively, with a distinct point of view. Some documentaries use a combination of both.

Direct cinema, sometimes called *cinéma vérité* (sin-un-muh vare-it-TAY), is a method of documentary filmmaking that attempts to record events objectively, without manipulation or direction. In direct cinema, the camera records life as it unfolds in real time. Usually the audience is not aware of the filmmakers' presence. Questions are not posed on screen, and generally, the film does not have narration.

While researching their documentary *LaLee's Kin: The Legacy of Cotton*, direct cinema filmmakers Susan Froemke, Deborah Dickson and Albert Maysles met the main subjects of their film: LaLee Wallace and her family and Mississippi educator Reggie Barnes. The filmmakers did not know in advance exactly what the film would be about, but allowed LaLee's story to unfold as they observed her and her family. Froemke reports that often what the filmmakers intended to film on a given day would be put aside when other, more interesting, events took place while they watched.

Other objective documentaries involve more planning. Ken Burns has made many documentaries about American history, including *The Brooklyn Bridge* and *The Civil War*. Burns' team works on several parallel tracks at the same time, producing a working script, performing extensive research into each subject, choosing historical pictures and written material and interviewing experts. This process continues during the two to three years it takes Burns to finish the film.

Objective documentaries are usually expected to show both sides of a controversial story in a balanced manner. A multi-sided or non-judgmental approach helps build tension and adds depth to a film. By including opposing points of view and contrasting opinions, filmmakers try to provoke people to question their own beliefs about or understanding of a subject.

Viewers may find a film's argument more convincing if the filmmaker's bias is not evident. Pierre Schoendorffer, the director of *The Anderson Platoon* (1967), spent six weeks with a 33-man American platoon during the Vietnam War. Schoendorffer does not make any outright political statements, but lets the audience draw its own conclusions about the war by listening to and watching the experiences of the soldiers.

Documentaries do not always try to be objective, however. Filmmakers such as Michael Moore and Barbara Trent make personal, opinionated documentaries. In these films, the director is usually a participant, either as a voice from behind the camera, or appearing as a character in front of the camera. Often the filmmaker narrates the film as well. Although representing an individual opinion, subjective films try to be truthful from the filmmaker's point of view.

My Architect, director Nathaniel Kahn's film about his father, architect Louis Kahn, is a highly personal documentary. During

the film, Kahn attempts to come to terms with his complex feelings toward his father.

Show your students a documentary or sequence from a documentary. Some suggestions are *Bowling for Columbine*, *Bright Leaves*, *The Brooklyn Bridge*, *Garlic Is as Good as Ten Mothers*, *He Makes Me Feel Like Dancin'*, *LaLee's Kin*, *The Panama Deception* and *The Thin Blue Line*. Ask them whether the film is told from an objective or subjective point of view. Discuss with them why they think the filmmaker chose to tell the story that way. Have the students identify the subject, theme and characters of the film. If there is a conflict in the film, have them determine if it is resolved by the end. Ask them to think about how the film might have been different if it had been a fiction film.

Then have the students discuss how the different sound elements, such as narration, music and ambient sound are used in the film, and to consider how the sound and image work together.

SUPPLEMENTAL ACTIVITY

Divide your students into groups and have each group write a 5-page script on the same topic, perhaps a topic your class has been studying. Using some of the criteria above, compare and discuss the different approaches to the subject taken by each group.

PART B

Some documentaries, like *Nanook of the North*, *Genghis Blues* (1999), *Step into Liquid* (2003) and *Children of Leningradsky* (2004), observe, describe or evoke different situations, cultures and people. Others, like *The Living Sea* (1995), explain an aspect of the natural world. Still others try to mobilize support for a position. *The Thin Blue Line*, for example, led to the release of a man wrongly convicted of murder.

A documentary can be arranged chronologically or it can move back and forth in time, if that is the best way to make a point or illustrate the theme. In his 1989 film *Roger & Me*, Michael Moore wants the audience to share his outrage about the closing of General Motors' plants in his hometown of Flint, Michigan. The film does not follow a timeline because Moore is less interested in the history of the plant closings than in their effect on the community.

Although documentaries are called subjective or objective, in fact there is no such thing as totally objective filmmaking. Every choice that a documentary filmmaker makes about what to include in the film and how to structure the story not only reflects his or her attitude toward the subject, but also influences the audience's reaction.

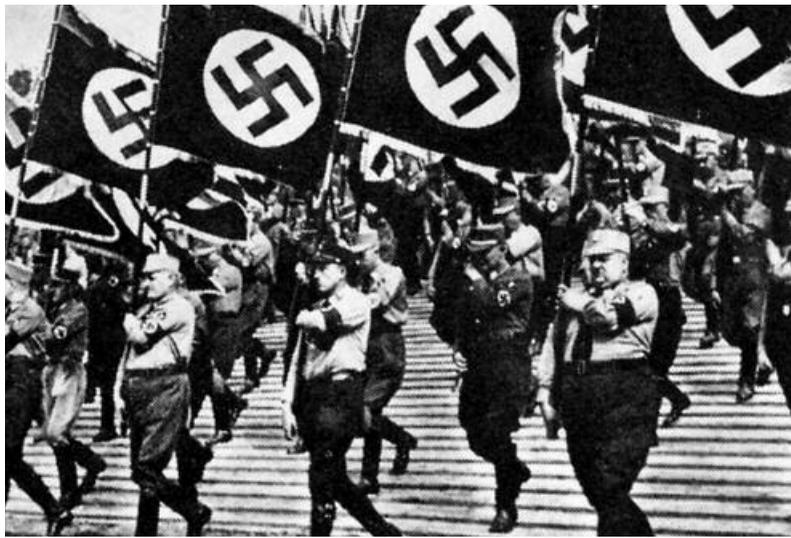
To illustrate this, have your students divide into two groups. Ask one group to choose a series of pictures from magazines or other sources and arrange them to illustrate a story in a straightforward, realistic way. Then ask the second group to take these same pictures and rearrange them to illustrate the story in a different way. For example, one group may tell the story in chronological order, while the second group arranges the pictures for a humorous effect. Have your students discuss how the same material can have different meanings.

A documentary's story is filtered through the sensibility of the filmmaker. To demonstrate the way one person's understanding can alter a story, have your students play the "telephone" game. Have a group of students sit in a line. Give a

prepared sentence to the first student and ask that student to whisper the sentence to the next student. The second student then whispers what he or she remembers to the third student, and so on until the last student is reached. Ask the last student to repeat the sentence and compare it to the written sentence that the first student began with.

SUPPLEMENTAL ACTIVITY

Have your students watch a short film or sequence from a documentary and then ask them to describe the exact sequence of events, the characters and the setting. Have them focus on what they are actually seeing and hearing, not what they think the filmmaker is trying to say. Ask them to read back their accounts and see what differences emerge. Then play the film again and let them compare their description to the film. Have them discuss what this exercise tells them about the difficulty of separating what is really going on in a film from what the viewer thinks is happening.



Using Nazi military imagery and dynamic camerawork, German filmmaker Leni Riefenstahl created *TRIUMPH OF THE WILL* (1935), a film still known as one of the most controversial ever made. Photo from the Margaret Herrick Library Collection, AMPAS.

ACTIVITY THREE

MAKING HISTORY COME ALIVE

Historical documentaries explore a past event or period of time or the life of someone who lived in the past. Finding visual material for a historical documentary can be difficult. Archival photographs, letters, and face-to-face interviews with historians and scholars are some of the sources historical documentarians draw on. Other filmmakers use actors to re-create events based on the historical record, or to read the



Using re-enactments and actual newsreel footage of American soldiers, John Ford and Gregg Toland directed a film account of the attack on Pearl Harbor in DECEMBER 7TH (1943). Photo from the Margaret Herrick Library Collection, AMPAS.

words of a historical person onscreen.

Historical documentaries can provide a comprehensive look at a topic, such as the series *Eyes on the Prize* (1987), which examines the civil rights movement of the 1960s. Others, like the 1997 documentary *4 Little Girls*, about the four girls killed by a bombing in a Birmingham, Alabama, church,

focus on a smaller, more specific part of history.

Other historical documentaries uncover the story behind the official reports. For *The Sorrow and the Pity* (1971), filmmakers Marcel Ophuls and Andre Harris combined French and German newsreel footage from the World War II period with more recent interviews with politicians, members of the French Resistance, victims of the Nazis, and members of various political factions to draw a complex picture of the country during wartime.

Historical documentaries are not always about weighty subjects. Stacey Peralta's 2001 documentary *Dogtown and*

Z-Boys, for example, traces the history of skateboarding in one particular California community.

Some documentaries take on historical importance as time passes. The silent 1927 film, *Berlin: Symphony of a City*, uses a poetic style to portray one day in the life of the city. Filmmakers Walther Ruttmann and Karl Freund arranged images of the city such as weaving telephone lines, train tracks dividing and coming together, and offices filled with typewriters and telephones to create visual rhythms and patterns, accompanied by a symphonic score. Seen today, the film shows what it was like in that particular city at that specific time in a more immediate way than does a history book.

Biographical films record not only the lives of famous individuals from the past such as Michelangelo or Rosa Parks, but also those of seemingly ordinary people. The short documentary *Sewing Woman* (1983) concerns documentarian Arthur Dong's mother, who emigrated from China to San Francisco and worked for over 30 years in the garment industry. Through her eyes, the audience witnesses Chinese customs, U.S. immigration policies and other problems faced by new immigrants. Barbara Sonnenberg's film *Regret to Inform* (1998) looks back at the Vietnam War by examining its effect on the wives and families who were left behind.

Individual lives often reflect the history of their times. Even stories about contemporary people can have historical interest. *Maya Lin: A Strong Clear Vision* finds the roots of the artist's vision in her family background. It looks at her work, from the powerful Vietnam Veterans and Civil Rights memorials to more personal pieces and, at the same time, reveals the strong feelings that still surround the Vietnam War and the civil rights movement. The 1995 documentary, *Hank Aaron: Chasing the Dream*, shows the sports hero's struggle against the racism of his time, and Aaron's efforts to break Babe Ruth's home-run record.

Show your students a historical or biographical documentary. Have them research one of the events or people in the film, using books, magazines, newspapers and the Internet, and have them record all their sources. You might also have them prepare a timeline. Ask them what they learned about the event or person that the documentary did not tell them, and if that changes the way they think about the film. Have them





Filed in the large-screen IMAX format, *EVEREST* (1998) followed a group of mountain climbers who ended up trapped in a deadly blizzard, creating an unexpected plot twist for the filmmakers whose lives were also endangered. Courtesy of MacGillivray Freeman Films.

identify the filmmaker's slant on the story and consider whether the film presents an accurate and fair recounting of the subject. Ask them to discuss which version they found the most interesting and why.

SUPPLEMENTAL ACTIVITY

Have your students each interview an older person about his or her history. Ask them to organize what they've learned in a way they feel makes the best story and present it to the class.

ACTIVITY FOUR

EXPLORING our WORLD

Documentaries help the audience understand the world they live in. They may focus on scientific discoveries, animal behavior, the environment, natural phenomena, human behavior, medical advances or the scientists themselves.

Documentarians often find it easier to interest audiences in difficult scientific or technical subjects by depicting the human stories behind them. Susanne Simpson and Ben Burt's 1996 IMAX film *Special Effects* explains the science and technology behind movie special effects, while at the same time paying tribute to the imagination of the artists and filmmakers who created them.

Sound and Fury (2000) discusses the controversy concerning cochlear implants, devices that can stimulate hearing in a deaf person. Rather than present a dry discussion of the pros and cons of the device, the filmmakers look at the rift that develops in one family as the members passionately debate whether to give the implants to two deaf cousins.

Another way to involve audiences in scientific subjects is by using the latest technology to show the audience what they

would otherwise not be able to see. The 1975 documentary *The Incredible Machine* uses groundbreaking medical photography to depict the human body from the inside out.

Five teams of filmmakers spent three years filming birds in flight, on the ground and on the sea for *Winged Migration* (2002). Many different kinds of aircraft were used, including traditional gliders, remote-controlled craft with computer-operated cameras, helicopters, Delta planes, and balloons. An Ultra Light Motorized aircraft was developed specifically for the film, giving the camera almost a 360-degree field of vision.

Many nature documentarians also try to educate the audience about the fragility of the environment. *Cane Toads* (1988) uses dry humor and a witty musical score to make a serious point

about the environmental damage caused in Australia by invasive, imported cane toads. A different kind of environmental warning is raised by Maryann De Leo, the director of *Chernobyl Heart* (2003), about the continuing consequences of a nuclear reactor explosion in Ukraine.

Ethnography is the scientific description of specific human cultures. Robert Flaherty's films are early examples of ethnographic documentaries. Unlike Flaherty, who frequently asked his subjects to recreate past events, other filmmakers focus on what people do in the present. The 1991 Oscar winner *Birdnesters of Thailand*, for example, looks at the lives of the men who struggle up cliffs and into caves in search of ingredients for bird nest soup.

Although their approach may not be as scientific as that of ethnographic documentarians, other filmmakers turn an investigative eye on groups inside our own culture. In 1962, director Michael Apted worked as an assistant on the British documentary *Seven Up*, in which a group of 14 English children from

different backgrounds talked about their values, prejudices and hopes for the future. Apted went on to film the same children at 14 and has made a new film with most of the same subjects every seven years since then. Taken together, the documentaries present an informative group portrait. They depict universal issues of growing up, as well as a bit about the English class system.

Salesman, a 1968 film by David and Albert Maysles, observes four door-to-door salesmen as they try to sell Bibles to working-class Catholic families. The Maysles brothers filmed the salesmen as they share stories with other peddlers and attend management and

sales meetings, portraying a tiny but fascinating subculture in American society. *Spellbound* reveals the diversity of the United States as it follows eight teenagers from different backgrounds and parts of the country, who are competing in the 1999



The controversy and confusion surrounding artist and sculptor Maya Lin, designer of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, is profiled in *MAYA LIN: A STRONG CLEAR VISION* (1994). Photo courtesy of American Film Foundation.

National Spelling Bee. Penelope Spheeris' 1981 documentary *The Decline of Western Civilization* chronicles the Los Angeles punk rock scene of the late 1970s. *Metallica: Some Kind of Monster* (2004) by Joe Berlinger and Bruce Sinofsky, profiles the music group Metallica as they work on an album and undergo group therapy.

In some cases, documentarians involve their subjects in the filmmaking process by giving them video or still cameras to record the events they find important. In the course of taking pictures in a red-light district in Calcutta, India, photographer Zana Briski became interested in the prostitutes' children. As documented with co-filmmaker Ross Kauffman in the 2004 Oscar-winning film *Born into Brothels*, Briski gave the children simple cameras and offered photography lessons. The photographs taken by the children not only present an inside portrait of their lives, but also reveal their talents, suppressed by poverty and social censure.

Show your students a scientific, nature or ethnographic-style film. Ask them what techniques, such as humor, participation of the subject or innovative photography, interviews, use of archival material, observation camera, sound and music and the like, the filmmakers use to make the topic interesting to the audience.

SUPPLEMENTAL ACTIVITY

Ask your students to create a family history. Have them interview family members, collect family photographs and videos, diagrams of family homes or anything else that is available.

ACTIVITY FIVE

REPRESENTING DIFFERENT VOICES

Scottish documentarian John Grierson believed that documentaries could be an important part of the democratic process. According to Grierson, the issues facing democracies have become so complicated that it is difficult for an ordinary citizen to participate in government in a meaningful way. Documentaries can dramatize issues and their implications for society, and by advocating for certain policies, contribute to political debate.

When representing events, people, places and causes ignored by governments and mainstream media, documentaries may be perceived as opposing governing institutions. In fact, documentary films often do challenge the status quo, but they may also advocate for special causes without questioning the existing social system. Some are funded by government institutions or businesses that wish to make a case for their policies. Grierson, Dziga Vertov, a Russian filmmaker in the 1920s, and American Pare Lorentz all made films with government support.

During the early days of the U.S.S.R., special "agit-trains" fitted with projectors and screens brought newsreel footage and filmed "fragments of actuality" (similar to Lumière's actualities) to small villages and towns. They were intended to inform all U.S.S.R. citizens about the benefits of the Bolshevik revolution.

Sponsored by the U.S. Resettlement Administration, Lorentz's documentary *The Plow That Broke the Plains* (1936) shows the ecological causes of the Dust Bowl and the devastating effects of the disaster on farmers and their families. The film was made to explain and develop support for the conservation policies

of Franklin D. Roosevelt's administration, and Roosevelt's opponents accused the film of being election-year propaganda.

Government funding organizations such as the National Film Board of Canada and the Public Broadcasting System in the United States have sponsored a wide range of documentaries that do not necessarily promote a political policy, including the PBS *Frontline* series and the Academy Award-nominated 1964 film *Kenojuak*, about an Eskimo artist.

Government-sponsored films are often seen as propaganda—films intended to sway the public with one-sided, misleading or half-true statements. Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* chronicles the 1934 Nazi Party Convention in Nuremberg, and exalts Hitler and his politics. In Germany, the film was used successfully as pro-Hitler propaganda, but it was also used by Hitler's enemies to demonstrate the chilling nature of his power.

During World War II, documentaries made in support of the war effort included films about the war (*Combat Report*), the home front (*Henry Browne, Farmer and It's Everybody's War*) and business and industry (*A Ship Is Born*), all made in 1942. In the 1942 film *Prelude to War*, a narrator guides the audience



PRELUDE TO WAR (1942), directed by Frank Capra, used animation over confiscated enemy newsreel footage to illustrate its point of view. Photo from the Margaret Herrick Library Collection, AMPAS.

through the issues that faced the United States before its entry into World War II.

Documentaries such as *Desert Victory* (1943) and *The Battle of San Pietro* (1945) depict the campaigns and battles of war, sometimes highlighting victories, sometimes death and destruction. Atrocities and war crimes are also a potent subject. In the 1970 film *Interviews with My Lai Veterans*, five veterans talk about the 1968 My Lai massacre. The short documentary *One Survivor Remembers* (1995) is the story of one woman who survived the Nazi concentration camps.

War documentaries may vilify the enemy or emphasize the heroic qualities of the home country and its allies; others condemn war. *Year of the Pig* (1968), made during the Vietnam War, uses interviews with many individuals and juxtaposition of sound and image to present a critical view of American foreign policy.

Operation Vittles (1948), about the Berlin Airlift, and *Seeds of Destiny* (1946), which focuses on the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration's efforts to aid children, are representative of documentaries that promoted post-war policies.

Over 200 documentaries were produced with funds from





THE DECLINE OF WESTERN CIVILIZATION (1981) focused on the burgeoning punk rock music scene of Los Angeles in the late 1970s. Courtesy of Sphेरisfilms.

movement and minority rights have been the subjects of numerous films. In the late 1960s, for the first time, many of the films were made by members of these groups telling their own stories. *With Babies and Banners: Story of the Women's Emergency Brigade* (1978), for example, was made by a team of women documentarians and concerns an automobile strike during the 1930s as remembered by the women who took part. *Tupac: Resurrection* (2004) uses the rapper's own words to tell the story of his life.

The 1993 film *The War Room* documents Bill Clinton's 1992 presidential campaign. The film by D.A. Pennebaker and Chris Hegedus does not represent a particular political point of view; rather, its subject is the political process itself. The film captures what it was like to run for president at the end of the twentieth century.

Some documentarians advocate for special causes, policies or political positions. Hanna Polak used her documentary *The Children of Leningradsky* to raise awareness of homeless children in Leningrad and to help fund outreach programs for abandoned orphans. Michael Moore's film *Fahrenheit 9/11* takes a strong stand against the policies of George W. Bush.

A record of public action at the local level, *The Collector of Bedford Street* (2000), is a short documentary about Larry Selman, filmmaker Alice Elliott's 60-year-old neighbor. Although mentally retarded, Larry raises thousands of dollars for charity every year while living in poverty himself. In recognition of Larry's service to the community, his neighbors organized an adult trust to take care of his financial needs.

Show your students one of the documentaries listed above or a similar documentary of your choice. Ask them to identify who is telling the story, whether it is the filmmaker, the subject

the European Recovery Program, popularly known as the Marshall Plan. Emphasizing European solidarity and cooperation, they were intended to counteract war-time propaganda and move Europe toward post-war democracy. The films, which were prohibited from screening in the U.S. until 1990, ranged from informational to anti-Communist propaganda to what we would now call docu-drama.

The American civil rights movement, the women's



THE THIN BLUE LINE (1988) used staged re-enactment scenes of a police officer's murder to illustrate incongruities in the testimony of various witnesses. Photo courtesy of Errol Morris.

of the film, or someone else. Have them discuss the theme of the film. Then ask them if they agree with John Grierson that documentaries are an important part of the democratic process.

SUPPLEMENTAL ACTIVITY

Political documentaries sometimes walk a fine line between advocacy and propaganda. Show the students two films or parts of films that deal with the same topic and compare and contrast their treatment of the topic. Have them consider how a film like *Triumph of the Will* could be used to support both the pro-Nazi and the anti-Nazi positions.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- A New History of Documentary Film*, by Jack C. Ellis and Betsy A. McLane. Continuum, 2005.
- Directing the Documentary*, by Michael Rabiger. Focal Press, 2004.
- Documentary: A History of the Non Fiction Film*, by Erik Barnouw. Oxford University Press, 1993.
- Documentary Filmmakers Speak*, by Liz Stubbs. Allworth Press, 2002.
- Documentary Storytelling for Video and Filmmakers*, by Sheila Curran Bernard. Focal Press, 2004.
- Introduction to Documentary*, by Bill Nichols. Indiana University Press, 1999.
- Making Documentary Films and Reality Videos: A Practical Guide to Planning, Filming, and Editing Documentaries of Real Events*, by Barry Hampe. Henry Holt, 1997.

- The Documentary Makers: Interviews with 15 of the Best in the Business*, by David A. Goldsmith. Rotovision, 2003.
- The People's Films: A Political History of U.S. Government Motion Pictures*, by Richard Dyer MacCann. Hastings House, 1973.

WEB SITES:

- www.oscars.org for more information about the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.
- www.documentary.org The Web site of the

- International Documentary Association.
- www.bfi.org.uk/education/teaching/ for teaching resources, free education packets and additional reading from the British Film Institute.
- www.yमितeacher.com to download more copies of this guide

The following Web sites all feature study guides relating to specific documentaries:

- www.educationplanet.com
- www.enhancetv.com.au
- www.facinghistorycampus.org

ACADEMY OF MOTION PICTURE ARTS AND SCIENCES





DOCUMENTARY BEGINNINGS

Documentaries are films about real events and real people. Some of the earliest films ever made were documentaries. In 1895, French inventor Louis Lumière developed a small, light-weight camera called the cinématographe, that allowed him to film whatever activities interested him. He called his one-minute films "actualities" because they were records of actual events. *Arrival of a Train at the Station*, one of the actualities, appeared so real to audiences that they believed the train would blast through the screen and into the theater.

Documentaries can be funny, sad, disturbing, or thoughtful. Unlike fiction movies that are based on real events, documentary filmmakers will not change a story to give it a happy ending or include something that did not really happen to make the story more dramatic. Documentarians do not simply turn on their cameras and shoot, however. That kind of film would be boring.

There are many different types of documentary films. What do you think makes a film a documentary?

Have you ever seen any documentaries? List the titles and a brief description.

What did you think about them? Were they serious? Humorous? Dull?

What kinds of topics would make a good documentary? Why?

Sometimes filmmakers will stage or re-enact an event that happened in the past. Although some documentary filmmakers do not agree with the use of re-enacted scenes, they have been part of documentary filmmaking from the beginning. Robert Flaherty, who in 1922 made *Nanook of the North*, one of the first feature-length documentaries, asked his Inuit subjects to hold a walrus hunt for the camera. Reenactments can, however, bring historical accuracy into question.



NANOOK OF THE NORTH (1922) is considered to be the first full-length feature documentary. Photo from the Margaret Herrick Library Collection, AMPAS.

DOCUMENTARY TERMS

ACTUALITIES: One-minute films of real events and real people, made first by employees of the French Lumière company and later by other companies, including the Edison Manufacturing Company.

ARCHIVAL MATERIALS: Historical photographs, documents, stock footage and other materials gathered from libraries, film archives and research facilities.

RE-ENACTMENTS: Using actors or nonprofessionals to portray actual events that happened in the past.

DIRECT CINEMA: A style of documentary filmmaking that attempts to capture events as they happen without preplanning, staging or interference. Documentaries made in this manner usually do not use narration or on-camera interviewers.

NARRATION: Off-camera commentary for a film. Narration can link the visuals together or provide extra information.

POINT OF VIEW: The perspective from which a story is observed or told. A point of view can be objective, subjective or a combination of the two.

PROPAGANDA: Films intended to sway the public with one-sided, misleading or half-true statements.

STRUCTURE: The organization of film elements, including story and time.

THEME: The central idea of a film which is represented by its characters, action and imagery.



MAKING A DOCUMENTARY

PART A. Just like fiction films, documentaries have a story, characters, a point of view and a theme. They may use sound, music or narration to compliment or contrast with the visuals. Some films may have no sound except the voices of the people onscreen. Visuals can include footage of the subjects, still photographs, interviews, animation, home movies, advertising graphics and stock footage.

Because they do not deal with fictionalized subjects, documentaries are often expected to be objective, that is, to tell a story without taking an obvious position or showing bias. Many documentarians do try to show both sides of an issue, but even objective films are shaped by the interests and thoughts of the filmmaker.

Direct cinema is a style of documentary filmmaking that tries to observe its subject with as little interference as possible. Generally, the filmmakers do not ask questions on the soundtrack and the film does not have narration.

Documentaries in which the audience is aware of the filmmaker’s opinions are called subjective documentaries. They may tell the filmmaker’s personal story, or they may start with strong personal beliefs about a subject.

Documentary filmmakers organize the material in many different ways, depending on the kind of story they are telling. Films may be arranged in chronological order, they may move back and forth in time, or they may show several different interlaced stories, for example.

Watch the documentary or sequence that your teacher has chosen. Complete the answers to these questions on the back of this page.

What is the subject of the film?

Who are the characters?

Is the film told from a subjective or objective point of view? How do you know that?

Why do you think the filmmaker chose to tell the story this way?

How do you think the film would be different if it had been a fiction film?

What kinds of sound does the filmmaker use? Is silence an important part of the soundtrack?

How do music, sound and image work together to convey the story of the documentary?

PART B. Every choice that documentary filmmakers make about what to show (and what not to show) and what order to show it in reflects their attitudes toward the subject and affects the film’s impact on the audience. With your classmates, choose a series of pictures from magazines or other sources. One

group will arrange them to illustrate a story in a straightforward, realistic way. The second group will then take these same pictures and rearrange them to illustrate the story in a different way, perhaps giving the story a humorous slant or arranging the pictures in non-chronological order. Study the two sequences of pictures, and describe the differences between them. For example, is one more entertaining? Does one make the story clearer? What else is different about the way each one tells the story?

Did the meaning change? Explain.

Which arrangement seems more truthful? Why?

Which arrangement do you like better? Why?

For his documentary *The Thin Blue Line*, Errol Morris re-enacted a murder according to the testimony of several different witnesses. The scenes demonstrate the contradictions in the witnesses’ testimony. An example of the way meaning changes depending on who is telling the story is the “telephone” game. Compare the last version of the story to the original version. Does the last version change the core of the story or only the details?

What does this exercise tell you about the truthfulness of what is seen and heard on film?

MAKING HISTORY COME ALIVE

Documentaries about an earlier period of time, past events or people who lived in the past are considered historical documentaries. Anything from the civil rights movement to surfing to rock groups can be the subject of a historical documentary. Similarly, biographical films portray not only the lives of famous people like Michelangelo and Eleanor Roosevelt, but also those of ordinary people.



Using re-enactments and actual newsreel footage of American soldiers, John Ford and Gregg Toland directed a film account of the attack on Pearl Harbor in DECEMBER 7TH (1943). Photo from the Margaret Herrick Library Collection, AMPAS.

Filmmakers use a number of different techniques to make their historical documentaries visually interesting. The makers of the 1987 documentary *Eyes on the Prize* used a combination of film and photographs from libraries and archives and on-camera interviews from the period, along with modern interviews and narration, to illustrate the story of the American civil rights movement.

Some documentarians use stock footage—that is, archival film that portrays a generally similar situation. For example, if someone on screen is reminiscing about going swing dancing in the 1940s, the filmmakers might show swing dance footage filmed during the 1940s, even though the images are not of the person being interviewed.

Re-enactments are another way filmmakers create visuals when none exist. In a documentary about the building of the Egyptian pyramids, the film might show actors dressed as ancient Egyptians.

Watch the film your teacher has selected. Pick an event, incident or person shown in the film and research it using newspaper accounts, magazines, books and the Internet. Keep a notebook or diary listing your sources.



Using Nazi military imagery and dynamic camerawork, German filmmaker Leni Riefenstahl created TRIUMPH OF THE WILL (1935), a film still known as one of the most controversial ever made. Photo from the Margaret Herrick Library Collection, AMPAS.

Title of film:

What event or person did you research?

What did you learn about the subject that the documentary did not portray?

Did your research change the way you think about the film? Why or why not?

Do you think the film presents an accurate or fair account of the story? Why or why not?

Was it more interesting to read about the subject or to watch the film?

What made it more interesting?

EXPLORING OUR WORLD

Documentaries about scientific discoveries, the environment, human behavior or nature help viewers understand the world they live in.

Science and technology can be difficult for a general audience



Filmed in the large screen IMAX format, *EVEREST* (1998) followed a group of mountain climbers who ended up trapped in a deadly blizzard, creating an unexpected plot twist for the filmmakers whose lives were also endangered. Courtesy of MacGillivray Freeman Films.

to understand, so filmmakers often concentrate on the people who made discoveries or who are working toward advances in the field. Humor is another tool that helps make a complicated subject more interesting.

Documentarians use sophisticated technology such as IMAX or tiny cameras to show viewers things that they might not be able to see in

real life. Sometimes filmmakers must develop new technology in order to make the film, such as the special aircraft that was

designed to allow the makers of *Winged Migration* to film birds up close.

Human behavior provides another compelling topic for filmmakers. Some documentaries explore the lives of people from

different societies around the world. Others, like *Spellbound* by Jeffrey Blitz and Sean Welch, or Les Blank's 1990 film, *Yum, Yum, Yum*, look at people closer to home. Filmmakers may unobtrusively observe their subjects, or they may give them video or still cameras or tape recorders to record their own impressions of their lives, which are then incorporated into the documentary.

After watching the documentary your teacher has chosen, identify the techniques the filmmaker has used to make the subject interesting to viewers.



The controversy and confusion surrounding artist and sculptor Maya Lin, designer of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, is profiled in *MAYA LIN: A STRONG CLEAR VISION* (1994). Photo courtesy of American Film Foundation.

Title of film:

What is the topic of the film?

Who do you think is the target audience for the film? How do you know that?

What techniques such as humor, innovative photography or new technology has the filmmaker used?

What kinds of images does the film use?

Does the film have narration?

Is the narration necessary to explain the topic?

Why or why not?

How do the narration and the visuals work together?

REPRESENTING DIFFERENT VOICES

Scottish documentarian John Grierson believed that documentaries could be an important part of the democratic process. By dramatizing the issues facing citizens, documentaries can give ordinary people information they need to participate thoughtfully in government. Documentaries also inform viewers about individuals, groups or issues that have been overlooked or ignored by mainstream media.



THE DECLINE OF WESTERN CIVILIZATION (1981) focused on the burgeoning punk rock music scene of Los Angeles in the late 1970s. Courtesy of Spherisfilms.

Political documentaries are made by filmmakers who support certain policies, interest groups or political parties, or who are interested in exploring particular issues. They may also be made by governments or government organizations to explain or develop support for government programs.

War films are a special



PRELUDE TO WAR (1942), directed by Frank Capra, used animation over confiscated enemy newsreel footage to illustrate its point of view. Photo from the Margaret Herrick Library Collection, AMPAS.

type of documentary. They can be used to draw people into the war effort, to report on the progress of the war, to criticize the enemy and to address problems after the war is over. Other documentaries protest against war or publicize war crimes and atrocities.

Watch the political documentary your teacher has chosen. What is the title of the film?

What is the key message of the documentary?

How does the filmmaker present this message?

Summarize the arguments for and against the subject of the film.

From whose point of view is the film told?

Who is telling the story? Is it the filmmaker or someone in the film?

Do you agree with John Grierson that documentaries are a good way to prepare citizens to participate in the democratic process? Why or why not?
