CONNECT!ONS Med!aLit moments



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Theme: Documentary Film and Media Literacy

In the first several minutes of *Trouble the Water* (2008), Kimberly Roberts uses a Hi8 video recorder to document the hours and days before Hurricane Katrina made landfall in New Orleans, and the first two days of the aftermath. To the untutored eye, Roberts was acting as an empowered citizen journalist, even as the floodwaters continued to encroach on her home and neighborhood in New Orleans' Ninth Ward. But within the first 20 minutes, it becomes evident that someone else is handling the cameras. And indeed, Roberts, along with her husband Scott, begin to look much more like the subjects of the film.

In a director's statement for the study guide to accompany the film, Tia Lessin and Carl Deal write, "When Hurricane Katrina made landfall. . .we were horrified by the televised images of elderly people laid out on baggage claim carousels at the airport, bloated bodies floating in the flooded streets, people standing on their roofs. Where was the help? We wanted to know why New Orleans had not been evacuated before the storm, and why aid was so late in coming after the levees collapsed."

So far the directors sound like a team of investigative journalists willing to challenge local, state and federal authorities for their handling of the disaster—but then they add, "We were in search of stories not being widely reported. . .Our challenge was to tell an intimate character-driven story that brought new voices to the screen, and to distill it all into a fluid narrative without recycling the images that had saturated the news." A character-driven story? Is this reality television? (*Trouble the Water* Study Guide).

Lessin and Deal continue, "In Kimberly and Scott Roberts, and their friend Brian Nobles, we encountered smart, funny, undefeated, indignant and determined survivors; by documenting their two and a half year journey to recreate their lives, we were able to put faces and voices to so many others left behind—the poor, the incarcerated, the elderly, the hospitalized." Where journalists consider interview subjects as sources of information, documentarists view their subjects as characters, albeit unscripted. In this case, they're made to bear the burden of representing an entire class of people. This "standing in" for others is directly related to media literacy pioneer Len Masterman's principle of representation. No media text is a transparent window onto reality. Even for a scene in a documentary film where groups or masses of people are going about their daily business, the selection of subjects, the framing of shots, the locations chosen, and the selection of monologue and dialogue will inevitably reflect the interests and intentions—even the agenda--of the filmmaker.

By the same token, many documentary filmmakers are much like investigative journalists. They present lifestyles, values, and points of view, and often choose to do so directly. They choose issues to address, and even causes to defend. They often stake a greater claim to truth than other media makers.

Perhaps what makes the documentary a compelling genre is the unpredictability of its entanglement with real lives and events. Take, for example, the case of filmmaker Joe Berlinger. In 2009, Berlinger received a visitor in his office. The visitor—the friend of a friend—told him that he absolutely had to direct a film about an epic environmental and legal battle in the Ecuadorian Amazon. Eventually, Berlinger flew to Ecuador, and was stunned as he surveyed the devastation in a once pristine watershed awash in a brew of toxic chemicals left by Texaco and Chevron in successive oil exploration campaigns. *Crude*, the film that Berlinger began to produce and direct, followed reports of sickness and death in the area, and documented a lawsuit filed on behalf of 30,000 indigenous people.

Steve Donziger, an attorney involved in the suit against Chevron, invited Berlinger to film both public hearings and private strategy sessions. Unfortunately for Berlinger, he captured a semi-private conference between Donziger and an Ecuadorian judge in the case, leading to accusations that Donziger had been acting unethically. Responding to a petition from Chevron, U.S. Judge Lewis A. Kaplan demanded that Berlinger surrender his tapes. While Kaplan acknowledged that Berlinger was a journalist with First Amendment protections, he still ruled that Chevron had the right to examine 600 hours of raw footage.

What's interesting to note is that the court order not only affected his ability to conduct his work as a journalist. It stymied his work as an artist as well. As Berlinger complained, "There's an expectation on the part of my subjects that the raw footage is not going to be released as if it's a 24-7 webcam of their lives. They expect me to sit in an editing room and spend years making a film and to create an honest and accurate portrayal." ("A 'Crude' Awakening: Chevron Vs. The Documentarian," NPR All Things Considered, 4 June 2010).

In this issue of *Connections*, we discuss the art and craft of documentary, a genre which utilizes techniques that differ widely from fiction film, including investigation and presentation of evidence, interviews, moral inquiry, calls to action, presentation of human relationships for emotional impact, and much more. In our first research article, we discuss the breadth of investigation that characterizes documentary film, which is more closely related to long-form journalism than news. In our second research article, we compare two films on the topic of sexual abuse in the Catholic Church to help audiences understand the differing intentions and techniques of docudrama and documentary. In our Resources section, we offer a variety of resources for documentary film and media literacy. Our MediaLit Moments activity, *He Named Me Malala*, utilizes a 2015 documentary of the same name.

Research Highlights

Documentary Film as Inquiry

Some documentaries are very much like investigative reporting. For example, Alex Gibney's *Enron: The Smartest Guys in the Room* (2005) is based on a 2004 book by *Fortune* magazine reporters Bethany McClean and Peter Elkind. Many of the techniques used in the film are related to mainstream journalistic practices. Numerous experts are interviewed to explain Enron's business practices, and to interpret their significance to audiences. News "reels" and Congressional testimony are used to offer further information, and to relay the dramatic conflicts played out in the search for the truth about the company's financial abuses. Such techniques are familiar to most audiences, and signal to them that the documentary addresses public affairs.

But if documentary film is like journalism, it most closely resembles long-form journalism. And, with so much time and film on one's hands, it's no surprise that many documentary film-makers treat the genre as a vehicle for wide-ranging inquiry. One good case in point is *Hoop Dreams* (1994), a film about two inner-city African-American teens who dreamed of attaining basketball scholarships to Division One schools. Filmmaker Steve James and his colleagues at Kartemquin films shot 250 hours of footage spanning over several years, as William Gates and Arthur Agee made their way through Cook County schools, both public and private. While James' narration was relatively unobtrusive, his camera was not. Most often, Gates, Agee, and their family members and friends were framed intimately—even in times of conflict, loss and privation. The result was an informal sociological study of the multiple challenges Gates, Agee and their families faced in their struggle for greater social mobility, and a shot at the American dream. While the film didn't deliver a univocal message, it clearly asked audiences to consider whether the dream was attainable in neighborhoods with few social, financial and educational resources.

Frederick Wiseman, who has taught courses in criminal law, family law, legal medicine, and psychiatry at Boston and Brandeis universities since the late 1950s, has filmed a wide variety of documentaries in institutional settings. With his first film, *Titicut Follies* (1967), Wiseman developed an ethnographic, observational treatment of relationships in Bridgewater State Hospital, an institution for the criminally insane in Massachusetts. As documentary scholar Barry Grant writes, "Wiseman knows where to look and how to capture images on film that resonate with meaning despite the uncontrolled circumstances in which he shoots" (Nichols et al., *Documenting the Documentary* p. 255).

Narration was entirely absent in *Titicut Follies*. Where most documentary filmmakers rely on camera work to capture the truth, Wiseman spent a great deal of time in the editing room—embarking on a "voyage of discovery," and describing the end result as "a report on what I've found." (Nichols et al., 256). In the end, Wiseman indeed had a report to deliver. Using editing and composition as primary techniques, he created sequences of scenes. In one sequence, a guard orders an inmate to gather his clothes; in another scene a doctor

questions an inmate in a way that seems unduly callous, and in yet another, guards strip-search newly arrived inmates. In each instance, inmates lose their identity and agency. Massachusetts state authorities banned the film, though it won awards. The film also became one of the inspirations for Milos Forman's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*.

With documentary film, some searches for truth (and subject matter) are even broader. In 1985, documentary director Errol Morris was interested in interviewing Dr. James Grigson, a Texas forensic psychiatrist who testified in scores of capital trials, nearly all of which resulted in death sentences. Through Grigson, Morris was exposed to the story of Randall Adams, who claimed that he had been framed for the 1976 murder of Dallas police officer Robert Wood, and that another man, David Harris, had committed the crime. After reading through a transcript of Adams' trial, and meeting with Harris, he decided to focus on Adams' case (Dormehl, 133-134). While the film often functions like a police procedural, it's also a meditation on the fragmentary and motivated nature of memory, and the contingent nature of truth.

Morris interviews several witnesses, and heightens the tension with multiple re-enactments of events which reflects the conflicts in the testimony of his interviewees. Media literacy skills are certainly needed to fully appreciate the film. How can audiences appraise the credibility of witnesses? In addition, Morris deployed a wide variety of cinematic techniques for the re-enactments: vivid colors, angles and compositions reminiscent of film noir style, a soundtrack by Phillip Glass, hypnotic pacing. How does that affect audience reception of testimony? Morris himself acts much less like a detective, and much more like a psychoanalyst who allows his patients the leisure of rambling, confessional monologues. Surprisingly Morris' style of interview allowed Morris to come closer to the facts of the crime by film's end. (Williams, "Mirrors Without Memories," 389).

Finally, some documentary investigations address the relationship between the personal and historical. In *Waltz with Bashir* (2008), Ari Folman interviews several fellow soldiers who participated in the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon in an attempt to regain lost memories of the conflict. Like a series of thawing icebergs, Folman's interviews lead to recovery of memory—most horrifically, the memory of standing by while Lebanese Phalangist militia massacred hundreds of Palestinian refugees in the Sabra and Shatila camps in West Beirut. As with *The Thin Blue Line*, format and technique become crucial to understanding Folman's intentions as a filmmaker. Why did Folman choose to use the medium of animated film? Was the war so nightmarish that he could only bear to render it in animated form? Did he use animation to convey a journey in which his experience of reality had been partly emptied out before it could be filled again?

Docudrama and Documentary: A Comparison

Most documentary films work to impress audiences with the importance of a single issue or topic, and highlight their potential impact on audience members themselves. But if one asks a typical moviegoer what documentary techniques arrested their attention, few will have a vocabulary for describing them. One way of "surfacing" audience awareness of documentary techniques is through comparison with the kindred form of docudrama. Take, for instance, the films *Spotlight* (2015) and *Deliver Us from Evil* (2006), both of which deal with sexual abuse of children by Catholic clergy.

Spotlight is a docudrama which draws from news stories and documented and oral history of the team of journalists at the *Boston Globe* who broke the 2002 story of widespread sexual abuse of children in the diocese of Boston. The series of stories written by the Spotlight team led to the resignation of Cardinal Bernard Law at the end of that year. While most of *Spotlight* is firmly grounded in fact, the directors choose from a wide variety of techniques typical of a Hollywood fiction film with a large budget—plentiful indoor and outdoor sets, a large cast of characters, plenty of on-screen action, and an energetic soundtrack, all of which convey the energy and drive of the Spotlight team as they seek out the truth of abuse in news clippings, parish records of assignments of priests, and victim interviews. In addition, much of the action is propelled by the Spotlight team's pursuit of attorneys Mitchell Garabedian and Jim Sullivan, who function as 'outside' and 'inside' sources of information. All of these elements give the film the feeling of an exciting detective/criminal procedural.

Amy Berg's *Deliver Us from Evil* clearly does not have a budget to match, but it does feature actual victims and their families who are willing to offer on-camera testimony to abuse. By the same token, the "reality" of abuse delivered to audiences comes in a number of forms, some of which are staged.

Berg starts chronologically. Bob and Maria Jyono, the subjects most frequently interviewed, tell the story of Father Oliver O'Grady's presence at their Lodi, California home in glowing terms while the soundtrack offers up the sounds of a guitar folk duo typical of a lay Catholic service. Maria describes O'Grady as a friend able to help the Jyono family with the burdens of daily life, and "the closest thing to God that we had." In subsequent interviews, medium or close-up shots of Maria appear to betray the regret that she feels for inviting O'Grady into their home. Berg is clearly pacing the action of the film.

A round of interviews with survivors whom O'Grady had abused as children forms the centerpiece of the film. When the camera returns to the Jyonos, they recount O'Grady's arrest, their disbelief in O'Grady's guilt, and the questions to their daughter Ann which go unanswered. All this leads to a highly charged emotional climax in which the Jyonos appear to entirely re-capitulate their anger and grief at the revelation that O'Grady had molested Ann from the ages of five to twelve in their own home.

By comparison, *Spotlight* is a scripted re-creation of the search for survivors and perpetrators

supported by accounts drawn from news interviews and articles. Again, format and technique are crucial to understanding the role of representation in the film. What counts most in those re-creations are the skills of actors to inhabit particular roles. In some cases, sets, costume, make-up, dialogue, and location shots of down-and-out neighborhoods are also used to remind audiences that offending priests preyed on vulnerable, lower-income families.

The plot of *Spotlight* revolves around the quest to unseal Church documents which will prove that Cardinal Law had prior knowledge of Father John Geoghan's serial abuse of children in the diocese. As with most Hollywood films, the "big reveal" is saved for the concluding scenes. *Deliver Us from Evil*, on the other hand, draws much of its power from oral testimony that builds an incremental and historical portrait of abuse. Victims recall first incidences. They recount complaints to church officials and their indifferent, even hostile responses. Families and survivors read letters of complaint about re-assignment of offending priests to nearby Central California parishes. In addition, Berg uses recorded excerpts from depositions of Bishop Roger Mahony and other church officials to suggest that they wished to evade the issue of abuse wherever possible.

In a few instances, the audience impact of interviews easily surpasses that of documentary evidence. In one of Berg's interviews with O'Grady, who lives in retirement in Ireland, O'Grady models a hypothetical (but typical) confession in which he admits his crimes to another member of the clergy, then airily asks for absolution. Not only does O'Grady appear to be an affable sociopath, his interview suggests that other priests are complicit in keeping his record of abuse private.

In another, Berg creates a trans-Atlantic connection between O'Grady and one of his victims, Nancy Sloan. O'Grady begins reading a letter of apology to Sloan, who appears on camera in her California home to read the rest of the letter aloud in a state of agitation. O'Grady's reading of the letter betrays his inability to comprehend the consequences of his actions. Perhaps what is most remarkable about this "choral" interview is that it ever took place. The building of personal relationships between documentary filmmakers and their subjects is one of the most important strategies a documentarist has at their disposal. With those relationships, documentarists can more easily persuade audiences of the truth of what has transpired on camera, and are better able to enlist audiences in support of an argument or cause.

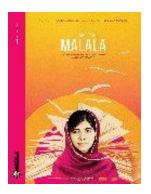
On the other hand, Tom McCarthy, the director of *Spotlight*, must deploy a number of strategies to help audiences appreciate the difficulty of the problems the Spotlight team had to address. Various characters affiliated with the Church attempt to dissuade them, while dialogue from a wider group of characters alludes to the power of the Church. Again, acting and staging is crucial to audience impact. In one scene, Mike Rezendes manages to make telephone contact with former priest and clergy sex abuse expert Richard Sipe, who is represented as a taciturn 'deep throat' source. The call is broken short after a minute or two,

suggesting that Sipe is fearful of possible reprisal.

Later, in a conference call with the entire Spotlight team, Sipe suggests that as many as 90 priests could be implicated in the Boston diocese. During this exchange, the camera tracks a slowly widening long shot on the Spotlight team, as if the team itself is beginning to comprehend the magnitude of a decades-long tragedy. Similarly, when the Spotlight team documents 87 priests in the diocese who have been arbitrarily re-assigned, the number "87" is magnified on screen to suggest that the problem of abuse is indeed systemic.

Perhaps the most important thing that a film about the tragic violation of intimacy can do for audiences is to remind them of the caring relationships they have with others, and the empathy they feel for characters on screen. Arguably, *Deliver Us from Evil* does this well through direct testimony. *Spotlight*, following a more journalistic impulse, reminds viewers that intimacy has to be achieved. When Spotlight team member Walter Robinson pays a holiday visit to Jim Sullivan, a friend and attorney often employed by the Boston diocese to privately settle abuse cases, Sullivan is incensed when Robinson makes a request bordering on a demand to provide the names of victims. Sullivan takes Robinson out for a private conference on the icy cold street. He takes the list of possible victims that Robinson has in hand, circles all the names on the list, and quietly turns back to his front porch.

CML News



CML Partners with *Journeys in Film* for SxSWedu Media Literacy Activity: *He Named Me Malala*

This issue of *Connections* includes the MediaLit Moments activity presented as part of the *He Named Me Malala* curriculum guide created by Journeys in Film. The activity was introduced at SxSWedu March 7-10 in Austin, TX. Find more information about Journeys in Film and the free curriculum guide http://journeysinfilm.org/films/henamed-me-malala/.



Videos Online of Media Literacy Strategies for Nonprofits

Media Literacy Strategies for Children, Youth and Family Nonprofits was held by Valley Nonprofit Resource Center on Tuesday, February 23rd at Tarzana Providence Medical Center. The presentation by Tessa Jolls is now available on CML's YouTube channel.

https://www.youtube.com/user/medialitkit/videos

CONSORTIUM for MEDIA LITERACY

Uniting for Development

About Us...

The Consortium for Media Literacy addresses the role of global media through the advocacy, research and design of media literacy education for youth, educators and parents.

The Consortium focuses on K-12 grade youth and their parents and communities. The research efforts include nutrition and health education, body image/sexuality, safety and responsibility in media by consumers and creators of products. The Consortium is building a body of research, interventions and communication that demonstrate scientifically that media literacy is an effective intervention strategy in addressing critical issues for youth.

Resources for Media Literacy

Resources for Documentary Film and Media Literacy

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- Enron: The Smartest Guys in the Room. Dir. Alex Gibney. Perf. John Beard, Tim Belden. Jigsaw Productions, 2005. Film.
- Hoop Dreams. Dir. Steve James. Perf. William Gates, Arthur Agee. Kartemquin Films, 1994. Film.
- Nichols, Bill, Jeannette Sloniowski, and Barry Keith Grant, eds. *Documenting the Documentary: Close Readings of Documentary Film and Video.* Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2014.
- Spotlight. Dir. Tom McCarthy. Perf. Mark Ruffalo, Michael Keaton. Anonymous Content, 2015. Film.
- Titicut Follies. Dir. Frederick Wiseman. Zipporah Films, 1967.
- Trouble the Water. Dir. Carl Deal and Tia Lessin. Perf. Kimberly Roberts, Scott Roberts, Brian Nobles. Elswhere Films, 2008. Film.
- The Thin Blue Line. Dir. Errol Morris. Perf. Randall Adams, David Harris. American Playhouse, 1988. Film.
- Waltz with Bashir. Dir. Ari Folman. Bridgit Folman Film Gang, 2008. Film.
- Williams, Linda. "Mirrors without Memories: Truth, History and *The Thin Blue Line*," in Nichols, Sloniowski, and Grant, eds., *Documenting the Documentary.* 385-403.

Recommended Resources

- Citizenfour. Dir. Laura Poitras. Perf. Edward Snowden, Glenn Greenwald. Praxis Films, 2014. Film.
- For once, IMDB writes a description that does justice to a documentary film: "In January 2013, Laura Poitras started receiving anonymous encrypted e-mails from 'CITIZENFOUR,' who claimed to have evidence of illegal covert surveillance programs run by the NSA in collaboration with other intelligence agencies worldwide. Five months later, she and reporters Glenn Greenwald and Ewen MacAskill flew to Hong Kong for the first of many

meetings with the man who turned out to be Edward Snowden. She brought her camera with her. The resulting film is history unfolding before our eyes." And, we should add, the quiet intensity of this film makes it compelling viewing.

Dangerous Documentaries: Reducing Risk When Telling Truth to Power.

Center for Media & Social Impact, School of Communication, American University, 2015. Patricia Aufderheide, Principal Investigator, cmsimpact.org/dangerousdocs. Thinking of filming your documentary in a conflict zone? Concerned that powerful interests might bury your film with a coordinated PR campaign? *Dangerous Documentaries* addresses these issues and more. The first several pages offer an illuminating discussion of the differing motivations and techniques of journalists and documentary filmmakers.

IndieWire (www.indiewire.com)

IndieWire may chase the Hollywood scene, but it's fairly generous with its coverage of documentary film.

International Documentary Association (<u>www.documentary.org</u>) Flagship organization devoted to documentary film.

Kasson, Elisabeth. "The Message Is the Medium: The Difference between Documentarians and Journalists." *Documentary Magazine*. Fall 2010. International Documentary Association. Web.

Mwangaguhunga, Ron. "Documentaries Are Filling the Void Left by Journalism's Crisis." Culture section, tribecafilm.com. 19 September 2013. Web. Short but informative article on the different audience needs that contemporary documentaries are able to address.

The Pervert's Guide to Cinema. Dir. Sophie Fiennes. Perf. Slavoj Žižek. Amoeba Film, 2006

While Dormehl describes the film as a psychoanalytic reading of cinema, it's just as much an exploration of the layers of ideology that can be found in film. Žižek narrates his interpretations of films (most drawn from the Hollywood canon) with a wit and style that is largely accessible, despite all the theoretical trappings.

Super Size Me. Dir. Morgan Spurlock. Perf. Morgan Spurlock, Daryl Isaacs. Kathbur Pictures, 2004.

Who says that a documentary should be filled with a series of talking heads delivering their opinion on the topic at hand? And why can't individual experience be used as evidence for an argument? In eating a McDonald's "diet" for 30 straight days, Spurlock was able to demonstrate just how harmful to one's health such a diet can be.

Taxi to the Dark Side. Dir. Alex Gibney. Perf. Alex Gibney, Brian Keith Allen, Moazzam Begg. Discovery Channel, 2007.

Gibney seems to exhibit the honesty and respect that make it possible to elicit the stories of soldiers stationed in Bagram AFB and Abu Ghraib during the occupation of Iraq, including those facing criminal charges. As a whole, the documentary makes a persuasive case that the Department of Defense intentionally created a fog of ambiguity regarding the proper conduct of interrogations and treatment of prisoners in the war on terror.

Med!aLit Moments

He Named Me Malala

"He Named Me Malala" is a 2015 documentary directed by Davis Guggenheim; the story explores the life of Malala Yousafzai, who was shot by the Taliban for championing girls' education in Pakistan, and who subsequently became the youngest-ever Nobel Peace Prize Laureate.

This videoclip from the documentary is the opening of the film, and it features an animated version of the story of the Afghani folk heroine Malalai of Maiwand, for whom Malala Yousafzai's father named her. This animated opening provides a frame for the remainder of the documentary, which contains subsequent animated sections as well as interviews and recordings representing Yousafzai's life.

Ask students why this animated story is chosen for the opening of a documentary film.

AHA! Malala Yousafzai's name provides inspiration for her life and for the telling of her story.

Grade Level: 6-12

Key Question #2: What creative techniques are used to attract my attention?

Core Concept #2: Media messages are constructed using a creative language with its own rules.

Key Question #4: What values, lifestyles and points of view are represented in – or omitted from – this message?

Core Concept #4: Media have embedded values, lifestyles and points of view.

Materials: Screen, LCD projector, computer with high-speed Internet connection.

Activity: Use the videoclip* (2:15 minutes long) found at http://ow.ly/Z0nWM.

Before identifying the film that the videoclip is taken from, ask the students if the animated clip caught their attention. What did they like or dislike about the creative techniques used to tell the story? If time permits, show the clip again. Then have the students list out the values, lifestyles and points of view they identify in the clip. Be sure to have students address omissions, such as other points of view. Students may want to explore historical information about the opponents and the context surrounding the battle depicted, or typical customs regarding women at the time.

After analyzing and discussing the videoclip, provide students with the name of the documentary and ask students what their expectations may be of Malala Yousafzai, the contemporary girl whom the documentary features. What kind of girl might they expect to meet or see?

Extended Activities: A complete teaching guide, "He Named Me Malala," is available free from Journeys in Film, http://journeysinfilm.org/films/he-named-me-malala/. Once students have had an opportunity to explore the framing of Malala's story from the standpoint of the

opening animation using a media literacy approach, it is illuminating to contrast and compare Malala Yousafzai's own story with that of the ancient heroine. Additionally, the book authored by Yousafzai, "I Am Malala: The Girl Who Stood Up for Education and Was Shot by the Taliban," provides another media venue to explore Yousafzai's story, allowing for a comparison between various approaches possible through different mediums. * The videoclip is excerpted from the 2015 film "He Named Me Malala." CML thanks Fox Searchlight Pictures for permission to use this clip for educational purposes. The Five Core Concepts and Five Key Questions of media literacy were developed as part of the Center for Media Literacy's MediaLit Kit™ and Questions/TIPS (Q/TIPS)™ framework. Used with permission, ©2002-2016, Center for Media Literacy, http://www.medialit.com.