

# DOCUMENTARY MAKING

For Digital  
Humanists

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## 6. Precedent

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Just as with traditional humanist writing, documentaries are created within a methodological context. Filmmaker-scholars will continue to draw upon the research and literature of their peers, rooting their works in a deep understanding of the scholarship on a given topic. But they must also work self-consciously within the framework created by the medium they hope to utilise. Just as scholarly literature will frame and inform your ideas, so too should filmic precedent inform the look, feel, and communicative tools drawn upon by the filmmaker-scholar.

Watching a wide range of films, both drama and documentary, will provide you with many different models that can be emulated, contested, or subverted. Whilst no single viewing list can cater to every taste or permutation of intellectual desire, we have found that the following films have proven particularly provocative, insightful, and inspiring: *F is for Fake* (1975) by Orson Welles, *The Story of Film* (2011) by Mark Cousins, *Confessions of a Superhero* (2007) by Matt Ogens, *Style Wars* (1983) by Tony Silver, *Best Worst Movie* (2009) by Michael Stephenson, *Capitalism: A Love Story* (2009) by Michael Moore, and *Exit Through the Gift Shop* (2010) by Banksy. You may draw inspiration from other sources. Indeed, we thoroughly encourage this. It does not matter if you are inspired by the same material as ourselves. What matters is that you build a sense of what the medium is capable of and what you can contribute to it. This chapter is merely a starting point in that process.

Both fiction or non-fiction will expose you to a wide range of visual grammars, dialects, and techniques. Every film is an essay on the many ways to succeed or fail at communicating ideas via an audio-visual medium. The controversial dramatic series *24* (2001–2010) was shot in a quasi-documentary style, to underline the sense of reality it sought to foster, but there is nothing to stop documentaries from, in turn, borrowing from it. With its problematic look at terrorism and anti-terrorism, the

series might not be an obvious inspiration for a scholarly film, but its split-screen simultaneous depiction of parallel events allows for the complexity of individual moments to be explored in detail.<sup>1</sup> To draw inspiration from *24* — or any drama — is to recognise an effective audio-visual grammar, one that can create a specific impression upon an audience and might add value to an on-screen intellectual discourse when it is appropriately retooled. It does not imply an acceptance of the ideology behind that original project. Whatever films or sequences inspire you, attempt to innovate or build upon the techniques you see, using them in new contexts or in different ways. You should not aim to replicate what has come before, but you should be prepared to respond to it.

In his 2007 film, *Confessions of a Superhero*, Matthew Ogens cuts from meticulously photographed interviews with his main subjects (struggling actors who play superheroes on the Hollywood Walk of Fame) to on-the-ground documentary footage of their everyday lives. This allows for more traditional documentary segments to be framed by deeper, more reflective insights, the unconscious (the happening) versus the conscious (the reflection on the happening). The approach resembles, in an abstract way at least, that of Woody Allen; the dichotomy between Allen (the character) and Allen (the narrator). That is not to say that *Confessions of a Superhero* resembles any particular Allen film — it does not.<sup>2</sup> But the interview segments of *Confessions of a Superhero* nonetheless serve a similar function as, say, Allen's frank voice-over, in *Annie Hall* (1977): the happening versus the reflection; the moment versus hindsight. Drama should not necessarily be imitated by filmmaker-scholars, but that does not mean that moments or devices used within dramatic films cannot inspire them.

With *24*, drama borrowed from documentary for the sake of style. With *Confessions of a Superhero*, documentary borrowed from drama for the sake of substance. From a functional perspective, then, there is

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1 There is much to be said about the problematic politics of *24*, but for a very brief insight see Jane Mayer, 'Whatever it Takes: The Politics of the Man Behind "24"', *The New Yorker*, 19 February 2007, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2007/02/19/whatever-it-takes> and Gazelle Emami, '24 is Back to Make you Fear Muslim Terrorists Again', *Vulture*, 2 February 2017, <http://www.vulture.com/2017/02/24-legacy-muslim-terrorists-terrible-timing.html>

2 *Confessions of a Superhero*. Directed by Matthew Ogens. Toronto: Cinema Vault, 2007.

no hard or fast line between documentary and non-documentary and, as such, each piece of media consumed by the filmmaker is one that is potentially filled with important lessons. The opening sequence of *Manhattan* (1979), the parallel action of 24, the carefully shot interviews in *Confessions of a Superhero*, all are valid precedents.<sup>3</sup>

Quite naturally, the works of other documentarians should provide a particularly rich source of inspiration and counterpoint, particularly as they relate to how you can use and assemble your footage. Ken Burns's monumental series *The Civil War* (1990) is, its intellectual content aside, a masterful demonstration of elegant simplicity. The commentary, which leans from ostensibly neutral to openly sentimental, is typically delivered over a series of still photographs. Cameras pan or zoom, in a slow, gradual sweeps, revealing new details in these still images, in much the same way that a camera panning across live action might. The change of the voice, from that of the narrator to an actor reading a historical source (in character) adds to the overall atmosphere. No expensive historical re-enactments were needed to stir an emotional response in the series' audience. But as effective as the technique was, it has also become clichéd. It is so characteristic of Burns's output that to imitate it would be to invite comparisons and accusations that, like Burns, you are romanticising, rather than analysing, your subject.<sup>4</sup>

Less sentimental, but no less manipulative, is 2007's *King of Kong*, from director Seth Gordon. It chronicles the tale of two duelling video-gamers as they compete against each other (and themselves) to become the holder of the world record in a classic arcade computer game. The film principally revolves around the rivalry between long-time 'Donkey Kong' champion Billy Mitchell and challenger to the title, Steve Wiebe. In the film, Mitchell comes across as arrogant, cold, and more than a little bullish, the perfect villain to Wiebe's struggling, humble underdog. If *King of Kong* succeeds at anything, it is in the presentation of a tight,

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3 Every DVD director's commentary is a documentary about how a film has been assembled, about the numerous decisions and hardships that went into the making of a given production. The making of a drama may not feel instinctively appropriate to the documentarian, but many of the decision-making processes faced by the creators of drama are faced by the creators of documentaries. Both use a similar set of methodologies and both seek to move their audience in some way.

4 For a range of academic responses to Burns's *The Civil War* see Robert Brent Toplin (ed.), *Ken Burns's The Civil War: Historians Respond* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

compelling narrative rooted in the excitement of the mundane and the universality of an underdog story. On the surface, at least, it is a powerful example of how deeply documentaries can entertain when they happen upon a set of compelling circumstances or subjects.<sup>5</sup>

*King of Kong* is immensely entertaining but, according to post-release interviews, some of the events depicted in the film did not occur as they appeared in the final edit. Throughout the film, it is constantly implied that Wiebe is struggling to overcome not only Mitchell's high score but his influence in the world of competitive video-gaming. The audience is led to believe that Mitchell's long-time record was being unfairly protected by the scene's vested interests when, in reality, Wiebe's record was accepted at a fairly early point in the process. The footage used in the film was carefully edited together, turning the real into a semi-fictional reordering of events, creating an impression so compelling that its audience would have little reason to doubt its veracity. That Gordon created his finished film from more than three hundred hours of footage is indicative of the many potential forms it could have taken. *King of Kong* tells a masterful story, but it is perhaps more important as an example of how far the medium can detach its audience from reality, even as the audience believes that the opposite is occurring.<sup>6</sup>

To be fair to Gordon, the creation of a fiction from reality is nothing new in documentaries. Robert J. Flaherty's landmark film, *Nanook of the North* (1922) claimed to give its audiences insight into the lives of an Inuk man and his family but, in reality, much of the material that appears on screen is staged or distorted. The result was a type of dramatisation of real life, a semi-mythical reimagining of the Inuit in the early twentieth century that was anachronistic and romanticised. It fed into larger racial-social images that celebrated pre-modern, but not modernised, indigenous peoples.<sup>7</sup> That *Nanook of the North* is clearly

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5 *King of Kong: A Fistful of Quarters*. Directed by Seth Gordon. New York: Picturehouse, 2007.

6 "The Kings of Kong", *Retro Gamer Annual* 4 (2017), 47–53; Walter, 'King of Kong — Official Statement', *Twin Galaxies Forum*, 26 September 2007–2012 March 2009, <https://www.twingalaxies.com/forumdisplay.php/406-The-King-of-Kong-Official-Statement?sort=dateline&order=asc>

7 For an example of how *Nanook of the North*'s illusion of authenticity has worked, see Barbara C. Karcher, 'Nanook of the North', *Teaching Sociology* 17 (1989), 268–69; for a more critical discussion about *Nanook of the North* and the ways in which its representation of its subject people is problematic, see Shari M. Huhndorf, 'Nanook



sympathetic towards its subjects does little to dispel how problematic its core worldview is.<sup>8</sup> Emotional identification with its subjects was achieved, but only at reality's expense.



Fig. 10. *Nanook of the North* (1922), directed by Robert J. Flaherty.

Documentaries have much to learn from each other; lessons in how to achieve, and how to fail at, their respective tasks. That *Nanook of the North* can be talked about next to *King of Kong* speaks to thematic or methodological consistencies in the genre, if not in every individual documentary, from which you can draw lessons. Inspiration should not always be literal; one should not aspire to distort the truth in order to create a more compelling narrative, despite the long roots of that tradition. That some filmmakers have placed secondary importance upon creating a reasonable interpretation (and representation) of the truth should be a point of contention and reaction; the filmmaker-scholar should work against such approaches, not embrace or encourage them. In his 2003 acceptance speech for the Academy Award for Best Documentary, Michael Moore famously declared that 'we live in fictitious times'.<sup>9</sup> Though he was referring to the logic behind the

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and his Contemporaries: Imagining Eskimo Culture, 1897–1922', *Critical Inquiry* 27 (2000), 122–48.

8 *Nanook of the North*. Directed by Robert J. Flaherty. New York: Pathé Exchange, 1922.

9 Michael Moore, 'Academy Award Acceptance' (speech, Los Angeles, 23 March 2003).

forthcoming American-led invasion of Iraq, he might have just as easily been describing the state of the documentary genre. Taken as such, it is a comment worthy of much reflection.

At least with drama, there is (typically) no confusion about the fictitious nature of the events depicted on screen. The audience understands that they are watching a piece of drama and the events being depicted are a fiction that exists solely within the confines on the screen's frame. Camera movements (a slow zoom towards a face, turning a mid-shot into a close-up) in drama are openly, if not always obviously, attempting to elicit an emotional response from the audience, and the audience is, on some level, aware of this.<sup>10</sup> In documentaries, however, that is not always obvious, particularly as the viewer runs the risk of being swept up by powerful analysis and emotive imagery, which make a claim to objectivity and veracity. Techniques differ between fiction and non-fiction, but the results are often the same. Much can be borrowed from drama to create deeper, more engaging intellectual experiences; much can be discarded from documentaries to create a deeper, more meaningful candidate for the truth.<sup>11</sup>

The camera captures what occurs in front of it, but it is the filmmaker who constructs a film's truth, be it in a fictitious, hyper-real fantasy like *Star Wars* or in a documentary film like Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004). The ostensible goal of most documentaries is the attainment of objectivity, a dispassionate analysis of events that accounts for their causes and/or consequences.<sup>12</sup> In reality, whatever the tone a documentary takes, it is always deeply editorialised. Ken Burns's *The Civil War* is at least open in its sentimentality, even if the audience is not given the intellectual tools (in the series itself) to compensate for and deal with that in-built authorial bias. *King of Kong*, however, is significantly less open about the way in which it is manipulating its audience. In both of these cases, there is much filmmaker-scholars can learn by studying, if not imitating, these two examples.

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10 Anthony J. Ferri, *Willing Suspension of Disbelief: Poetic Faith in Film* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2007).

11 Perhaps the one clear exception to this is the historical drama, which is often viewed as containing some essential element of truth by a significant proportion of its audience. See Thomas Doherty, 'Film and History, Foxes and Hedgehogs', *OAH Magazine of History* 16 (2002), 13–15.

12 *Fahrenheit 9/11*. Directed by Michael Moore. Santa Monica: Lionsgate, 2004.



A more subtle approach to editorialising, though one that is no less dangerous, is taken by documentaries that utilise a neutral, observational tone. Tony Silver's 1983 film *Style Wars*, about the emergence of Hip-Hop culture, features only a tiny amount of commentary. Unlike films such as *King of Kong* or *Confessions of a Superhero*, there is no attempt made at constructing a character arc out of any of the people who appear in this film, giving *Style Wars* a contrivance-free feel. There remains, however, significant editorialising and authorial bias within the film. Whilst Detective Bernie Jacobs, who struggles against the proliferation of graffiti in New York City, is hardly a villain, he does represent the normative counterpoint around which the film is constructed. Unlike most of the film's participants, he wears a shirt and tie and, like the mainstream culture that the film aims to chide, he sees graffiti tagging (the focus of the film) as a nuisance and as an act of criminality.<sup>13</sup> As this is a film about tagging, Jacobs is implicitly criticised throughout — not wrong, per se, but limited in his vision because he, like most of *Style Wars'* audience, was ignorant of the social significance of the tagging movement.<sup>14</sup> Graffiti tagging might be illegal, but that does not, the film argues, make its adherents immoral.

Despite its neutral tone, minimal commentary, and its apparent ambivalence towards its subject, *Style Wars* has a clear message: graffiti tagging and wider Hip-Hop culture, cannot be judged by a binary right-or-wrong standard. It is a symptom of change and societal unease, not the cause; like all art, the film seems to say, tagging is about generating necessary social discourses which otherwise might go unheeded. All of this goes unsaid in the film, but is nonetheless communicated, in toto, over the course of its duration, a thesis delivered through atmosphere and immersion rather than words or explicit argument. *Style Wars* is a wildly effective and fascinating piece.

The film's use of contextual footage as a means of developing and communicating this discourse is inspired. Without ever saying so directly, Silver depicts New York as a type of ever-changing art gallery in which the struggles of the city's voiceless denizens are now able to find expression. Every subway car becomes a moving wall in this

13 Sharon R. Sherman, 'Bombing, Breakin', and Getting Down: The Folk and Popular Culture of Hip-Hop', *Western Folklore* 43 (1984), 287–93.

14 David Craven, 'Style Wars: David Craven in Conversation with...', *Circa* 21 (1986), 12–14.

living gallery, documenting gang rivalries, love affairs, and individual aspiration. For their part, the city authorities have a role to play in the evolution of this living artistic space, continuously struggling to wipe away all signs of the culture that *Style Wars* was so determined to expose. If *Style Wars* can be criticised for lacking a clear protagonist, it is because the audience, accustomed to identifying with other people, are looking in the wrong place. New York itself is the main character in *Style Wars* and only by understanding its component parts, the elements that exist below the mainstream culture, can one truly grasp the city's character.<sup>15</sup>

A more humanistic approach to this subject matter can be found in *Exit through the Gift Shop* (2010) by famed street artist Banksy. Originally rooted in the work of amateur videographer Thierry Guetta, Banksy's film explores the street-art phenomenon through an unexpected case study, turning the story of a movement into the narrative of Guetta's unlikely transformation from documentarian into a prominent (if controversial) figure in the street-art movement. Originally intended as a documentary about street art's twenty-first-century resurgence, based around the material captured by Guetta in the early 2000s, the film had to be completely re-tooled when its original director proved woefully unable to produce competent, or even watchable, content. According to Banksy, the film Guetta produced was so bad that he had to completely reassess his position: 'I realised that maybe [Guetta] wasn't really a filmmaker. That he was maybe just someone with mental problems who happened to have a camera.'<sup>16</sup> To rescue the material, Banksy asked for Guetta's raw footage in the hope that he could re-edit it into something of value. It was at this point that Guetta turned his hand to producing street art of his own, providing the film, which Banksy was now directing, with its new narrative focus.

Rather than re-tooling Guetta's original footage into a *Style-Wars*-esque documentary, as seems to have been the plan, Banksy instead chose to tell the story of Guetta himself, charting how an amateur videographer was able to ingratiate himself into the street art scene and, even more importantly, what he did after he surrendered control of his film to Banksy. Despite lacking any significant artistic talent, Guetta,

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15 *Style Wars*. Directed by Tony Silver. New York: Public Arts Films, 1983.

16 *Exit Through the Gift Shop*. Directed by Banksy. London: Revolver Entertainment, 2010.

with the help of a large team of paid artists, staged a massive show in Los Angeles in 2008, turning himself, practically overnight, into one of the world's most commercially successful street artists. According to many of Guetta's former subjects, many of whom appear visibly annoyed or offended by Guetta's self-styled rise, their former documentarian was, essentially, over-praised (at best) or a hack (at worst). The art he produced was deeply derivative; and it was principally produced by Guetta's team, rather than the 'artist' himself. In the film, much attention is paid to Guetta's vanity, which is on full show throughout.<sup>17</sup>

And yet *Exit through the Gift Shop* looks fondly at its subject, in spite of the criticisms levelled at him. Banksy drew heavily upon Guetta's original footage and, particularly in the first part of the film, uses it to provide a fascinating insight into street art's renaissance. Nonetheless, the real focus of the film is not the movement itself, but Guetta's attempt to acquire through it the type of external validation he seems to crave and require. Despite his potentially damaging and artistically disingenuous career, it is Guetta's very relatable need for inclusion that sits at the heart of Banksy's film.

By setting aside the need to create an accurate document of the movement's rise, and instead exploring the story of the film's would-be creator, *Exit through the Gift Shop* is able both to surprise and enlighten its audience. The lens through which the movement is viewed is much more personal than might be expected. An unusual (and arresting) life story was used to explore the commercialisation (and possibly the meaninglessness) of an artistic movement, a discussion of arguably greater value than the seriousness with which the subject might have otherwise been treated. In part, *Exit through the Gift Shop* is effective precisely because it suggests that street art might not be as worthy of celebration as its main practitioners believe it to be. Whatever else can be said about Thierry Guetta, he helps to show that the value of art, or an artistic movement, is entirely subjective. Despite failing to produce a documentary about the twenty-first-century version of the street art movement, the makers of *Exit through the Gift Shop* achieve something even more profound.

From a filmmaking perspective, *Exit through the Gift Shop* is an excellent example of how flexibility in the face of reality can lead to the creation of

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17 Ibid.

documentaries that far exceed their original potential. By accepting that a documentarian should react to circumstances, rather than trying to control or misrepresent them, as many of the films previously discussed in this chapter have done, Banksy's work was able to achieve a greater level of depth and insight than otherwise might have been possible. Events that might have felt like an annoyance or a distraction at the time were instead correctly appreciated for their intellectual and narrative potential. This transformation of perspective even helped to redeem much of Guetta's original footage, turning unusable moments of ham-fisted videography into invaluable character insights. In other words, the nature of the "truth" contained in that film matured significantly.

For the filmmaker-scholar, *Exit through the Gift Shop* should serve as a reminder that they cannot know precisely what type of film they are making until the filmmaking process has concluded; that even the most irrelevant or asinine footage might, if assembled correctly, allow the filmmaker to engage in a more meaningful intellectual discussion than the one they had originally envisioned. Collating the necessary variety of raw material, combined with flexibility in how it is assembled, opens a vast multitude of opportunities.

In many of the examples outlined in this chapter, footage of varying sorts is used in unexpected and novel ways, and these films interact with one another, building upon prior ideas in the genre whilst reacting against others. The authority of Ken Burns's *The Civil War* echoes through *Style Wars*, but with a vastly different set of subjects benefitting from the perceived power of a strong authorial voice. *Nanook of the North*'s semi-staged authenticity is unconsciously mocked by the very different type of authenticity that Banksy injects into *Exit Through the Gift Shop*: one film's B-Roll becomes another film's A-Roll. A deeper truth about the human condition was sought by both *Confessions of a Superhero* and *King of Kong*, but both films ultimately service the need to elicit sentiment and to create entertainment — goals they thoroughly achieve. In each of the examples discussed in this chapter, candidates for the truth have been presented, but each, in its own way, serves as a reminder that those candidates have been constructed with strong authorial voices or editorial agendas.

From an intellectual perspective, you should be prepared to revisit your footage as your project evolves. Indeed, you should be prepared

for the creative process to invert your own expectations about the focus of your work. Capture A-Roll and B-Roll, but be prepared to reassess the worth (and classification) of each. By engaging with a wide range of filmic precedent, and by placing your work within the context of its medium, as well as the relevant scholarly literature, your work will be in a position to react not only against the surrounding academic discourse, but a wider environment in which the public is petitioned to invest in innumerable, often manipulative, explorations of the “truth”.

