

DOCUMENTARY RESOURCE

CASE STUDY: *AMY* (KAPADIA, 2015)

Camera shots:

Asif Kapadia's 2015 documentary on the singer Amy Winehouse is distinctive in many ways. It follows the same filmmaking techniques that he utilised on his earlier film on the racing driver Ayrton Senna to a similar overall effect.

The film uses a style which the director likes to label 'true fiction'. The entire narrative is constructed from a variety of archival footage sources and lacks any guiding voiceover. It uses a number of interviews from Winehouse's family, friends and people that worked for her, to develop an insight into her troubled life. Captions and the use of her music, alongside a specially developed score also work to position the spectator in a particular way.

The film was well-reviewed and became the highest grossing British documentary at the UK box-office. It also received a number of awards for Best Documentary, most notably gaining an Oscar and BAFTA in 2016.

Task One - Contexts – Before the screening

It is likely that students may only have a very slight knowledge of who Amy Winehouse was, so it is worth them doing some research into her life, her music and this film itself. This exercise however can be held back until after the screening if teachers want to increase the impact of the film.

In small groups you will be given an aspect of Amy Winehouse's life to research. You will put together a resource – it can be a **Prezi**, a **PowerPoint** or a **graphic hand-out**. There can also be a **presentation element** built into this exercise if need be.

That said this **shouldn't be a cut and paste exercise** – the work should be the student's own.

All these resources can then be shared digitally or printed out as a contextual basis for the film itself.

Group One – Amy Winehouse's personal life

You should look at her family background and her upbringing. Who were her friends growing up and her first manager and what part did they play in her life. Assess her relationship with her husband Blake Fielder-Civil. Look at her problems with alcohol and drugs. How much of her background constructed her persona as an artist?

Group Two – Amy Winehouse's relationship with the media

Research how she was reported in the tabloid press. What picture was painted of her as she struggled with addiction? Try to find quotes and images that support this viewpoint. How did they exploit her difficulties? What are your feelings in this? Does this suggest that the film may be about wider issues than just Winehouse's life – the intrusion of the media, attitudes to celebrity/fame, and issues around addiction?

Group Three – Amy Winehouse's career as a musician

Look closely at her music by accessing YouTube. Chart her success as an artist by finding quotes from reviews for her two albums. Assess the lyrics from her final album *Back to Black*. Try to find evidence that link these lyrics to parts of her personal life. How did her career as a singer end? What factors contributed to this?

Group Four – Amy – the film

Find information about the production context of this film. Look at material on the director's first film *Senna* – perhaps some quotes from reviews and also box-office information. Assess the poster and trailer campaign for *Amy* – how did this sell the film? Were there any difficulties around the film's production – especially after the release in terms of criticisms about how the events around her life were portrayed? Is this another selling point for the film? Why do you think the film was so successful at the box-office based on this information?

Task after assessing all this information

After looking at all this contextual material, what problems and issues would the director have to contend with when making a documentary film about Amy Winehouse?

Think about the following:

- **Narrative structure**
- **Selection of information - in terms of footage and interviewees**
- **Positioning the spectator**

Task Two – Initial tasks after watching the film

Look back to the first section of this resource in relation to **Task 4: Documentary Techniques**.

Filmic Techniques

1. Identify the techniques that Kapadia has used in this film from this list.
2. Comment on the effectiveness of these techniques in creating meaning and generating a response for the spectator.
3. Looking at the other techniques listed – which ones would you use *other* than Kapadia's choices? How would the emphasis of the documentary change as a result of your choices?

Possible responses

1 and 2

- Most obviously students will correctly identify the wealth of archival footage that is used in the film. They should also be encouraged to differentiate between the different types of footage utilised by Kapadia – stock footage (mostly from example news sources/interviews), unseen footage captured on video or DV by people close to her, mobile phone footage.
- They should also be clear on the variety of still images that are used in the film and the different impact of these.
- The lack of the authorial voiceover is also important encouraging the spectator to be guided more by the juxtaposition of images and sound, rather than a direct point of view.
- The selection of voices to support the images/footage which are carefully chosen. These are examples of indirect interviews and are captioned. The interviewees are not seen speaking directly to camera – unless (in Amy Winehouse's case) as part of stock footage.
- The montage effect of the editing – piecing together a narrative based on the huge variety of source material.
- The use of real footage to provide expositional information about setting in most cases in this film London. This often takes the form of swooping aerial shots.

- The use of captions is most interestingly used in the form of lyrics from Amy Winehouse's songs.
- Incidental music is used in particular sequences of the film to align the spectator with the subject matter.

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- Students may take a more expository approach here and this may be done in a variety of ways.
- Utilising a 'voice of god' commentary for a more explicit point of view.
- Having an obvious narrator – who might be seen on camera.
- The use of direct interviews – face to camera for example.
- Use of the confessional interview – possibly with Mitch Winehouse or Blake Fielder Civil.
- More obvious framing of the narrative – shooting the places of where Amy grew up for example. Also perhaps where she died.
- Perhaps using reconstruction techniques to give a sense of issues hinted at in Kapadia's film – her relationship with her father or husband for example.
- Using expert testimony from say psychologists to comment on aspects of her addiction and her state of mind.

Narrative

In small groups discuss and evaluate the relative importance of the following issues in *Amy*.

- What would you say is the plot of *Amy*?
- How is the narrative of the film structured?
- What is the overall effect of the film's structure?
- What are the key sequences/scenes that stand out for you? Give reasons for your choices?
- To what extent are you aligned to a particular point of view in *Amy* because of the narrative construction?
- How far do you feel that Kapadia's description of his filmmaking style as 'true fiction' compares with what you have seen in *Amy*?

Possible responses

In a general sense these responses will be quite varied as the questions will be open to a number of interpretations. That said it is hoped that most students will identify some key points:

- There is a plot – the film follows Amy Winehouse from being a talented North London teenager with a powerful voice, through to her recording contract with Island, her first album *Frank* and the transformation in her artistic development which resulted in her hugely successful record *Back to Black*. The film also reflects on her traumatic relationship with Blake Fielder-Civil and her eventual death as a result of her addictions.

- The film is largely chronological and linear. There are a couple of instances where the past is reflected upon with the use of home video footage. The interesting issue in approaching the narrative is that as it is based on real-life events (and given the earlier work on context), it is clear where it is going.
- Certainly the way that dramatic situations are captured by Kapadia can be commented on and this is enhanced by the way that the film is structured – especially around the intervention to stop Amy taking drugs, the imprisonment of Fielder-Civil and most obviously her death.
- Kapadia certainly clearly aligns the spectator with the central protagonist through his choice of interviewees and by using footage with people who admired her talent such as Tony Bennett. This is also reinforced with the overarching sense of tragedy that engulfs the second part of the film. In many respects the spectator can be seen to be aligned with her friends who seem powerless to help her.
- The notion of ‘true fiction’ is an interesting one as it can be seen to suggest a number of things in relation to representations of what might be considered the ‘truth’. Kapadia’s wide-ranging access to all of this material and his subsequent selection and positioning of all this footage, alongside the recorded sound interviews is worth evaluating closely in terms of how he represents Winehouse’s life. It is of course his version of what he thinks is true. Also the use of the word ‘fiction’ raises a number of issues about the nature of Amy as a documentary itself. If this is in fact a ‘fiction’ what should we believe and what shouldn’t we? Is this important?

Sequence Analysis 1 – Recording the song *Back to Black* (47.15-50.00)

This short sequence is comprised of footage of Amy Winehouse in the studio recording the title track of her breakthrough album. We also see and hear the album’s producer Mark Ronson.

Watch the sequence individually at **least twice** and make notes on how it is **constructed** based on the following questions.

- Why do you think **the original footage** was shot in the first place?
- To what extent has Kapadia **manipulated** this footage to create a different set of **meanings and responses**?
- What **function** does this sequence have in the narrative as a whole?
- How might **contextual factors** impact on the way that you read this scene?

Possible responses

In terms of the original footage this was possibly shot as a document of the recording process. Often material like this is used by record companies as part of reselling an album in a new package – unseen footage of the recording process.

That said Kapadia uses this footage in a very different way. Firstly he foregrounds it with part of an interview with Amy over the top of the sound of Ronson in the studio. There is a caption used with the date (March 2016) and the situation (Recording Session with Mark Ronson) and location (New York). The interview with Winehouse outlines the connection between the songs and her relationship with Blake-Fielder.

On the soundtrack, we can hear the start of the song *Back to Black* and non-diegetically, Ronson is heard (and again captioned) talking about the tempestuous nature of Amy's relationship with Blake and also about the process and speed of her writing at that time. We see him in shot essentially producing the song. There is then a shift to a medium long shot of Amy in a small recording booth singing the song. As spectators we can hear her voice directly from the footage – with an ambient sense of the song underneath. The recurring captions spelling out the lyrics, which have been contextualised earlier on in the sequence by their direct link to Fielder-Civil.

The camera does move into a medium close up of Winehouse as the song progresses. At 48.30 however the sound moves to back to non-diegetic as the song quickly fades in and seemingly combines with Amy's voice in the booth. The camera angles to change to different aspects, still focusing on her face, but it is clear that her words and the music on the soundtrack are obviously not in sync.

The camera moves out to reveal Amy in a medium long shot again as the orchestration enhances the song's melody. However the whole song isn't played and at 49.20 the sound becomes diegetic again with just Amy's voice and some ambient sound underneath. The camera has also moved closer to her as well but as the refrain of 'black' is repeated the camera moves out once again. Her reaction to her performance (and the lyrics) is 'it's a bit upsetting at the end, isn't it?' could certainly be interpreted in a number of ways.

Ronson's affirmation of her work at the end is also interesting in terms of aligning the spectator at this point by extolling her creative and hardworking ethos – which seemed to disappear as drugs, alcohol and eating disorders took over.

This sequence clearly shows her at her peak and its narrative function is developmental. But it also hints at the other factors (Fielder-Civil) that influenced her work and it serves as a reminder of her talent. It might also be read within the context of the whole film as suggesting the waste of a life. Certainly broader contextual factors particularly her treatment by the tabloid press and her status within British popular culture will also have an impact on some spectator reactions.

Sequence Analysis 2 – Addiction to crack cocaine and Blake (1.08.21 -1.11.58)

This short sequence indicates Winehouse's descent into addiction to crack cocaine. It is useful to look closely at the techniques used by Kapadia in this instance.

- List the techniques used by the director here to indicate Amy Winehouse's battle with drug addiction.
- Evaluate why you feel he used these particular techniques.
- What do you feel is the overall effect of this sequence?

Possible responses

The overarching response will concentrate on the effect of the editing in terms of the selection of material here. Equally the use of sound (interviews/ambient/music) is crucial.

- Home DV footage shot by Blake – who appears in shot.
- Use of caption to identify the location as Amy's flat in Camden Town.
- The flat seems to be untidy.
- Voiceover by Fielder-Civil, also captioned. Mentions that after their marriage this was the first time that Amy was introduced to hard drugs. He also states that he had also used these drugs in the past.
- The footage changes – it feels almost like a hidden camera, there is also the introduction of an ambient musical soundtrack as we see what appears to be drugs paraphernalia on the screen.
- We also see Amy in a couple of shots and she appears to be under the influence of drugs – particularly in the big close up.
- There is then some stock footage of her performance at the Eden Project in July 2007 – where she appears to be struggling to stay awake while singing. The lyrics are once again captioned.
- The ambient musical soundtrack re-emerges as there are a series of shots of her and Fielder-Civil being surrounded by the paparazzi with the sound of the flashes feeling like they have been accentuated.
- Interview footage with Amy is used which starts with some unflattering, handheld extreme close ups and moves to a more conventional set-up. Amy seems to be tired and her line of thought fragmented. This is in direct contrast to what we saw earlier in the film.
- Then there are a further series of still images of drug paraphernalia and Blake/Amy with the camera moving vertically and horizontally
- The last image of Amy is underscored by the voices of her friends Juliette and Nick recounting their response to a phone-call from Fielder-Civil saying that Amy had overdosed.
- The screen then fades to black.

The juxtaposition of these techniques through the editing could be said to give the overall impression of her slide into addiction to hard drugs. Fielder-Civil is certainly cast as the villain of the piece here. The overall effect might be seen to show that her relationship with this man is clearly detrimental to her career. There is clear alignment with Winehouse here once again.

Sequence Analysis 3 – Amy's death and its aftermath (1.52.59 -1.)

This provides the climax of the narrative and its inevitable sad conclusion. The sequence is once again extremely carefully constructed to engender an emotional impact on the spectator and this is at the core of this analysis.

- ❖ To what extent does Asif Kapadia use filmic techniques to generate a response in the climax of *Amy*?

Possible responses

It is very interesting how Kapadia attempts to position spectators at the end of this film. Points that might be raised are;

- The aerial location shot of London and the use of dates in relation to the last scene and Amy's demise.
- The use of her friend Juliette's clearly upset voice to foreground the death.
- The use of dissolves between still images of Amy in full make-up but looking obviously older than 27.
- The still which dissolves from a shot of Amy, Juliette and Lauren as children to one of them in their 20s on holiday.
- The soaring score building slowly to a crescendo.
- Andrew Morris – her bodyguard's voice recounting finding her body and also telling a story about her in relation to giving her talent up just so that she could walk down the street without being bothered. He is positioned in many respects as one of the heroes of the film.
- Use of freeze-frames and slow motion to accentuate meaning around Morris's reaction.
- The exploitative nature of use of stock footage (her body leaving her house – in three shots, the funeral).
- Reaction shots and sound from the archival footage.
- Voiceover use of expert testimony from Dr Cristina Romete on Amy's alcohol blood level at the time of her death and offers some reasons why her heart stopped.
- We then see a shot of her on the cover of the prestigious American music magazine Rolling Stone, which then cuts to some footage of Tony Bennett. This is supported by his view of Winehouse as one of the greats of jazz.
- The funeral, captioned as three days later is all from stock footage, much framed in long shot. The opening shots are of Mark Ronson. There is also a focus on Amy's parents, Andrew Morris and Nick at the end of this part.
- Amy being shown in a series of close-ups after the funeral sequence as the score builds. She is either performing or the footage is shot by friends. She seems to be happy in this selection of shots. Freeze-frame techniques are also once again utilised.
- Once the main credits start, the use of *Valerie*, one of best known songs is used to remind spectators of what has been lost.

All of these individual techniques could be seen to have a profound impact on how the end of the film is read. Kapadia's aim seems to be to encourage the spectator to feel a sense of loss by the techniques used in this climax. There is no real development of anything to say after her death, apart from the brief insert from Tony Bennett. The film ends with us seeing a happier, healthy Amy and the final song over the credits provides a powerful end coda.

Task 6 – Independent Study - Reading

Please read Paul MacInnes' interview with Asif Kapadia (The Guardian, 29/06/2015)

<https://www.theguardian.com/film/2015/jun/27/asif-kapadia-amy-winehouse-doc>

- What further insights does the director give you about the film *Amy* in this interview?
- Are there any points made here that might connect with your own experience of watching the film?