

DOCUMENTARY RESOURCE

CASE STUDY: *AMY* (KAPADIA, 2015)

INTRODUCTION

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 be then 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 in 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 feel the film 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?



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*?

Sequence Analysis 1 – Recording the song *Back in 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?

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 this particular techniques.
- What do you feel is the overall effect of this sequence?

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*?

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?