

## Component 2

### Global filmmaking perspectives

#### Section B: *Documentary Film*

This is a **single film study** where you will be required to study one film from the following category – Documentary film

The films are chosen from one of the following;

- ***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)**

The films are studied in relation to the following areas;

#### The core study areas

- **Area 1: The key elements of film form; cinematography, mise-en-scene, editing, sound and performance.**
- **Area 2: Meaning and response; how film functions as both a medium of representation and as an aesthetic medium.**
- **Area 3: The contexts of film: social, cultural, political, historical and institutional, including production.**

#### Specialist studies

Learners will be required to approach a documentary film in terms of two specialist studies.

##### 1. **Critical debate; *The significance of digital technology in film***

The degree of impact digital technology 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.

## 2. Filmmaker's Theories

The documentary film will be explored in relation to key filmmakers from the genre. The documentary film studied may either directly embody aspects of these theories or work in a way that strongly challenges these theories. In either case, the theories will provide a means of exploring different approaches to documentary film and filmmaking.

**Two** of the following filmmakers' theories must be chosen for study:

**Peter Watkins**

**Nick Broomfield**

**Kim Longinotto**

**Michael Moore**

### Introduction

What this resource will do is to offer a number of ways into teaching Documentary Film which will be directly linked to what is outlined in the specification and also will feed into how this area is going to be assessed in the examination.

The structure of this resource will be based around lesson tasks and ideas that will supplement the delivery of this part of the course.

#### 1. What is a documentary?

This will offer some introductory tasks to the concept of documentary film, especially in relation to the core areas of study.

#### 2. Specialist Studies – Looking at and applying filmmakers' theories.

This will give a sense of the filmmakers named in the specification and their approaches to documentary.

#### 3. Critical Approaches - Significance of digital technology

This part of the resource will examine the impact of digital technology on the documentary genre.

#### 4. Case Study – *Amy* (Kapadia, 2015)

This unit will examine ways of teaching this film by focusing on key aspects of the core and specialist areas of study. These methods can be easily transferable to the other films in this section.

## What is a Documentary?

### Task One – Personal responses

**This is an individual task. List all the documentaries that you have seen and then answer the following questions.**

- Were they documentaries that you saw at the cinema?
- Were they documentaries that you saw on television?
- Were they documentaries that you saw through a streaming service – Netflix, Amazon Prime?

#### ***Possible responses***

Very few if any students will have seen a documentary at the cinema – an extension of this might be why this is the case. Multiplex cinemas don't show these types of film, only arthouse cinemas.

Most of the exposure to documentaries will be through more straightforward television documentaries on mainstream channels. These will be expository films dealing with single strand subject matter.

Some students may cite more problematic types of documentary in the case of reality television or docu-soaps – a further discussion of how these are differentiated from what might be considered conventional documentary form might take place.

The separation of documentary from other types of media text on the main streaming services highlights the difference from say fiction. This may or may not be the attraction when choosing what to watch.

**If you have seen no or very few documentaries suggest reasons why this might be.**

#### ***Possible answers***

Experience of watching fiction films from an early age.

Lack of access in terms of cinema exhibition.

Little publicity in mainstream sources.

Lack of exposure at home to these types of film.

Preferential treatment for mainstream fiction films.

**Task Two - Defining documentary**

**In pairs or small groups of three, come up with a clear definition of what you documentary is. Try to do this in less than 25 words.**

***Possible responses***

**The focus here should be on pulling out keywords and ideas that make up these definitions. These are the words/ideas that are most likely to emerge;**

Truth	Information	Objectivity	Non-Fiction
Reality	Genre	Narrator	Facts
Education	Perspective	Entertainment Story	
Construction	Style	Bias	Viewpoint
Subjectivity	Positioning	Events	Reliability
People	Ideology	Seriousness	Mediation
Propaganda	Provocation	Critical	Conclusions

**Task Three – Defining documentary in relation to fiction film**

**In the same pairs or small groups think back to your first year of study. Choose one of the American films that you studied – either Hollywood 1930-1990 or American film since 2005.**

**Look closely at the core area of study Area 1: The key elements of film form; cinematography, mise-en-scene, editing, sound and performance. Map out how each of these might be different from a documentary film.**

***Possible responses***

Many students may well suggest that documentary film is not as creative in terms of using elements of film form, that by the very nature of what it has to deliver as suggested by the definitions given in Task 2 that it is deeply conventional.

**Mise-en-scene**

This is more obviously a construction in a fiction film in terms of the use of sets, settings, props and costume. Everything that is framed by the director is there for an obvious reason.

Mise-en-scene within the documentary film will be seen as less of a construction, but actually a representation of a ‘real’ place, of ‘real’ people in ‘real’ situations. Of course it can be questioned here that a constructed space can also be achieved in reconstructions of real events or formal interview **situations**.

## **Cinematography**

Again the argument may well be that the American film studied has a far more aesthetic approach to how the camera is used in constructing meaning. This may well revolve framing shots, lighting, camera movement and variety of angles.

The counter argument may focus on the fact that why these techniques can't be utilised in order to construct meaning in a documentary film text.

## **Editing**

The main form of editing in American cinema being continuity editing and this might be said to be one of the main ways in creating meaning in mainstream cinema. That said there may also be arguments put forward for more creative forms of editing in terms of montage editing.

It will be largely believed that documentary film eschews any form of stylised editing techniques for a more conventional show and tell approach based on continuity editing form. Equally the selection of material might not be highlighted.

## **Sound**

There will be parallels made with the use of vocal sounds in these films delivered by actors and from a script. Additional sound and music will also be brought up in terms of creating a particular effect in terms of a creative usage.

With documentary the most common use of sound will focus on the use of voiceover and perhaps music to shape meaning.

## **Performance**

This will be seen as perhaps the clearest distinction in that there are actors in these American films who will use their physical expression and vocal delivery to convey meaning from a screenplay.

Performance in documentary will most likely be debated as problematic as it may be seen as 'natural' or 'real' rather than more obviously performed. As a result this will be possibly be seen as less constructed than these American fiction films.

**The overall arguments may be;**

1. Documentary film is less aesthetically pleasing than fiction film.
2. Documentary film is less constructed than fiction film.
3. Documentary film is more naturalistic in its use of elements of film form than fiction film.
4. Documentary film has less emphasis on film form to structure what might be considered a narrative than fiction film.
5. Documentary film doesn't have to convey meanings about character through mise-en-scene as much as fiction film.
6. Documentary film is more concerned with a version of 'truth' than developing ideas around character, story and situation than fiction film.
7. Documentary is rooted in a less expressive form of filmmaking and is more focused on a realist form of film making than fiction.

It might be worth looking closely at these arguments and any others your students come up with as a framework for watching your chosen documentary and then returning to after the first screening.

**Task 4 - The techniques of Documentary Film**

In small groups brainstorm what you think the **main techniques of the documentary film** based on the core study area 1 are and what kinds of responses might they create in the spectator.

**Possible Responses - it would be useful to have a paper copy of this for later use (see 4. Case study)**

**Actuality Footage:** Actuality is the term for film footage of real life events, places and people. This is where the documentary filmmaker shoots what she/he wants in the film, going to relevant locations and covering appropriate subject matter. There needs to be an emphasis here on whether this is going to be interesting, entertaining and also aesthetically pleasing for the spectator.

**Archival Footage:** Also called 'Stock Footage', this is film or video that can be used in other film productions and it is commonly used in documentary. Stock footage can come from a variety of sources, mostly obviously archive news footage or interviews from the past. That said it can also establish setting and situation as well by focusing in on specific subject matter that supports the filmmakers point of view. This wider footage can also take in personal footage (Super 8/16, video, DV, CCTV, mobile phone material). With access to this growing amount of footage a much broader sense of the subject matter can be examined. Of course the selection and construction of all this material in the final cut is crucial to establishing meaning.

**Use of Still Images:** This will use photographs of relevant subject matter to construct meaning or support points made by the filmmaker. This will be produced in a studio with the use of a rostrum camera. This is different to using a still shot of an image say within an interview.

**Voice Over Narration:** The use of a non-diegetic (not part of the narrative) voice that assists in explaining information, primarily in a documentary or news feature. The use of the voice positions the spectator to the point of view of the filmmaker. This can be the filmmaker themselves or someone used to convey a sense of meaning behind the images. The narration can also be interviewees whose testimony is crucial in constructing meaning and engendering a response. That said not all documentaries need to have a voiceover.

**Voice Over Exposition:** The use of a non-diegetic voice to introduce information to the audience. Typically this is factual in nature, and this may occur at the beginning of a documentary feature.

**Archetypal Characters:** The term 'character' is a problematic one when discussing documentary as this most obviously suggests a construction or representation of a person, rather than focusing on someone who is 'real'. In the case of documentaries, these characters will be selected by the filmmaker to support his/her point of view. This is fundamentally different to casting actors for a fictional role.

**Contrasting Characters:** Also selected will be people who might be used to create tension and offer differing points of view for an audience.

**Interviews:** Interviews can be both direct and indirect. A **direct interview** involves asking questions in a way that the responder understands the purpose of the question, and the intended response. **Indirect interviews** involves asking questions when the responder is unaware of the purpose, or the intended response. These interviews may be shown in a face to camera situation or may well have been recorded in a sound capacity and then used over film images. Both of these techniques will produce a different set of effects and meanings.

**Montage:** Selecting and carefully editing of selected pieces of film to form a continuous whole. This final selection of material is crucial in constructing meaning and generating an appropriate response.

**Cross-Cuts:** Used to establish action occurring at the same time, cross-cutting involves the camera cutting away from one action to another to give the impression of the action occurring simultaneously.

**Jump-Cuts:** A cut in film editing that gives the impression of the subject "jumping" forwards in time. This is done by showing almost the exact same shot in successive frames with only a slight variation in the subject.

**Frankenbiting:** An editing tool that allows for scenes, usually with spoken dialogue, to be edited into smaller sound-bites, and in effect changes the meaning of the scene. There is a great amount of debate over the ethics of this, particularly in reality television.

**Confessional Monologue:** A direct to camera 'confession' of a character in the film. In a documentary this occurs in response to a particular event or action.

**Dialogue / Duologue:** Dialogue is the conversation that occurs between many people in a film. Duologue refers to conversation between only two people.

**Graphics/Captions:** Use of titles or other written information displayed on the screen. This may be used as a shortcut in terms of offering crucial information such as names/status of the interview/interviewer. It may also convey information about dates and places which might

be vital to understanding a sequence. For obvious reasons of technological development, graphical images and special effects are increasingly important in documentary film, especially in the form of CGI. Traditionally this might have been in the form of a map illustrating geographical context or a hand built model. With an increasingly visually sophisticated audience this is growing in importance. That said CGI also adds significantly to the cost of film production.

**Music:** This is important within scenes or through scenes to complement visual images. The broader soundtrack, any recurring musical theme, the use of a montage of music has to be applied external (asynchronous) to the visuals. Equally there is no reason why music can't be employed contrapuntally as well.

**Ambient Sound:** This is sound that is present, or available, in the context of the scene being filmed. It may consist of the background sounds (of traffic, birds, wind, planes flying overhead, machines working, children playing, etc.) It is always applied synchronously; that is, the sound emanates from within the scene (not external to the scene). If we hear music, for instance, we hear it because someone is playing a car radio or is attending a performance or is present in a scene where music is playing.

**Establishing Shots:** Used in filmmaking to set up the context for a scene by allowing the audience to see where it is taking place, and the relationship that the characters have within it. This is also fundamental in establishing place and situation in documentary.

**Point-Of-View Shot:** By using the camera in a specific way, usually after a shot of a character or person, the camera is able to film a short scene that is exactly what that character or person would be looking at – it shows their point of view. This may well be the direct point of view of the filmmaker themselves.

**Reaction Shots:** Usually a cut-away shot to indicate the reaction of a particular character. This is usually in response to a specific action or emotion, and is used primarily to show the audience the full traits of a particular character. This might be employed in a variety of situations in a documentary film within interviews or even within stock or archival footage.

**Re-enactment or reconstruction:** These are staged reenactments of events from the past in order to recreate the feel of real life events. The settings may be recreated or staged and the people involved are actors. That said they are carefully framed with the documentary itself, alongside more obvious documentary techniques (interviews, archival footage). This can be also seen as a technique referred to as docu-drama, but it is not a standalone film. This is also different to say a fiction film covering 'real-life' events or more specifically the bio-pic which concentrates on the past life of a famous person.

**Looking at this list (by no means definitive) of documentary techniques, does this suggest that documentary can do more creatively than might have been previously thought?**



## Task Five – Philosophical Debates on Documentary Film

### Look at the following terms

Objectivity

Non-Fiction

Construction

Truth

Reality

Cinematic

1. Firstly outline what they mean in relation to documentary film.
2. Rank them in order of importance in how you view documentary, what is the most important term as number 1 and the least as number 6.
3. Give reasons for your rank order.

### *Possible responses*

Obviously a clear sense of what these terms actually mean is essential as they will be ideas that will be returned to when looking at specific documentary films in this unit. That said the meanings in relation to documentary can be examined in some depth and this can offer an interesting set of debates.

In terms of the rank order this can also open up wider issues about what documentary is or what it can be and again this can be returned to after the chosen film has been screened.