In the Archive of Cinematic Memories: Teaching Documentary Film History

It is not surprising that film and media students often think of documentary film as a platform for expressing political opinions, dissent or frustrations with important, contemporary social issues. In recent years our media and English curricula have been inundated with American documentaries focusing on the political profiles and governing strategies of neo-conservatives, the Western geopolitical mores in the Middle East, the emergence of political and extremist Islam, corporate crimes and media misdemeanours in an era of unprecedented economic progress.

In the last eighteen months, however, there appears to have been a marked decline in the amount of feature documentaries in cinemas. It seems that those suffocated by the steady diet of political documentaries include filmmakers, audiences and distributors. English, media and film educators who regularly used documentary films in their classes may find this situation challenging. However, students can be given relevant insights into the history of the documentary form—an aspect of curriculum that was marginalized in previous years, giving way to the coverage of current political issues.

Where to begin?

Teachers who were bombarded by articles, study guides, conference papers and other support material regarding gun control, the war in Iraq or corporate kleptocracy may be willing to change the texts and the format of their classes, but they could also be unsure about the relevance of old documentary texts or their capacity to engage present-day students. So, where to begin? This overview of documentary film history provides a list of the essential films and filmmakers and notes that might help educators in choosing the most relevant and appropriate film texts for their classroom practice.

There was a lot of interest in film factuality at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century that coincided with the establishment of film as a medium. Auguste and Louis Lumière’s shorts produced in 1895/1896 may assist students in understanding how the early films engaged the first audiences, and inspire them to look at the events, settings, social actors and circumstances of interest to early filmmakers. Films about amputations and various medical conditions were at first very descriptive, primitively structured and lacking a point of view, but were very popular among early cinemagoers.

The term ‘documentaire’ was used by the French to describe travel films, also popular in the early decades of the twentieth century. However, the term was first used to convey its present meaning by John Grierson in February 1926, in his review of Robert J. Flaherty’s film Moana (1926) in the New York Sun. Grierson defined documentary film as ‘the creative treatment of actuality’. Flaherty’s remarkable film about Inuit life Nanook of the North (1922) is often described as the birth of creative, engaging documentary film. It is a fascinating account of exotic lands, people living in a harsh, unforgiving climate and a dramatic evocation of the reality of life under those conditions. Poetic and inspiring, Nanook of the North still carries the aura of a pioneering attempt at the documentary form. Short excerpts from this film and Flaherty’s Moana could help initiate class discussion and reveal a lot about our perceptions of ‘reality’ in a documentary film. As Bill Nichols tells us, Flaherty’s great story about the struggle for survival in the Arctic represents Inuit culture in the way that the Inuit were not yet prepared to do for themselves. In addition to that, Nichols suggests that Flaherty’s sponsor, Revillon Frères, had a commercial interest...
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Propaganda machinations
Hitler’s coming to power signified the birth of documentary as a propaganda tool. Though documentaries had been used in communist Russia from the early 1920s to promote the role of the working class, it was the work of Leni Riefenstahl in Germany (Triumph of the Will [1935], about the Nuremberg Rally, and Olympia [1938], about the 1936 Olympic Games in Berlin) that most memorably and effectively used documentary filming as a form of propaganda. Hitler’s propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels first used propaganda in radio news and commentary, but filmmaking emerged as a revolutionary tool for conveying political ideas to the masses.

Riefenstahl’s biography and films are highly controversial. Her documentaries are often used to illustrate Hitler’s popularity in 1930s Germany and are frequently accompanied by films commemorating the victims of the Holocaust. The problem with screening Riefenstahl’s documentary masterpieces on their own is that some students may not be aware of the wider historical context and the implications of the rise of Nazism in the 1930s. Nevertheless, screening them as a ‘double bill’ with Alan Resnais’s Night and Fog (1956) as English teachers often do, focusing on the literature of the Holocaust, may lead to confusion as students may mix up the periods of films’ production and the political, cultural and historical contexts.

At the same time, filmmakers on the Left, like Spanish surrealist filmmaker Luis Buñuel, tried to show their opposition to social inequality and their support for the poor and the marginalized. Buñuel made Land Without Bread (1932), a socially conscious documentary about the appalling conditions of endemic poverty in the Spanish countryside. The 1930s saw many other filmmakers supporting social equality, like Joris Ivens (The 400 Million, 1939) or Jean Renoir (La vie est à nous, 1936), but also some non-political documentaries, like Jan Kucera’s Construction (1933) or John Ferno’s Million (1936), but also

Screening social consciousness
In 1930s England, documentary film began its long journey as a socially conscious form. John Grierson believed that a document must respond to social needs and must have social purpose. Grierson’s Drifters (1929), Flaherty’s Industrial Britain (1932), Basil Wright and Harry Watt’s Night Mail (1936), and other films made in this period focus on the representation of social and working conditions in England. Screening excerpts from these documentaries in secondary school classrooms can be a very good introduction to conversations about the socially and politically engaged documentary filmmakers. In 1939, Grierson became the film commissioner and chief executive of the National Film Board of Canada, the most important documentary institution in the world.

One should also remember that the daring of conservative film critics in America, March of the Penguins (Luc Jacquet, 2005), could also be discussed as a political film, marked by a conspicuous absence of political themes and issues.

New forms
New lightweight equipment assisted the advent of television and the new generation of documentary filmmakers. The mobile unobtrusive camera became the new recording and storytelling tool of the cinema vérité style in France and direct cinema in the United States, with the television picture having the appearance of live images. As James Monaco points out, “[T]his new style of documentary eschewed narration, ostensibly allowing its subjects to speak for themselves.” D.A. Pennebaker’s Don’t Look Back (1967) and Monterey Pop (1968) do not merely look at the rise of pop culture, but also chronicle the rebellion of the 1960s generation against war, totalitarianism and sexism.

Renowned observational documentary film High School (Frederick Wiseman, 1968) makes for compelling viewing as it allows teachers and students to speak for themselves and allows the viewer/audience into their personal narratives. Although it is rarely used in secondary schools, this film could provide students with a strong sense of identification with an observational documentary mode. It provides a lot of excellent ideas on how to use the camera as a storytelling tool and not merely a recording tool. It also broadly and un-schematically deals with high school students and their problems, making it extremely engaging viewing for their peers.
Focusing on the life of two former socialites – relatives of Jackie Kennedy – living in their ruined mansion, Grey Gardens (Ellen Hovde and Albert Mayles, 1975) is an intimate observational portrait of a world in decline, and simultaneously a post scatological legacy of the American Camelot. Barbara Kopple’s Harlan County USA (1976), on the other hand, is a moving portrait of the people of Harlan County, Kentucky, the epicentre of the coal miners’ union movement in the United States. Thirty years later, this film remains one of the rare attempts to map out the industrial relations conflicts in the English-speaking world; looking at the endemic poverty, health hazards, unregulated disputes as well as corporate strategies to eliminate organized workers’ protest. Kopple’s use of live folk and rhythm and blues music performed as part of the protest still reverberates among contemporary audiences. More than a storytelling device or a stylistic exercise, her courage to confront the armed thugs and strike breakers with a rolling camera is first and foremost a lesson in a filmmaker’s integrity.

Kopple’s film is strongly recommended to secondary teachers looking at the issues of social equality and freedom of speech. It is also mandatory viewing for tertiary lecturers of film and media studies perplexed by the fact that following a decade of conservative government and radical reforms of industrial relations laws (a hundred years after they were introduced), Australian filmmakers are not looking at workers’ rights as an area of interest for their cinematic narratives.

Recent tendencies

The advent of television brought a tidal wave of news and current affairs programs that were ostensibly competitive with the advent of television brought a tidal wave of news and current affairs programs that were ostensibly competitive with the advent of television. Current affairs programs that were ostensibly competitive with the advent of television. Recent tendencies in recent decades; he assisted Resnais on dozens of other roles in order to maintain consistency in the tide of politically minded American documentaries. It looks like the legacy of cross-cultural programming in X Channel (Van Cassavettes, 2005) may appeal to tertiary students who find that the strategies employed in narratives about contemporary political themes remain relevant almost half a century later in a variety of transformations of the medium, including the increasingly prevalent web content. Yet this is by no means the only theme of interest for contemporary student audiences. The ostensibly light-hearted Spellbound (Jeffrey Blitz, 2002) deals with an array of complexities from responsible parenting to cultural integration and provides a very good starting point for discussing the home and school pressures on students in present-day society. I, Frankenstein (Geli) and Dayna Goldthorpe, 2009) presents a neatly packaged narrative using rare archival material, masterfully conducted interviews and dancing sequences. For a film that sought to please a relatively narrow target audience, it surprisingly also appeals to young viewers immersed in contemporary pop culture.

Waco: The Rules of Engagement (William Gazecki, 1997) is an excellent example of the filmmaker’s total control over documentary material. Waco was also one of the films that heralded the tide of politically minded American documentaries. It looks like the legacy of cross-cultural programming in X Channel (Van Cassavettes, 2005) may appeal to tertiary students who find that the strategies employed in narratives about contemporary political themes remain relevant almost half a century later in a variety of transformations of the medium, including the increasingly prevalent web content. The work of documentary makers who focus on problems of social equality and political developments in Asia as local issues. Teachers who seek to maintain a political focus in their curriculum may find Control Room (Jehane Noujaim, 2004), Enron: The Smartest Guys in the Room (Alex Gibney, 2003) or The Corporation (Mark Aitchbar and Jennifer Abbott, 2003) both entertaining and instructive. Davis Guggenheim’s An Inconvenient Truth (2006), featuring Al Gore, has found its place in the curriculum of many Australian secondary teachers. However, the environmental politics of Daniel’s Darkroom (Hubert Sauper, 2004), the cloaked identity report in The Fog of War (Mark Rappaport, 1992) or the legacy of cross-cultural programming in X Channel (Van Cassavettes, 2005) may appeal to tertiary students who find that the strategies employed in narratives about contemporary political themes remain relevant almost half a century later in a variety of transformations of the medium, including the increasingly prevalent web content.

The mobile unobtrusive camera became the new recording and storytelling tool of the cinema vérité style in France and direct cinema in the United States. Werner Herzog’s documentary films emerge as an impressive yet uneven body of work. Lessons of Darkness (1992), the film that uses the narrative framework of science fiction to convey the outcome of the Gulf War, is interesting for discussing the stylistic features of documentary narration. According to Adam Bingham, Herzog makes an attempt to begin in abstraction and proceed in order to discover the deeper layer of truth. Herzog’s career spans five decades and he continues to make striking and provocative documentaries such as Grizzly Man (2005), which chronicles the life and death of wildlife enthusiast Timothy Treadwell who lived among grizzly bears for thirteen summers.

Errol Morris’ films Gates of Heaven (1978), The Thin Blue Line (1988), Mr Death: The Rise and Fall of Fred A. Leuchter, Jr. (1999) and The Fog of War: Eleven Lessons From the Life of Robert S. McNamara (2003), and his extraordinary television program First Person, are characteristic of the director’s unshakeable and ostensibly detached filmmaking style. They could be screened to exemplify different interviewing techniques as well as the use of re-enactments in the broader context of the documentary narrative.

British filmmaker Nick Broomfield developed his unique interviewing style with his trademark sound boom and his on-screen appearances. Broomfield’s influence is evident in the later works of Michael Moore and Morgan Spurlock. Soldier Girls (1981), The Leader, His Driver and the Driver’s Wife (1991) and Kurt & Courtney (1998) are some of his films that may engage senior secondary and tertiary audiences. Teachers should check for ratings and content.

Senior secondary and tertiary students frequently leave their research aside or incomplete to focus on exhaustively filming their subjects, hoping to discover what the film is about in the process. They are often unaware of the crucial role of studying their documentary subjects before the start of filming, to locate the cost effectiveness of well-conducted research. The engaging self-reflexivity of the veteran filmmaker Agnès Varda in The Gleaners and I (2000), Melvin Van Peebles’ exploration of the marginalization of African-Americans in Hollywood (1998’s Classified X, directed by Mark Daniels) or home-movie aesthetics used for dramatising the predicament of a pariah family in Capturing the Friedmans (Andrew Jarecki, 2003) may assist such students in understanding different stylistic approaches to documentary material.

Music documentaries, from Pennabaker’s 1960s films to contemporary tales of success, failure and decline (Ondi Timoner’s hilarious, Faustian DGG! [2004] – only for tertiary audiences) remain highly valued material for aspiring filmmakers. Film and media students often find that the strategies employed in narratives about contemporary pop stars remain relevant almost half a century later in a variety of transformations of the medium, including the increasingly prevalent web content. Yet this is by no means the only theme of interest for contemporary student audiences. The ostensibly light-hearted Spellbound (Jeffrey Blitz, 2002) deals with an array of complexities from responsible parenting to cultural integration and provides a very good starting point for discussing the home and school pressures on students in present-day society. I, Frankenstein (Geli) and Dayna Goldthorpe, 2009) presents a neatly packaged narrative using rare archival material, masterfully conducted interviews and dancing sequences. For a film that sought to please a relatively narrow target audience, it surprisingly also appeals to young viewers immersed in contemporary pop culture.
While the documentary films in the Australian secondary media and English curriculum often reveal the current tides in film repertoire, one should also recognize that teachers’ insistence on screening documentaries over the last decade has brought upon a new quality in the development of media literacy in classrooms. Discussing screen ‘realism’, bias and representation, composition of cinematic narratives and stylistic and technical devices used in the production of ‘film actualities’ would have been hard to imagine without work on popular documentaries. It has increased student awareness of the language of film and documentary in particular, improved their analytical tools for text analysis and perhaps inspired them to work in this challenging field. At a time when feature documentary has lost some of its steam, educators might find it useful to look for more inspiration in the archive of cinematic memories.

Endnotes
4 See Boris Trbic, “Dark is the Night: A Television Hero in a Quest for Justice in George Clooney’s Good Night, and Good Luck”, Screen Education 41, pp.34–42.
5 For a comprehensive list of directors and cinematographers and very interesting interviews with filmmakers see the film Cinéma Vérité: Defining the Moment (Peter Wintonick, 1999).