

## Component 2

### Global filmmaking perspectives

#### Section B: *Documentary Film*

### 3. Critical debates: The significance of digital technology in film

The degree of the impact that digital has had on film since the 1990s is a developing debate. Some film commentators argue that although digital technology could potentially transform cinema, so far films, especially narrative films designed for cinema release have changed very little from pre-digital times. Others consider that the impact of digital filmmaking is only beginning to emerge, both in high concept Hollywood filmmaking and in much lower budget experimental work.

What this section hopes to explore is how we can look at this debate in relation to documentary film. All five films in this section of the specification have utilised digital techniques with a wide variety of results. What the tasks here will set out to achieve is a recognition and reflection of these digital techniques and their influence on the documentary filmmaking process.

#### Task One – Everyday filmmakers

The vast majority of you have a smartphone. What this task is going to do is to evaluate your own filmmaking on these mobile digital devices.

In pairs discuss the following points;

- Have you ever used your smartphone as a **filmmaking device**?
- If you have – what did you film?
- If you haven't why not – give reasons for this.

To broaden the debate the pairs then should team up with two other students

- In terms of the films that have been captured on these devices – what have these been of: **you, friends, family events, real-life incidents, gigs/concerts/other events?**
- Have you **shared** these via social media sites or YouTube and what has the response been?
- **Why** did you do this?
- Have you **manipulated** the raw footage captured on your smartphones e.g. in terms of editing, changing the sound, changing the colour palette or adding other techniques.
- What is **the most important film** that you have on your smartphones? Give reasons for your choice.

## Class debate

One side of the class can be positioned in favour of the motion and the other side of the class against the motion. This will hopefully raise key issues about what and how people use these devices to film. They should also link into the film texts in more depth.

Do you think that the *need* to document important events on smartphones is a valid one?

## Possible points in favour of the motion

- We are all now **potential filmmakers** which gives us access to the medium
- This may have been denied in the past because of **cost** or a lack of **technical ability**
- This type of **filmmaking** can capture **our reality**
- We can **document** parts of our lives – especially key events
- These films can **reflect** how we were feeling at a particular time
- There is the potential to use the internet as a means of **distribution** of these films
- Equally **aesthetic decisions** can be made on how the films look and how they are subsequently received

## Possible points against the motion

- Whatever happened to use of our **memories** – shouldn't this be enough to document **our own reality**
- Does the filming of what we determine as our key events be possibly seen as **self-obsessed** and **narcissistic**
- What **viewpoint** of reality is this point of view actually giving?
- Can this sort of filming ever be **truly objective**?
- **Who** is going to want to see what we have filmed?
- Without **technical manipulation** (such as editing) can these films ever create a coherent narrative?
- Is digital technology too **easily disposable** to last? What is its ultimate value artistically?

## Task Two - What is digital filmmaking?

### Introduction

A good introduction to this area is getting the 2012 documentary *Side by Side* either on a college e-stream (it has been broadcast by FilmFour and can be retrieved if your centre has a BUVFC licence).

It is currently on YouTube (June 2017) @

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4Fgfl7RgBAI>

Even better is Toby Kearton's short video essay on Film vs Digital @

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cfNKtxGMHig>

Although the main focus here is on fiction filmmaking, especially within Hollywood this can start to at least open up debates about the importance of this shift from celluloid to digital.

These questions can be offered in a whole class debate or initially in pairs/small groups:

- **Does this really matter to audiences?**
- **If it does what have they gained or lost as a result of this revolution in the film industry?**
- **Evaluate the advantages for film producers in terms of budget considerations and also in terms of the filmmakers themselves, aesthetic decisions on how the film looks.**

### Small group research task

Each group will be given an area to research online in terms of digital technology and then in the form of a short presentation go through their findings to the whole class.

1. What have been the key developments in digital filmmaking process in the following areas:

**Group One: Cinematography**

**Group Two: Sound**

**Group Three: Editing**

**Group Four: The creation of mise-en-scene**

2. **Evaluate** if these developments have enhanced the audiences experience of watching films.

## Task Three – The digital world and documentary

Documentary has always responded to the possibilities afforded by new technologies. The growth over the years of more portable cameras and sound equipment have greatly added to the way that documentaries can show real innovation when reporting on their subject matter. In many respects the recent boom in digital technology has further added to this and this can be seen in all the films offered in this unit.

- ***Sisters in Law* (Ayisi and Longinotto, Cameroon and UK, 2005)**
- ***The Arbor* (Barnard, UK, 2010)**
- ***Stories We Tell* (Polley, Canada, 2012)**
- ***20,000 Days on Earth* (Forsyth and Pollard, UK 2014)**
- ***Amy* (Kapadia, UK, 2005)**

## Revision

1. Looking back to the first section of his resource – **list all the major documentary techniques that are contained in your chosen documentary.**

There should be a link here to ***Task 4: The techniques of documentary film or a print version offered.***

## Looking at the digital aspects

2. In pairs identify what you think are the most **obvious uses of digital technology** in your chosen documentary
3. Choose **one key sequence** from your documentary.
4. Examine the impact that **these digital technologies** have on the way that you **understand the sequence.**

## Possible general answers for Q4:

### ***Sisters in Law***

- As an observational documentary the mobility of the digital camera and the on-location recording of sound capture the raw nature of the events.
- Being in a rural West African environment the fluid nature of the camera can capture the action as it happens. Decisions about framing and shot size are made as the film unfolds.
- This adds to the sense of rawness and authenticity as the film offers a clear insight into life in Cameroonian society.
- The lightweight cameras also offer a relatively unobtrusive look at the legal system and life in that country. The participants in the film seemingly act as they would in their everyday normal situations.

- It could be argued that digital equipment enhances the observational style to a great degree, capturing the fly-on-the wall approach and enhancing the representation of the real.
- Equally the fact that digital cameras can shoot for far longer than their analogue counterparts does add to the way that the observational documentary is shot.
- There might be other issues raised about how this film could have been made with digital equipment in a less observational and more reflexive style?

### ***The Arbor***

- The use of high definition Red camera by the DOP Ole Birkeland adds a very clear sense of filmic quality to the reconstructions and particularly the direct to camera close ups.
- This is accentuated by the use of tracking shots to ground the spectator in terms of place.
- The intercutting of analogue material from Andrea Dunbar's past life and the digital reconstructions offers a set of interesting juxtapositions between a version of reality (the interviews/footage of Dunbar from 70s/80s) and the sharply focused reconstructions of today. Here there might be debates raised about which is more 'real' and which is more constructed.
- The use of digitally recorded interviews that are then subsequently lip-synched by the actors is also fundamental to how the film is read. The vocal testimonies capture the distinctive Bradford accent and of course the real-life accounts of the events around Dunbar's career. Does this add to the authenticity of the piece or is it a distraction?
- The use of these voices alongside the actors – does raise the question of why not use the real people being interviewed onscreen? Does the use of the more attractive actors detract from the realistic nature of the story being told or not?
- Alternatively does the use of the HD digital photography and the lip-synching device actually create a film that avoids the tropes of the conventional biographical documentary on the tragic life of an artist? Is Barnard's film an artistic recreation of Dunbar's life with her distinctive signature – through the narrative structure, choice of shots and employment of an innovative sound device?

### ***Stories We Tell***

- The meta-nature of the film does utilise digital technology to tell Polley's story in an interesting and revealing manner.
- The use of a range of the family's old Super 8 films offers an interesting juxtaposition with the crisp images of the contemporary interviews. These interviews clearly position the spectator in the present and the contrast is quite stark
- However it is the nature of the reconstructions that is most interesting. The manipulation of the images to suggest that this footage is from the past, on occasion blurs the lines between what we might think is real and what isn't. This is exploited at a number of key points in the film and at different junctures as Sarah slowly unfurls the truth.

- There is also a real emphasis on the mise-en-scene in these reconstructions – especially those from the past and also recounting Diane’s affair with Harry. Polley also chooses to reconstruct her meeting with Harry where he revealed to her that he was her father – rather than interviewing herself.
- The reflexive nature of the film is very clear for all to see. The shots of Michael recording voiceovers in the studio, being directed by Polley exposes the constructed nature of the film to fine effect.
- An issue that may be exposed here is about the way the way that the personal story has become easier to make interesting with the use of digital technologies. In this case, not just relaying on traditional face to camera interviews, but interspersing the film with highly developed reconstructions which serve to give yet another version of reality.
- Could it be argued that this greatly enhances the narrative or reinforces the director’s version of some events that she can’t have witnessed? Does this also add to the overall aesthetic feel of the film, making it more creative and even more challenging to the spectator?

### ***20,000 Days on Earth***

- The film is shot on HD digital cameras and the footage of Nick Cave in the present is sharp and exploits on a number of occasions the reflexive nature of the film, which avoids the normal clichés of the rock star biographical documentary.
- The film also uses archive footage from a number of sources which chronicle Cave’s long career in music. The selection of this material does offer an interesting counterpoint to the footage shot by Forsyth and Pollard.
- There is also a clear difference between the verite moments in the recording studio and in rehearsal which is hand-held, adding to the sense of capturing the reality of a musician’s life and the more constructed elements of the film.
- The use of the faux archive and the in-car interviews for example, show how a different approach can be taken in examining an artist’s career. However it might be asked if these techniques could equally be done on analogue film? Has the digital process been important here, beyond obvious issues like cost? Does the long-take encourage a more productive set of points in the conversations without having to change the film?
- The opening montage of the film with its combination of archive and digitally created images may raise issues about digital editing techniques and how these might create a certain type of mood for the spectator.

### ***Amy***

- In Kapadia’s film there is very little actual original footage shot. This seems to largely consist of captioned establishing shots of London – either with a helicopter or a drone. These few shots are very clearly digital and offer a brief counterpoint to the rest of the film’s style.

- *Amy* is clearly the work of a number of film-makers and Kapadia's skill as a filmmaker is really seen in the editing room. He has amassed a great deal of archive footage from media sources and placed these alongside more personal filmic insights into Winehouse's life.
- The combination of both analogue and some early digital recordings of Amy Winehouse from her friends and in some cases her family do offer a revealing perspective on her childhood, adolescence and the early part of her career.
- Where interesting debates may be developed is on the more controversial aspects of her life – her bulimia, her addictions and her ill-fated relationship with Blake Fielder-Civil. This may well focus on the selection and use of particular footage.
- Interestingly we also only hear the interviewees and never see them. Kapadia would have spoken to these people and recorded their thoughts digitally and then used them to underscore his images.
- The manipulation and crucially the montage effect of the using the footage alongside the interviews is what give the film its power.
- What it also exposes is the way that even before Winehouse became famous, her existence was being documented. The key debates here are to do with Kapadia's focus in telling the story that he wanted to tell. Might he have done this differently? How would this have changed the emphasis of the film?

5. Finally in small groups **evaluate** how the use of **digital technologies** in your chosen film might relate to **two** of these key debates associated with documentary:

**Wherever possible you should do this with direct reference to your film – using sequences reference**

- a. Objectivity
- b. Non-Fiction
- c. Construction
- d. Truth
- e. Reality
- f. Manipulation
- g. Fiction
- h. Spectator positioning

## Teacher notes

This higher order thinking skills task will hopefully get students to link what they understand the digital process of filmmaking with some of the key debates linked to documentary.