

**DEPARTAMENT  
DE FILOLOGIA  
ANGLESA I DE  
GERMANÍSTICA**

**UNIVERSITAT  
AUTONÒMA DE  
BARCELONA**

**2020**

# **Focus on the USA**

**Representing the Nation in Early 21st  
Century Documentary Films**

**Sara Martín Alegre (ed.)**









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## PREFACE: THE USA IN 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY DOCUMENTARY FILM, AN OVERVIEW

The e-book here offered is the product of the activities carried out in the elective third/fourth year course 'Cultural Studies', which I have taught in the Spring semester of the academic year 2019-2020, within the BA in English Studies of the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (and in the middle of the first Covid-19 crisis). A series of previous projects produced with students<sup>1</sup> convinced me of the suitability of the idea I had for this specific course: publishing a collective volume focused on how the United States of America are represented in current 21<sup>st</sup> century Anglophone documentary film.

I had originally planned to work on 50 films, supposing that about 25 students would enroll in my class. To my surprise, that number rose to 42 students, which allowed me to cover 84 films. Some students volunteered to do extra work, and I myself contributed 2 essays, so that the e-book could reach the nice round figure of 90 films. I had selected 100 titles in case some films were impossible to find and other circumstances and I am really sorry that my many other academic duties have prevented me from covering those other 10 films. In any case, each essay contains information about three other documentaries, which means that, in fact, the e-book mentions in more or less detail about 350 documentary films.

All the 350 films use English as their only or their main language, simply because we have studied them within a degree in English Studies and the selection depends on this circumstance, though not all of them have been made by American filmmakers. My aim was to explore with my students how the USA is represented by and in documentary films for two main reasons: I believe that this is an unfairly neglected genre both by mainstream audiences and in academic analysis, and also because the America documented there is far more varied (and 'real') than the America of the better valued fiction films. The main aim of my course was to prove, besides, that although filmmakers might not be aware of this, what they are doing with their cameras can be called practical Cultural Studies.

The structure of the e-book follows the structure of the course, which was subdivided into the sections Crime, Economics, Environment, Gender, Icons, Politics, Pax Americana and War, Politics and 9/11, Race, Religion, Social Issues, Space Exploration, and Sports. This might not be the best possible arrangement but I wanted very much to begin the course (and the e-book) with Michael Moore's *Bowling for Columbine* (2002) and give my students variety apart from instruction. The course was designed from the beginning to lead to the e-book, and I organized classroom time on the basis of the students' presentations of their two documentaries each, first in the flesh and later, once the Covid-19 lockdown became inevitable, online. Their presentations were structured to result in the essays here gathered. To my delight, I chose to focus the presentation and essay which I offered as a guiding model to my students on *American Factory*, the documentary that just a few weeks into the course won the Oscar for Best Documentary Feature. Call that serendipity.

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<sup>1</sup> See the complete list at <https://gent.uab.cat/saramartinalegre/content/books>

Having won an Academy Award, or Oscar, was, precisely, one of the criteria that articulated my selection. I first drew a list of Oscar Award winners since 2000 that had something significant to say about the USA; then I drew a map of the issues they touched upon, and next I searched in many online lists of 'best documentaries' for films that had escaped the Oscars' attention but had won other awards (at Sundance, for instance) or had a high reputation. I came up with a list, as noted, of 100 films, of which I had seen about 60 (I have seen the others as my students worked on them). I did not want to select films only on the basis of their topic; I intended to mix interest and quality, and I believe that the selection worked fine. I assigned two documentaries to each student randomly, and, amazingly, this was welcome with no complaints. The only student who was unhappy with one of her films (Michael Winterbottom's irregular *The Shock Doctrine*) chose a third film to dissect, but that was the only incident in the process of writing the e-book.

I must also clarify that I have laid the stress on films with a theatrical release, though some were made for conventional TV and others for the newer streaming platforms. I also decided to focus on stand-alone feature films, leaving aside both short films, mini-series, and series. The huge phenomenon of Netflix's *Tiger King* (an eight-episode documentary mini-series) erupted in the middle of the course and I had, in addition, serious doubts about not including Spike Lee's *When the Levees Broke A Requiem in Four Acts* (2006-2007, five episodes) or Ken Burns's *The Vietnam War* (2017, ten episodes). I think, however, that mini-series and series should be part of a different volume.

I have provided a brief introduction to each section, to help readers understand how the e-book is articulated beyond this preface. Some sections were initially subdivided, but I finally decided to have the e-book be less fragmented. The downside is that some sections might seem too miscellaneous, though this is inevitable because of my selection criteria. I could have chosen to fill in the gaps that each reader might note with convenient films, but I really wanted to emphasize quality. I must **WARN** readers that the essays contain multiple **SPOILERS**, since they have been written as academic criticism, not as reviews.

I do hope you enjoy the e-book and the astonishing effort which the student authors have made in the middle of one of the worst health crises the modern world has known, and, above all, that you enjoy the films.

Barcelona, 1 July 2020

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<http://gent.uab.cat/saramartinalegre>

<http://blogs.uab.cat/saramartinalegre>, *The Joys of Teaching Literature*

## CRIME: PERSONAL AND ORGANIZED

Michael Moore's *Bowling for Columbine* (2002) marked a turning point in the reception by world-wide audiences of documentary films. Suddenly, many spectators realized that documentaries were not just time-fillers for easy TV consumption but films worth paying for to see on cinema screens (theater screens if you are American). Moore's down-to-earth, populist American-accented voice proved, besides, that the documentary need not be a genre dominated by ponderous British-accented narration. Moore changed, then, the patterns of consumption, habituating both audiences and producers to the idea that documentary films were not a subproduct but simply films. As he has stressed, the word 'documentarian' should not be used in reference to those who make documentaries because they are filmmakers, just like those who make what, properly speaking, should be called 'fiction films'.

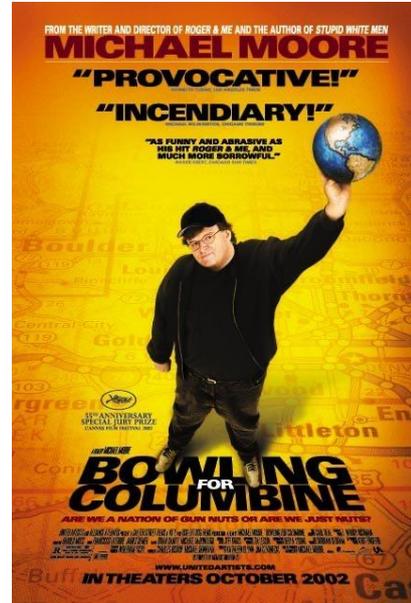
*Bowling for Columbine* is not a true crime documentary but a film that intends to look beyond mass murder into its causes. The other films on personal crime that appear in this section follow a similar line. *Capturing the Friedmans* (2003) deals with the complex matter of child abuse, questioning both the sense of normality and American justice. The very moving *Dear Zachary: A Letter to a Son About His Father* (2008) also questions justice but that of Canada, which allowed a deranged woman to get away with the murder of a quintessentially good American man. The terrifying *West of Memphis* (2012) examines again child abuse from the perspective of a dramatic miscarriage of justice affecting three teen boys. *Tower* (2016) connects with *Bowling for Columbine* by considering the first American mass murder, this time from the point of view of the survivors.

Organized crime has not resulted in as many outstanding documentaries and it is here represented by two. *Cocaine Cowboys* (2006) narrates how Miami was flooded with drugs imported by a coalition of Colombian cocaine barons whereas *Cartel Land* (2015) documents both sides of the Mexican-American border, showing how impossible it is to curb drug trafficking. This is so not because the Central and South American criminals are controlling the USA but because US citizens have chosen to consume drugs, putting the authorities in a no-win situation in the fight against crime.

# Bowling for Columbine (2002): The Unbreakable Gun Culture

## CREDITS

**Directed by** Michael Moore  
**Written by** Michael Moore  
**Produced by** Michael Moore, Charles Bishop, Jim Czarnecki, Michael Donovan, Kathleen Glynn  
**Music by** Jeff Gibbs  
**Cinematography by** Brian Danitz, Michael McDonough  
**Film editing by** Kurt Engfehr  
**Production companies** Salter Street Films, VIF 2, Dog Eat Dog Films, Iconolatri Productions Inc  
**Distributors** Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM) (theatrical)  
**Runtime** 1h 59'



## MAIN AWARDS

**Academy Awards (Oscars) (2003):** Best Documentary Feature (winner)  
**International Documentary Association (IDA) (2003):** Best Documentary of All Time (winner)  
**César Award (2003):** Best Foreign Film (winner)  
**Cannes Film Festival (2002):** 55th Anniversary Prize (winner), Palme d'Or (nominee)

## OTHER NOTABLE DOCUMENTARY FILMS BY THE DIRECTOR

*Roger & Me* (1989), *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004), *Sicko* (2007, Oscar Award nominee), *Capitalism: A Love Story* (2009), *Where to Invade Next* (2015), *Michael Moore in Trumpland* (2017), *Fahrenheit 11/9* (2018)

## REASONS TO SEE *Bowling for Columbine*

- Its detailed portrayal of the American society after the Columbine shooting and of how the word Columbine entered the vocabulary of American fears in 1997.
- Its exploration of the long-lasting gun culture in America, supported by both American citizens and lobbies.
- The topics presented in this documentary are, unfortunately, still relevant in 2020, when school shootings continue unabated.

## CONNECTED WITH...

- *Playing Columbine* (2008), directed by Danny Ledonne. This documentary follows the creation of the videogame *Super Columbine Massacre RPG!* in which players can recreate the Columbine High School massacre. It features both the supporters and critics of the videogame. The supporters defended the game arguing that it was aimed at adults, and not children.
- *Elephant* (2003, fiction film), directed by Gus Van Sant. Written by the director himself, this film narrates events that while not directly identified with the Columbine High School massacre appear to replicate them, unless we need to understand that Van Sant narrates what could be just any school massacre in the USA. With its minimalist style and dialogue, *Elephant* tries to horrify spectators just by showing what school shootings are like.
- *Newtown* (2016), directed by Kim A. Synder. This documentary follows the aftermath of the Sandy Hook School shooting of 2012, in Newtown, Connecticut. It features families who lost their children and the shocking moments that they went through. Twenty children (aged six and seven years old) and six adult staff members were killed by a suicidal, murderous white young man, one of many the USA seems to produce without seeking to learn why.

## RE/PRESENTING AMERICA IN *Bowling for Columbine*

*Bowling for Columbine* follows the aftermath of the Columbine School shooting of 1997 when two students entered their school building armed with guns and took the life of thirteen persons. However, the documentary not only seeks to explore why the shooting happened but also to discover a little more about American society and its long-standing gun culture. This exploration is achieved by showing other harmful events happening in America and related issues: generalized criminal firearms violence, Bush's War on Terror, Police racial profiling against the Black and Hispanic population, and much more, such as the fact that Lockheed Martin (major makers of military weapons) are located in Columbine.

The documentary begins with the by now notorious scene showing Michael Moore opening a bank account, for which he is rewarded with a firearm of the client's choice. This shocking scene is quickly followed by one which shows an introduction to Moore's own life and his typically American history with firearms. The documentary then continues with a succession of surrealistic images concerning the US passion for guns: a dog dressed up as a hunter, posing for a picture, with a firearm on its back; Moore buying ammunition at the barber's while he gets a new haircut and so on. The scenes show the habitual inclusion of firearms and ammunition in the everyday life of Americans. Then, the film proceeds to cover the events of the Columbine shooting in 1997, which left an aftermath of terror. At that moment, Columbine was coined as a new vocabulary word (and taboo word) that upset Americans, if someone were to include it in a conversation. Moore also reveals how the American Government (and society) tried to blame the heavy metal music culture, the video games, the media and the violent films for the actions of the young white shooters. To dispel this myth he

interviews eccentric rock star Marilyn Manson, among those unfairly accused of inspiring the shooting though music clearly had nothing to do with the killers' stance.

Even though the whole documentary takes an anti-gun stance, Moore also wants to explain why Americans will never change their stance on supporting gun ownership. Gun culture is something that Americans will never give up and many citizens still feel it is their right to carry weapons. Despite the topic, there are no better words to describe this documentary than "funny, chilling and provocative" (Pierce, 2000). Pierce proceeds to state that "Moore's left-wing bias is obvious". Although he uses his habitual manipulative tactics, Michael Moore wants to show the brutal impact that guns have on all the American population and their lethal consequences.

David Ansen's review "Son of a Gun" describes the documentary as a film that leaves nobody indifferent: one either detests it or enjoys it for "It is both powerful and infuriating, brilliant and facile, hilarious and horrific, witty and demagogic" (Ansen, 2003). However, as Ansen observes, there are some moments when Moore makes himself look good at the expense of the persons appearing in his documentary. For instance, when Moore randomly asks a Los Angeles cop why it is impossible to see the Hollywood sign through the smog, knowing he will not offer a smart-sounding answer. Even worse is his visit to Charlton Heston's home, which leaves the ageing actor and then president of the National Rifle Association baffled and embarrassed. Still, although one may not like Moore's storytelling technique, he manages to cause an impact on the viewer (Ansen, 2003). The reviewer concludes by warning "Do not swallow *Bowling for Columbine* whole. Fight it. Question it. Enjoy it. However, by all means, do not miss it". *Bowling for Columbine* turns one question (why did he shooting happen?) into many topics that must certainly be debated, argued, considered.

What is remarkable about the documentary film is that "Moore does look like a lone figure in the American media mainstream, challenging gun culture" (Bradshaw, 2002). Moore is a unique figure in American society because he is both typically American and yet a constant challenger of main American tenets. He manages to show his vision in *Bowling for Columbine* of the United States of America as a nation that is both easy to understand and elusive. Perhaps this is because Moore presents in his documentary not just the factual truth but a personal representation of the United States of America, that feels like a personal essay.

In short, in *Bowling for Columbine*, Michael Moore manages to connect American gun culture and in general American Society to the events that occurred before, during, and after the Columbine School shooting. Moore's thesis is thoroughly reflected in the documentary: America leaves in fear, and fear leads to violence, much more so when access to guns is so easy. At the same time, as he stated in an interview shown in the film, "I think there is something in the American psyche. It is almost this kind of right or privilege, this sense of entitlement, to resolve our conflicts with violence". America is the way it is because of how people have been raised and the community has been articulated, but, Moore hints, everything could change for the best if only gun culture was abandoned.

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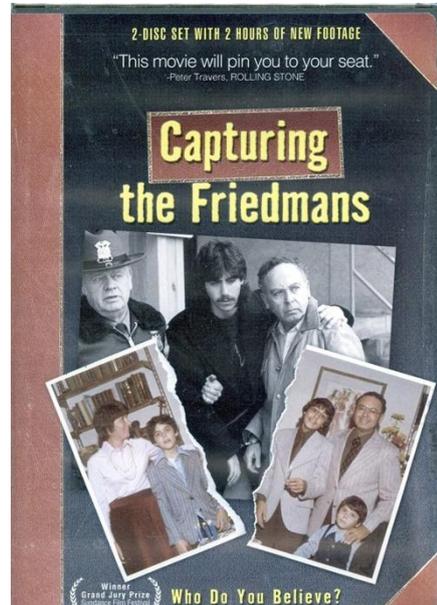
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Francesc Aranda Sierra

## **Capturing the Friedmans (2003): An Ambiguous Truth**

### **CREDITS**

**Directed by** Andrew Jarecki  
**Produced by** Andrew Jarecki, Marc Smerling, Peter Brove, Richard Hankin, Jaye Nydick, Jeniffer Rogen  
**Music by** Bill Harrington, Andrea Morricone  
**Cinematography by** Adolfo Doring  
**Film editing by** Richard Hankin  
**Production companies** HBO Documentary  
**Distributors** Magnolia Pictures  
**Runtime** 1h 47'



### **MAIN AWARDS**

**Academy Awards (Oscars) (2004):** Best Documentary Feature (nominee)  
**Chlotrudis Awards (2004):** Best Documentary (winner)  
**News & Documentary Emmy Awards (2005):** Emmy Outstanding Individual Achievement in a Craft: Editing (winner)  
**Sundance Film Festival (2003):** Grand Jury Prize: Documentary (winner), Grand Jury Prize: Documentary Direction (winner)

### **OTHER NOTABLE DOCUMENTARY FILMS BY THE DIRECTOR**

*The Jinx; The Life and Death of Robert Durst* (2015, documentary series)

### **REASONS TO SEE *Capturing the Friedmans***

- The director, Andrew Jarecki, plays with the ambiguity of the situation and makes us question who is really telling the truth. He does this by showing the different perspectives of the Friedmans' case while trying to remain neutral.
- The role of the media in creating a general negative opinion about the Friedmans and their harassment of the family during the case in a sort of parallel trial.
- Jarecki's film shows the disintegration of a "normal" middle-class American family. The child abuse case created an atmosphere full of tension which led to the creation of two sides: that of the mother and that of the father with their children.

## CONNECTED WITH...

- *Leaving Neverland* (2019), directed by Dan Reed. This documentary focuses on two men, Wade Robson and James Safechuck, that claim to have been abused when they were children by Michael Jackson; the abuse allegedly happened while they were Jackson's guests at his Neverland home with their families' happy consent. Throughout the interviews, the film digs into the darker side of the King of Pop and, at the same time, exposes the consequences of sexual abuse on Robson and Safechuck's life.
- *Just, Melvin: Just Evil* (2000), directed by James Ronald Whitney. In the film, the director investigates his maternal step-grandfather, Melvin Just, who apparently abused at least ten members of his own family from two different marriages. Whitney not only exposes the terrible truth about his relatives, both the perpetrator and his victims, but also questions why Just still denies having committed any crimes despite his prison sentences.
- *An Open Secret* (2015) directed by Amy J. Berg. This documentary deals with the sexual abuse of child actors in the movie industry by a variety of Hollywood-related men. In the film, five former child actors are interviewed who claim that they were abused when they were underage. Amy J. Berg also mention different names such as Marc Collins-Rector and Bryan Singer as possible sex-offenders.

## RE/PRESENTING AMERICA IN *Capturing the Friedmans*

*Capturing the Friedmans* began as a documentary film about the best clowns and children's party entertainers in New York. However, when the director, Andrew Jarecki met Davis Friedman, the well-known clown Billy Silly, the topic of the documentary changed. After many hours of interviews with Davis Friedman, Andrew came across a dark story of serial child abuse full of vague facts and in which the truth appeared to be very blurred. During these interviews, Davis also gave to the director a series of tapes that he made during the trial of his father and of Jesse, his brother, as well as a video-diary of himself during those times. In this film, Andrew Jarecki wants to show how difficult it is to judge somebody giving the fact that there is not only one truth.

The Friedmans were a typical American middle-class family that lived in Great Neck, Long Island. They led an ordinary life until one day the Police found child pornography in the family's mail. This led to an investigation during which the Police discovered various pornographic magazines with images of children, which belonged to Arnold Friedman, the father of the family. Also, throughout the investigation, the Police learned that Arnold taught piano and computer classes at home. After interrogating various children, some of his students accused Arnold and Jesse, the youngest son of the family, of having sexually abused them. The two were tried for crimes of child abuse, including sodomization.

Arnold Friedman pleaded guilty and was sentenced from ten to thirty years in prison. Although Jesse initially claimed he was innocent, he ended up pleading guilty and explaining that he had also been abused by his father during his childhood

(something he later denied). Jesse was sentenced from six to eighteen years in prison and was released in 2001, while Arnold committed suicide in 1995 (leaving a life insurance of \$250,000 to Jesse). The case not only affected Arnold and Jesse, but also the whole family as they were constantly harassed by the press. Throughout the trials the family were divided into two sides: that of the mother and that of the father with their children. Mrs. Friedman was reluctant to believe 100% in her husband Arnold, whereas the children did not doubt their father and their brother's innocence. This uncertainty about whether father and son are actually guilty or not, is shown through the tapes recorded by family members, and especially, through the different testimonies of the Police, lawyers, family members, and the students who accused Arnold and Jesse.

In the documentary, Andrew Jarecki tries to maintain a neutral position, based on listening to the Friedmans and most of the people involved in the case. Jarecki manages in this way to show the failures and the incongruity of some parts of the investigation and the many contradictions in the children's statements. He raises the possibility that their accusations are not true since methods not usually recommended (such as hypnosis) were used during interrogation. This technique was criticized as it could insert false memories into patients' minds, and therefore, the student's statements were deemed unreliable. Jarecki as Peter Travers writes in his review "is unflinching as he digs into a disturbed family psyche where the only thing out of reach is the truth" (2003). For this reason, he does not deny that Arnold is innocent since it is a fact that magazines with child pornography belonged to him. Arnold also admitted having abused the son of one of his friends, his brother Howard Friedman (which Howard does not remember), and Jesse. The film shows that Arnold had pedophile tendencies and that at one time in his life he went to therapy for this. However, Arnold denies that he abused his students, and this makes us wonder about who is really telling the truth.

Peter Bradshaw observes, likewise, in his review that "*Capturing the Friedmans* does not take sides; it does not present itself as a case for the defense. (...) It's just that within families, witnesses to the truth are so compromised, and have such a vested interest in looking the other way, that the truth is all but impossible to get at" (2004). This is an interesting statement because throughout the documentary we see how the two sides present a very ambiguous truth. In the 1980s there was an increase in cases of sexual abuse which created a feeling of chaos and hysteria in the population of the United States. For this reason, the press and the citizens were really interested in this case and quickly accused Arnold and Jesse of being pedophiles. However, the families of the victims were involved in such extreme ways (to the point they even discussed whether their sons had been sodomized more times than others) that Jarecki's position seems by comparison perfectly rational. Arnold and Jesse continued to maintain their innocence but at the same time they also claimed to have lied on some occasions to diminish their sentence and jail time. All this manipulation of the truth by both sides makes us question to what extent these abuses actually occurred.

Will Self also points out that "unlike other families falsely accused in this type of cases, the Friedmans didn't unite to face the threat: they fragmented" (2003). This is partly true since in the documentary we see how the family was always arguing as, for instance, when they discuss whether Arnold and Jesse should plead guilty or not. The children recriminated to their mother that she did not believe in Arnold's innocence

(she ended up divorcing Arnold). The Friedmans were, in fact already a broken family. On the one hand, the marriage had problems. Elaine did not get along with her husband and they hardly ever had sex, which caused them to distance themselves many years before the case happened. The children were aware of his problem to the point of describing their mother as “sexually ignorant”. At the same time, we see how the children were really close with their father and had even formed their own gang. Elaine, due to her lack of sense of humor and her refusal to participate in their games, never belonged to this gang and was the most isolated member of the family. All this combined to gradually destroy the family; the case only made this happen faster.

The Friedmans’ case shows the hysteria that was experienced in America in the 1980s and how all this affected everyone involved. At the same time, it shows how the truth is not always so clear. In the same way, it makes us realize the difficulty of discovering how guilty Arnold and Jesse actually were. Likewise, it is also a criticism of the legal system and of the American society which judges the accused beforehand, depriving them of their right to maintaining a presumption of innocence.

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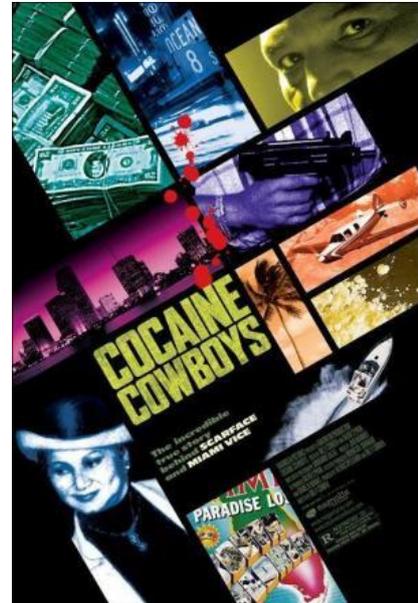
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Kerly Argos

## Cocaine Cowboys (2006): The 1980s Miami Drug Wars

### CREDITS

**Directed by** Billy Corben  
**Produced by** Billy Corben, Daniela Manas, Alfred Spellman, Davod Cypkin, Bruno del Granado, David Ross, Mara Beth Sommers  
**Music by** Jan Hammer  
**Cinematography by** Armando Salas  
**Film editing by** Billy Corben, David Cypkin  
**Production companies** Rakontur  
**Distributors** Magnolia Pictures USA (all media)  
**Runtime** 1h 56'



### MAIN AWARDS

This film has not won any major awards.

### OTHER NOTABLE DOCUMENTARY FILMS BY THE DIRECTOR

*Raw Deal: A Question of Consent* (2001), *Square Grouper: The Godfather of Ganja* (2002), *Limelight* (2011), *Broke* (2012), *Dawg Fight* (2015), *Screwball* (2018), *Magic City Hustle* (2019)

### REASONS TO SEE *Cocaine Cowboys*

- Regardless of the lack of awards, the documentary is certainly worth watching. It is both informative and entertaining.
- It is quite shocking to witness how Miami, a residential city, is transformed into the drug capital of the USA in no time from 1970s onward.
- The interviews of John Roberts and Mickey Munday, real participants in the drug business, surprise the spectator with their testimonies about how they managed to avoid being caught by the Miami Police, and how and where they hid the drug and the money.

### CONNECTED WITH...

- *Cocaine Cowboys 2* (2008) and *Cocaine Cowboys: Reloaded* (2014), both directed by Billy Corben. The former is a sequel to *Cocaine Cowboys* but this time set in

Oakland, California and paying special attention to Charles Cosby and his relationship with Griselda Blanco A.K.A 'The Godmother', who features extensively in the first film. The latter is a revisit of the original *Cocaine Cowboys* with never-before-seen footage.

- *Square Grouper* (2011), also directed by Billy Corben, is a film that serves as some sort of prequel to *Cocaine Cowboys*. Also set in Miami, the film narrates the smuggling of marijuana by American dealers back in the 1970s before Colombian-imported cocaine made its first appearance.
- *Miami Vice* (1984-1989). A popular fictional television series created by Anthony Yerkovich and inspired by the criminal events that took place in Miami. With corrupted Police officers, plenty of violence and drugs, the series resembles very much what Mickey Munday and John Roberts described in *Cocaine Cowboys*, though they claim that the real-life situation was even much worse. There was a far less successful re-boot in 2006.

### **RE/PRESENTING AMERICA IN *Cocaine Cowboys***

*Cocaine Cowboys* is a documentary film about the drastic change that Miami, Florida's capital, experimented during the period between the 1970s and 1980s due to the growth of cocaine smuggling. Before cocaine made it to Miami the business of drug dealing was already present in the city but instead of cocaine the preferred drug was the much milder marijuana. Marijuana trafficking was also much more relaxed and violence among dealers practically inexistent. The drug consumption rate augmented drastically with the introduction of cocaine and the city started to benefit from the illegal money that coke and political corruption brought in. However, the fragile boom collapsed the moment the mafias started fighting for the total control of the cocaine business and murders become a routine matter, particularly those ordered by Colombian 'Godmother' Griselda Blanco.

In terms of structure, the documentary can be divided into two parts. In the first part, we are introduced by means of interviews to John Roberts and Mickey Munday. Roberts had worked in night clubs for the Italian mafia in New York but after the murder of a close colleague he got too scared and moved to Miami. Afterwards he started in the cocaine business with the help of the Cubans migrants (mainly the Marielitos expelled by Fidel Castro to the USA in 1980). Pilot Mickey Munday started as a marijuana smuggler until the marijuana business collapsed. However, that did not prevent him from continuing in the drug business. Instead, he joined the Medellín cartel and helped them to transport the cocaine from Colombia to the United States. When cocaine demands topped the amount of cocaine that the Cubans could provide him with he was introduced to Mickey Munday and they began to work side by side.

In the interviews, made after both had served their prison sentences, the two men explain in detail what they did to hide and move the coke and the millions of dollars they were earning. Miami started experiencing an enormous growth due to cocaine smuggling, especially in the real-estate business. Smuggling was being carried out with the help of corrupt Policemen that preferred money over their duty. This situation lasted for long because trafficking was not particularly violent. However,

there is a turning point in this story. The Colombians were running the biggest part of the business and the Cubans also wanted their share of the cake but the Colombians demanded full control of it. It is at this moment, in the early 1980s, when a war for the full control of the cocaine business starts in Miami resulting in hundreds of murders. The second part of the documentary film focuses on Jorge Ayala, a.k.a. Rivi, a cartel 'enforcer', and more importantly, on Griselda Blanco, the vicious 'Godmother' who was, ultimately, responsible for the vast majority of the murders in Miami (including those committed by Rivi).

This documentary film has been made from the point of view of those who are clearly against drug dealing, drug consumption and more importantly, against violence. There is no possible way in which an individual could interpret it otherwise. What is more, not only does Corben aim at showing how the drug business worked but also by filming this documentary he denounces how the city benefitted from it. The cost of Miami's renaissance, that is, the hundreds of deaths that the drug business claimed, is thus exposed. As Maitland McDonagh notes, "Cocaine cash financed Miami's renaissance, but the film never downplays the human cost at which that urban renewal was purchased" (2006).

K.J. Doughton writes that "*Cocaine Cowboys* is also a fascinating study of antisocial personality disorder. Few of Corben's subjects, some recently released from prison or still incarcerated, seem remorseful for the key parts they played in this violence-splattered web of death and addiction. In an uncharacteristic moment, Roberts says, 'I've only got myself to blame'. But that is the only shred of regret or shame from the *Cocaine Cowboys* gang. Mostly, they tell their tales with bravado-powered gusto" (2006). This remorselessness is what I dislike most about this documentary film. When you watch John Roberts and Mickey Munday's interviews you get the feeling that they do not regret anything at all and that, on the contrary, they are proud of what they achieved during that period, even knowing that what they did was far from being right. Their testimonies provoke a sense of astonishment in the viewer that perhaps should have been avoided. Nonetheless, their presence in the documentary is more than justified because Corben was not trying to praise the world of drug dealing or consumption and does not glamorize them.

Kenneth Turan states that "In a sense it's a shame that *Cocaine Cowboys* is so obsessed by violence, because the film has interesting points to make" (2006). I could not disagree more on this view. In my opinion violence, if not the most important, is one of the most relevant themes in this documentary. The sharp increase of violence became a turning point in the whole business of drug dealing in Miami. Obviously, I am not saying that violence was necessary, because violence should always be avoided, but had it not been for the unprecedented violence that was taking place in Miami, drug dealing and consumption would have continued to grow unchecked. Last but not least, a story cannot be fully understood if part of it is omitted.

*Cocaine Cowboys* describes the starting point of the cocaine business in Miami in the 1980s, as noted, and might seem a story about a specific city in a particular period of time. Unfortunately, it can be easily extrapolated to other cities and times. As a matter of fact, the documentary is relevant today as the same pattern continues to unfold. What has changed is where the drugs come from: now they come from Mexico rather than Colombia. A complex issue is that Central and South American migrants play an important role in this story. Both Cuban and Colombian migrants are

presented as members of criminal gangs, which does not help at all to improve the image that conservative white Americans have of migrants. There is a moment in the documentary in which Edna Buchanan, a white journalist who covered the news at that time, says that due to the violence caused by the drug wars waged in Miami, ordinary citizens felt extremely unsafe. For this reason, many of them, including her, started carrying guns. Even though this is not the main point of the documentary, this widespread reaction gives an important hint about how Americans think: if violence erupts, do not look into the causes, just carry guns. It is to be wondered how many of the concerned Miami citizens were also cocaine users fueling their city's violence.

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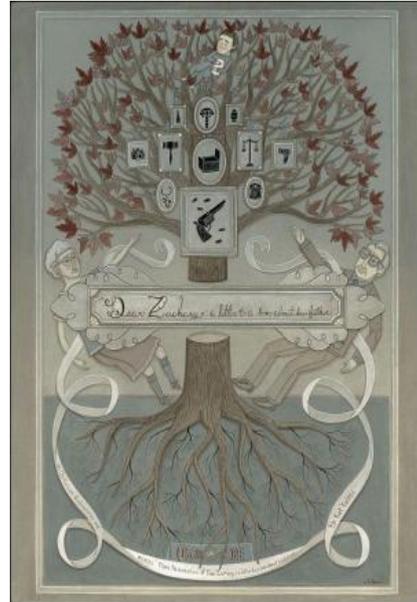
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Jordi Camí González

## **Dear Zachary: A Letter to a Son about his Father (2008): Finding Courage through Loss and Injustice**

### **CREDITS**

**Directed by** Kurt Kuenne  
**Written by** Kurt Kuenne  
**Produced by** Kurt Kuenne  
**Music by** Kurt Kuenne  
**Cinematography by** Kurt Kuenne  
**Film editing by** Kurt Kuenne  
**Production companies** MSNBC Films  
**Distributors** Oscilloscope Laboratories (theatrical)  
**Runtime** 1h 33'



### **MAIN AWARDS**

**Chicago Film Critics Association Awards (2008):** Best Documentary (nominee)  
**Dallas-Fort Worth Film Critics Association Awards (2008):** Best documentary (nominee)  
**Docville (2009):** Best International Documentary – Jury Award (winner)  
**National Board of Review, USA (2008):** Top Five Documentaries (winner)

### **OTHER NOTABLE DOCUMENTARY FILMS BY THE DIRECTOR**

*Rent-a-person* (2004, short film), *Validation* (2007, short film), *The Legacy of Dear Zachary: A Journey to Change the Law* (2013, short film)

### **REASONS TO SEE *Dear Zachary: A Letter to a Son about his Father***

- The presentation of the moral and ethical problems attached to murder, combined with its true crime account.
- The loving portrait of the victim, the all-American Dr. Andrew Bagby.
- Its indictment of the law and justice system of Canada, shown to be capable of catastrophic errors.

## CONNECTED WITH...

- *The Legacy of Dear Zachary: A Journey to Change the Law* (2013), directed by Kurt Kuenne. This short documentary (which can be considered a follow-up) describes how the completion of *Dear Zachary: A Letter to a Son about his Father* (2008) was managed, and the ensuing efforts to correct the Canadian criminal code. It is intended to show appreciation and gratitude to those people who supported and contributed to the Canadian law allowing convicted murderers to retain child custody being finally changed.
- *Abducted in Plain Sight* (2017), directed by Skye Borgman. This documentary narrates the terrible events that a family experienced as victims of its sociopath and pedophile neighbor Robert Berchtol during the 1970s. He was able to deceive the family and manipulate their minds to subsequently kidnap (not only once but twice) young Jan, one of the Brobergs' daughters. It exemplifies the loss of innocence suffered by Americans in the face of an unstoppable wave of personal crimes, which suddenly seemed to be happening everywhere.
- *Casting JonBenet* (2017), directed by Kitty Green. This documentary brings together several theories and speculations by the neighbors that lived alongside the Ramseys about the unsolved crime of their daughter, child beauty queen JonBenet, who was murdered in 1996, aged six. As she explores the case, Green examines the American beauty queen pageant sub-culture to question the exploitation of little girls like JonBenet.

## RE/PRESENTING AMERICA IN *Dear Zachary: A Letter to a Son about his Father*

*Dear Zachary: A Letter to a Son about his Father* is a tribute to Andrew Bagby, a 28-year-old American graduate medicine student who in 2001 was shoot dead by his 40-year-old Canadian ex-girlfriend Shirley Turner, also a graduate medicine student. Kurt Kuenne, Bagby's friend since childhood, attempts to collect in his devastating film as much information as possible about the murder of his dear friend to pass it to the son of the deceased, baby Zachary. The combination of old footage along with extensive interviews with Bagby's parents (David and Kathleen) and a large number of his close friends results in an emotional rollercoaster intended to expose the senselessness of some judicial decisions.

Andrew Bagby is described as everybody's best friend. Throughout the whole documentary, we see multiple scenes in which an easy-going, smiling Andrew appears, confirming this view. After having broken up with his former fiancé, Andrew met Shirley Turner, another student at the same medicine school he attended in Canada. Even though nobody in Bagby's circle liked insecure, domineering Turner, both decided to continue with the relationship. Andrew eventually realized that he was no longer happy with Shirley and decided to break up with her. Unable to accept his decision and motivated by a huge sense of hatred, Turner shot Andrew dead. However, by the time local American Police determined that Turner was the murderer, she was already flying to her hometown, located in Canada.

From then on, the private hell of David and Kathleen, Andrew's parents, began. They started a very long fight against the Canadian Justice system to have Turner extradited so that she could be charged in America for Andrew's murder. Turner, however, announced that she was pregnant with Bagby's baby while the extradition procedure was delayed over and over again. Due to her wit and cunning, alongside with the Canadian judges' leniency, Turner gave birth to little Zach and got full custody. Months passed by and the extradition still seemed something impossible for David and Kathleen, who only wanted justice for their son. Andrew's parents, by then established in Canada, managed to get shared custody of Zachary, as they claimed that Turner was hardly capable of taking care of her own son after having killed Zach's dad. Turner soon started to conspire against David and Kathleen, alleging their intention of getting rid of her to get full custody of Zach. In the middle of Kuenne's shooting of his film, her jealousy and foolishness lead her to kill Zachary and subsequently commit suicide, confirming David and Kathleen's worst premonitions.

Kuenne's point of view is necessarily biased against Turner since, as noted, Andrew and Kurt had been friends since childhood, sharing much affection for each other. Notwithstanding, the documentary not only portrays Kuenne's perspective of Bagby but also the numerous experiences shared by people who were emotionally involved with him as well. Reviewer Nostra writes that "the main reason for the impact this movie has on your emotions is that the editing really is top-notch. The story slowly takes hold of your emotions and won't let go, even after the movie itself finishes" (2011), which is certainly true. Kuenne's remarkable editing skills allow the audience to feel more vividly all the plot twists that the documentary offers. The fast pace that the director keeps throughout the film is intended to overwhelm the spectator, though not in the easy way of tear-jerkers. The main purpose of this editing is capturing tragedy in an unexpected way that instantly astonishes us.

Brian Orndorf states in his review that "what ultimately drove Turner in *Dear Zachary* doesn't have many answers, nor does [Kuenne] seem to care much about the woman's motives and eventual domestic fallout, putting up a few hints here and there to help paint Andrew's murder clearly, but nothing beyond that" (2008). Shirley Turner's previous life is alluded to only in brief glimpses, with hints of similar stories of uncontrollable possessiveness in her past. However, all viewers need to know is that she is a psychopath that stole Andrew's and little Zach's life for no reason at all. Viewers totally empathize with David and Kathleen and may even feel part of Bagby's closest circle of friends. This is manipulative, but this is how Kuenne wanted his film to be: not a character study of the killer, but of her victims.

Nonetheless, Bill Thompson worries that "the choice to put talking lips over still shots of the figures in the Canadian Justice System is a manipulative element (...) and turns [the film] into angry slapstick, kind of like an episode of *Family Guy*" (2014). I certainly second this complaint, as this specific scene is closer to wry humor than to serious outrage. The superficial discussion of Canadian justice's actions surely calls into question whether Kuenne is right to display his emotional involvement in the story. The whole film is made of anecdotes, feelings, thoughts and kind words for a man who was unfairly killed, allowing the spectator to feel the pain and sorrow of all those people who had the chance to meet Andrew Bagby. Yet, the larger underlying judicial and legal issues are not addressed. The shots in which the Canadian judicial system is

mocked are only a reflection of a hopeless, anguished mourning and a last tribute to a good friend but hardly an articulate call for justice.

The extremely questionable role that the Canadian Justice system plays in Andrew Bagby's crime and the apparent full impunity of Shirley Turner makes America appear to be both as victim and hero. In *Dear Zachary* the US Justice system can do little or nothing but it is somehow subtly hinted that Turner would have been deprived of Zach's custody and he saved if the tragedy had unfolded on American soil. Implicitly compared with soft, irrational Canada, rightful America emerges victorious embodied by Andrew's loving parents. America is seen, somehow, as the savior country, emphasizing Canada's multiple failures not only to impart justice for Andrew, but most importantly to protect little Zach from his Canadian mother, a woman undoubtedly incapable of loving.

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Beatriz Ariza Castrillo

## **West of Memphis (2012): Six Ruined Lives**

### **CREDITS**

**Directed by** Amy Berg  
**Written by** Amy Berg, Billy McMillin  
**Produced by** Damien Echols, Lorri Davis, Amy Berg, Peter Jackson, Fran Walsh  
**Music by** Nick Cave, Warren Ellis  
**Cinematography by** Maryse Alberti and Ronan Killeen  
**Film editing by** Billy McMillin  
**Production companies** Wingut Films, Disarming Films  
**Distributors** Sony Picture Classics (theatrical)  
**Runtime** 1h 27'



### **MAIN AWARDS**

**BAFTA Awards (2012):** Best documentary (nominee)  
**Chicago Critics Association (2012):** Best documentary (nominee)  
**Satellite Awards (2012):** Best documentary (nominee)  
**The WIFTS Foundation International Visionary Awards (2012)** (winner)

### **OTHER NOTABLE DOCUMENTARY FILMS BY THE DIRECTOR**

*Deliver Us from Evil* (2006, Oscar Award nominee), *An Open Secret* (2014 with Evan Henzi and Michael Egan III), *Janis: Little Girl Blue* (2015), *Prophet's Prey* (2015), *This Is Personal* (2019)

### **REASONS TO SEE *West of Memphis***

- Dealing with a shocking and even grotesque crime, Berg's documentary unveils how corrupt the judicial system is in the United States of America.
- It highlights the fact that persons guilty of terrible crimes are still on the streets, while innocent people are sentenced to a life behind bars.
- It provides the audience with an insight into how broken homes can lead to massive tragedy, in which children are victims.

## CONNECTED WITH...

- *Paradise Lost: The Child Murders at Robin Hood Hills* (1997), directed by Joel Berlinger and Bruce Sinofsky. This documentary focuses on the aftermath of the arrests of the three teenagers accused of the horrific murders of three eight-year-old friends from Robin Hood Hills, Arkansas. Apart from real footage of the trials, interviews with the relatives of both the victims and the defendants, Police officers and lawyers involved in the case are displayed in this film. The Police and the victims' relatives find the three of Memphis guilty. However, the families of the accused teenagers allege their innocence.
- *Paradise Lost: Revelations* (2000), directed by Joel Berlinger and Bruce Sinofsky. Berlinger and Sinofsky offer an insight into the appeal made by Damien Echols against the sentence that had sent him to prison for the murders of Robin Hood Hills. The malpractice and negligence of the trials and all the judicial process are exposed. The filmmakers also interview a support group who contacted them on the Internet after the release of the first documentary. In addition, John Mark Byers, father of one of the victims, becomes a possible suspect for the case and his interview is also present in this documentary. The defense attorney, Dan Stidham, hires an expert to help him with the appeal using a bite mark to prove the innocence of the three sentenced teenagers.
- *Paradise Lost: Purgatory* (2011), directed by Joel Berlinger and Bruce Sinofsky. This documentary functions as a recap of the two previous ones. It also shows the repercussion and success the two previous documentaries had. This time, the filmmakers focus on the new evidence and the efforts of the defendants to continue investigating the case. This documentary is a turning point in this story; even John Mark Bayers, father of one of the murdered children, is convinced that Echols, Baldwin and Misskelley are innocent. It is in this episode when a new suspect is discovered: Terry Hobbs, the stepfather of one of the murdered children.

## RE/PRESENTING AMERICA IN *West of Memphis*

*West of Memphis* by Amy Berg adds a final episode to the three previously released documentaries directed by Joe Berlinger and Bruce Sinofsky, the *Paradise Lost* trilogy. Berg's documentary could be called 'the truth about the lie'. It unveils the facts of this horrific case which took away not only the lives of three eight-year-old children, but also the innocence and freedom of three teenagers, falsely accused of killing them. Using original footage and extremely graphic photos Berg tells all the events of that tragedy; she also examines the ensuing faulty Police investigation and the irregular trials. Uncovering new evidence little by little, Berg shows that the three imprisoned young men were innocent, pointing her finger at the real culprit.

On May 5th, 1993, eight-year-old neighborhood friends Stevie Branch, Michael Moore and Christopher Byers were found brutally abused and murdered in Robin Hood Hills, Arkansas. The episode shook profoundly the residents of the city, and so did the arrest for the crime on that same day of teenagers Jessie Misskelley, Damien Echols and Jason Baldwin. Everyone assumed they were the actual murderers, but

sought no reliable proof that they were indeed guilty. *West of Memphis* narrates the three trials which Misskelley, Echols and Baldwin had to face due to the negligence of the State of Arkansas as well as to its corrupt judicial system. The faulty evidence of the forensic expert convinced the jury that, as the Prosecutor claimed, this was a sexual crime tied to a Satanic cult led by Echols. With Misskelley and Baldwin sentenced to prison for life, and Echols to the death penalty, the case seemed to be closed and peace given to the families, once the killers were behind bars. However, the truth was anything but what the jury had determined.

The main question everybody should ask themselves is, why were the three of Memphis a perfect match to be sentenced, not only by the state, but also by the community? As investigator Phil Brown mentions in the film they “were arrested primarily because they dressed in black and listened to strange music (and therefore must be part of a cult, right?)”. The authorities accused them from the beginning and so did the local residents. The community seemed to have judged them even before the trials, mainly on the basis of a dubious confession which Misskelley, portrayed as a “borderline mentally retarded” young man with an IQ around 70, was forced to sign. This followed a long interrogatory with the authorities in which he was asked detailed questions which elicited the answers used to write the manipulated confession. Echols was depicted as a Satanist who took the lives of the three boys as a part of a cult ritual, as witnesses claimed, and who could easily influence Misskelley and Baldwin to do anything he wanted.

However, under the pressure from many who doubted the trial had been fair, all these assumptions were revoked at a later trial which re-opened the case and made America wonder whether the imprisoned teenagers were actually guilty. Using real footage from the trials, Berg shows how the truth remained unexplored because of the judicial malpractice of the State of Arkansas. Under no circumstances, not even when the lack of evidence against the three boys was confirmed, would the judge or the other judicial authorities admit their mistakes. The footage provided in this documentary is as hair-raising as the fact that a man almost lost his life because of corruption and unfairness. A story full of lies and pain is narrated by the families of the children, and partly sweetened with an unusual but hopeful love story between Damien Echols and pen-pal/girlfriend Lorri Davis. All this ends up pointing out that Terry Hobbs, the stepfather of one of the victims and an abuser of his own family, is actually responsible for the crimes.

*West of Memphis* was produced, among others, by Damien Echols and Lorry Davis, so the point of view is biased to their side. Even so, it is narrated both by the families of the murdered children and by the relatives of the presumed killers. Davis is in charge of sugaring the dramatic story with her love story with Echols, and her efforts to overturn his wrongful conviction. Proof that the prosecution used false evidence, that the authorities manipulated Baldwin’s confession and that Misskelley had an alibi is given in this documentary. With the footage and explanations revoking the so-called sentence, this film has succeeded in raising awareness of one of the most painful wrongful convictions of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Roger Ebert states in his review that, including the *Paradise Lost* trilogy, “The documentary *West of Memphis* is the fourth film about one of the most heinous cases of wrongful conviction in American judicial history” (2003). I could not agree more: I strongly believe this case is a perfect depiction of how corrupted the American judicial

system is and how many innocents must be behind bars today due to the wrongful sentences of yesterday. In his review, Ebert also writes that Amy Berg's film "opens with a great deal of footage that is shockingly detailed and grisly, with gruesome descriptions. It's so graphic it's hard to watch". The footage provided in this documentary of the dead children's bodies is perhaps what can most disturb audiences, apart from the wrongful sentences. The pictures of the murdered children in the place where they were found and from the autopsies are horrifying. At the same time, its use is justified: there is nothing more atrocious than a human being feeling entitled to take someone else's life; the pictures raise awareness of how wicked and vicious these murders were and partly explain why the three teens elicited so much hatred.

Peter Bradshaw writes in *The Guardian* that "The movie shows the agonizingly slow progress made by the campaign, and the final agonizing choice faced by the West Memphis Three. A gripping documentary" (2012). After having spent many years in prison, the three of Memphis had to face the ultimate choice: plead guilty and be released (invoking the Alford plea), or plead innocent and stay behind bars for a lifetime. I could not agree more with the choice of adjective that Bradshaw uses in his review: "agonizing". How is somebody supposed to confess to a crime they did not commit to be released? What legal sense is there in this bargain? Obviously, the only explanation is that the State of Arkansas protected itself in this way from any future demands by its three victims. The bittersweet ending of this nightmare shows that no justice is done, either to the child victims or to the accused.

The death penalty and the judicial system itself have always been in the spotlight. The United States of America is notorious for being one of the countries in which the death penalty is still legal, the only one in the democratic West. This documentary is essential to make US citizens wonder whether the death penalty should be abolished to prevent innocent people from dying. With the unmasking of the truth, the system is portrayed as corrupt and wrong. Beyond the judicial errors, this documentary also stresses the American propensity to judge beforehand, in the sense that the community of Robin Hood Hills decided that the three boys accused were guilty with no solid proof (most likely because they were perceived as white trash). This is in the end also a story of how the prejudiced voice of the mob can take away the freedom and innocence of the falsely accused. However, it should also be mentioned that a bit of the American dream is present in the film: the unique love story of Davis and Echols proves that in America everything is possible.

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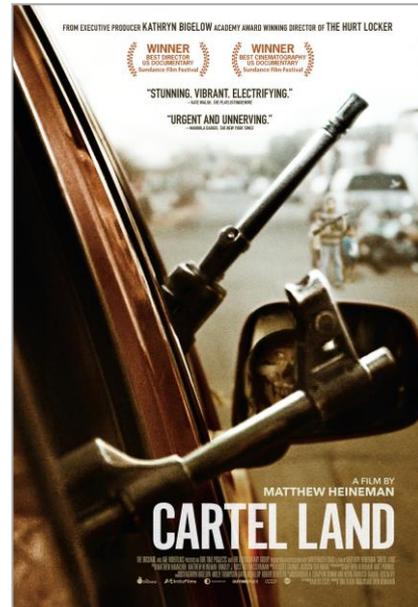
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Ada Montón Molina

## **Cartel Land (2015): On Both Sides of the Border**

### **CREDITS**

**Directed by** Matthew Heineman  
**Produced by** Heineman, Tom Yellin, Kathryn Bigelow, Molly Thompson  
**Music by** H. Scott Salinas & Jackson Greenberg  
**Cinematography by** Matthew Heineman, Matt Porwoll  
**Film editing by** Mathew Heineman, Matthew Hamachek, Bradley J. Ross, Pax Wassermann  
**Production companies** A&E IndieFilms, The Documentary Group and Our Time Projects  
**Distributors** The Orchard  
**Runtime** 1h 40'



### **MAIN AWARDS**

**Academy Awards (Oscars) (2015):** Best Documentary (nominee)  
**Cinema Eye Honors Awards, US (2016):** The Unforgettables (winner), Outstanding Achievement in Cinematography (co-winner), Outstanding Achievement in Nonfiction Feature Filmmaking (nominee), Outstanding Achievement in Direction (nominee), Outstanding Achievement in Production (nominee), Outstanding Achievement in Original Music Score (nominee)  
**Directors Guild of America, USA (2016):** Outstanding Directorial Achievement in Documentary (winner)  
**Sundance Film Festival (2015):** Best Documentary (nominee)

### **OTHER NOTABLE DOCUMENTARY FILMS BY THE DIRECTOR**

*Our Time* (2009, with Matt Wiggins), *Escape Fire: The Fight to Rescue American Health care* (2012), *City of Ghosts* (2017)

### **REASONS TO SEE *Cartel Land***

- It teaches a valuable lesson about the reality of the situation on the border between the United States and Mexico.
- It makes you feel concerned for those American and Mexican people who have been suffering because of cartel attacks.
- It makes you know about how the Mexican Government acted and reacted against this issue, often protecting the cartels.

## CONNECTED WITH...

- *Narco Cultura* (2012), directed by Shaul Schwarz. A film recorded during three years, it shows the reality of drug dealing along the US-Mexican border and how this has become a way of living, not always seen negatively, quite the opposite. 'Narcos' have become in many ways modern Robin Hoods and role models to follow, a sort of criminalized embodiment of the American Dream beyond the reach of American law or of any law.
- *Drug Lord: The Legend of Shorty* (2015) directed by Angus Macqueen and Guillermo Galdós. This film follows the story of Joaquín Guzmán 'El Chapo', one of the most important drug dealers ever, who even wielded power over the US and Mexican Governments. El Chapo caused countless 'narco' wars as the former leader of the powerful Sinaloa cartel before his capture and extradition to the USA.
- *Breaking Bad* (2008-2013, fiction series), created by Vince Gilligan. The series tells in 62 episodes the story of Walter White, a high-school teacher of chemistry diagnosed with terminal lung cancer, who becomes a drug dealer in New Mexico by producing methamphetamine. Although acting to guarantee his family an income after his death, White gradually becomes a major drug dealer in partnership with a former student, and seems to enjoy it.

## RE/PRESENTING AMERICA IN *Cartel Land*

Inspired by articles published in *Rolling Stone* and *Wall Street Journal*, *Cartel Land* shows the reality of the border between Mexico and the USA, where the drug cartels have the control of the place and are extremely dangerous both for the Mexican and for the American citizens. "Crisply edited, and marked by masterful hand-held camerawork, *Cartel Land* vividly presents", reviewer Christine Jun notes, "the gulf between fantasies of vigilante heroism, and how they often harrowingly—if not bitterly—play out in reality" (2020). In Michoacán, a group of concerned citizens calling themselves *autodefensas* (self-defense), led by Dr José Manuel Mireles, get hold of weapons to start fighting the local cartels after many years of suffering under their arbitrary rule, years when the cartels killed, kidnapped or tortured their relatives. Meanwhile, on the American border, a militia group led by Tim 'Nailer' Foley defend their land from the foreign organized criminals. Foley, accused of being an outlaw vigilante, denies that he is racist; he simply worries that Mexican cartels act with total impunity on American land. Heineman shows how violence calls for more violence and how when the Government and other rulers of the country do not help justice has to be controlled by individuals.

This might seem right, yet, nonetheless, reviewer Mark Kermode, from *The Guardian*, wonders if those new sheriffs (both the militia and the *autodefensas*) are more reliable than the cartels. As the end of the documentary shows, *autodefensa* members become the same or even worse than those they fight. It seems as if human nature makes men evil whenever they get power. Considering the director's emphasis on aspects beyond the specific crime, Kermode argues that Heineman seems more interested on the human tragedy caused by evil than on the political aspects of the

conflict: “Like *The Act of Killing*’s director Joshua Oppenheimer, Heineman has been accused of focusing too closely on the interpersonal at the expense of the geopolitical. Yet it is precisely this first-hand element that allows his depiction of a horrendous human tragedy to hit its targets on such a gut level” (2015). I think this is both positive (it makes us be more connected with people and how they suffer) and negative (it is important to know where the problem comes from and about the corrupt system). Viewers might not feel concerned about events on the other side of the border, or they might think that cartel-related violence is a Mexican internal affair. Heineman’s film does show that the cartels are also causing struggles in the USA and, even more importantly, he raises empathy for the Mexican people suffering in the front lines of the conflict.

Reviewer Manohla Dargis worries about the effects of the film’s fast pace. Heineman’s documentary “moves so quickly and fluidly and with such unnerving violence that it doesn’t give you much time or space to think through the serious, urgent issues it raises”. In view of some appalling scenes “it can be difficult to get past the shock and horror. The dead become the only argument” (2015). I do not agree with this opinion: actually, I think there is plenty of time in the documentary to see people suffering and to understand the implications of the violence that is occurring. Perhaps, Dargis refers to the political situation in Mexico, where, according to the film, the Government is protecting the cartels instead of the citizens. In that case, a much longer documentary, or even another one, would be necessary to explain the complex politics of Mexican crime. However, Heineman offers a clear enough view of the problem and if that interests spectators, it is up to them to search for more information.

Dargis also comments on how the leader of the *autodefensas*, Dr Mireles, and militiaman Mr. Foley are connected through the editing, which indirectly compares both men by switching from one to the other. They are “very different men” that share “a proficiency with guns, a certain swagger and a similar justification for their groups”. The editing, however, has them form a “united front” though they never meet with the film becoming “a platform for their beliefs”. This is, in fact, a great achievement, since these two men from different cultures, who understand life in diverse ways, are united by the same cause. It is true that they are united for tragic reasons, but this may make us think about the possibility of different countries (such as the USA and Mexico) working together in hard situations, instead of fighting each other. Having said that, perhaps the most salient message of the film comes from the mouth of a Mexican ‘narco’ who simply points out that if American consumers did not demand drugs there would be no cartel wars on either side of the border.

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Kiko Bermúdez Pérez

# Tower (2016): The Story of the Survivors

## CREDITS

**Directed by** Keith Maitland

**Written by** Keith Maitland (based on Pamela Colloff's article "96 Minutes")

**Produced by** Megan Gilbride, Keith Maitland, Minnow Mountain

**Music by** Osei Essed

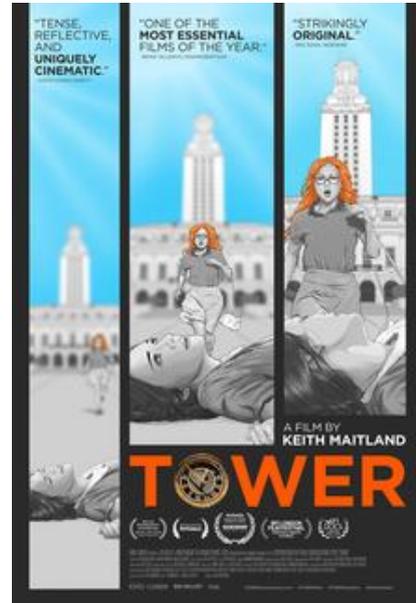
**Cinematography by** Keith Maitland, Sarah Wilson

**Film editing by** Austin Reedy

**Production companies** Go-Valley, Texas Archive of the Moving Image, Killer Impact, Meredith Vieira Productions

**Distributors** Kino Lorber (theatrical, streaming)

**Runtime** 1h 22'



## MAIN AWARDS

**Austin Film Critics Association (2016):** Best Documentary (winner), Austin Film Award (winner), Breakthrough Artist Award (winner), Special Honorary Award (winner), Best Animated Film (nominee)

**Critics' Choice Documentary Awards (2016):** Most Innovative Documentary (winner), Best Director (theatrical feature) (nominee), Best Documentary Feature (nominee)

**News & Documentary Emmy Awards (2018):** Outstanding Historical Documentary (winner), Outstanding Music and Sound (nominee)

**Sebastopol Documentary Film Festival (2017):** Feature Documentary (winner)

## OTHER NOTABLE DOCUMENTARY FILMS BY THE DIRECTOR

*The Eyes of Me* (2009), *A Song For You: The Austin City Limits Story* (2016)

## REASONS TO SEE *Tower*

- The documentary shares the story of some of the survivors of the first school shooting massacre in the United States of America, at the University of Texas
- It focuses on the emotions and struggles of the survivors, rather than on the perpetrator.
- It transmits a message of humanity and hope in the face of irrational evil.

## CONNECTED WITH...

- *The Deadly Tower* (1975, fiction film), directed by Jerry Jameson. The film is based on the same incident as *Tower* (2016), however, instead of focusing on the survivors it is focused on the shooter, Charles Joseph Whitman. He was an engineering student and former Marine who murdered his own mother and his wife, and then went to the campus of University of Texas and proceeded to shoot at random people from the tower.
- *Massacre at Virginia Tech* (2008), directed by Jonathan Hacker. This documentary also offers the story and details of another similar incident that occurred at Virginia Tech University on April 16, 2007. It covers the backstory focusing on the shooter, a South Korean undergraduate student named Seung-Hui Cho. As a consequence of this tragic event, 32 people were killed and 17 were injured.
- *Waltz with Bashir* (2008), directed by Ari Folman. This is also an animated documentary film, in which the infantry soldier Folman looks for his lost memories of the 1982 Lebanon War. Folman meets one of his childhood friends, soldiers and psychologists who will help him recall what he saw and did. It won an Oscar Award nomination as Best Foreign Language Film.

## RE/PRESENTING AMERICA IN *Tower*

*Tower* is a documentary directed by Keith Maitland. Released in 2016, the film narrates the story of the first mass school shooting in the United States of America, which happened at the University of Texas on 1st August 1966. The gunman Charles Whitman, a 25-year-old young man, rode the elevator of the tower and stationed himself on the 27<sup>th</sup> floor terrace; once there, he started shooting at random any passersby, terrorizing them for about 96 minutes. As a consequence of this tragedy, 16 people were killed, including an unborn child, and 98 injured, some badly. *Tower* gathers the different stories of a selected group of survivors. It combines in an original aesthetic style archival footage from the incident, animation using rotoscope to reproduce scenes, the testimonial of the victims, and new interviews with the survivors.

The documentary begins with Claire Wilson James, a pregnant teen student leaving the cafeteria with her partner Tom. A few seconds into the film, they both get shot and fall to the ground: Tom is dead and so is Claire's unborn baby. Unable to move, she stayed on the hot ground hoping someone would help her. However, Claire was right in the shooter's sightline, making it risky for anyone to approach her. The intimate and unique way in which the survivor narrates her feelings makes the audience feel overwhelmed. The sense of emotional and physical struggle can be perceived very vividly. It must be said that doubtlessly this tragedy caught the witnesses off guard. Hence, throughout the documentary we see the passersby puzzled and with a sense of disorientation about what might be happening. While some people were crawling hopelessly, some others stood up trying to figure out the situation and take action, leading to many accidental heroic acts.

On the Police officers' side, Houston McCoy and Ramiro Martinez narrate the incident from their point of view in a profoundly personal manner. The way confusion and the rush of the moment are presented makes the viewer understand the risks and anxiety the Police officers had to go through in the middle of the unprecedented chaos. The barely equipped Police officers tried to make their way to the top as the shooting continued. At this point, we see how many armed civilians got close to the tower and started to shoot back at the sniper by using rifles (after all, that was Texas). This sudden use of dangerous weapons by common citizens while Police officer Ramiro Martinez was carrying just a small handgun, makes us astounded about how American citizens can acquire weaponry effortlessly. This overall impression makes us wonder whether easy access to mortal weapons played a big role in what caused such an event to unfold in the first place.

Aleck Hernandez Jr., another survivor, was a young teenager working the newspaper round in the neighborhood with his little cousin when he suddenly got shot. Before the shots are heard the scenery is colorful and visually appealing. However, when the second victim falls down the colors start to fade away and the surroundings became monotonous. Allen Crum, a clerk in the university's book shop, was one of the people who tried to take action against the sniper. He saw many people gathering around Aleck and he soon realized something was off. Subsequently, he approached the tower and once inside he boldly (or recklessly) followed another Police officer to the top. At the same time, a local news reporter reached the dangerous location to broadcast from a portable radio how the events evolved; he was heard all over the country. The news delivered a significant shock to the American population as this was an unusual and despicable tragedy, which unfortunately became the first in a long list of many others down to our days.

After reading "96 Minutes" (2006), an article by Pamela Collof, director Keith Maitland proposed making a documentary film about the massacre to her. Collof eventually worked as one of the executive producers. They had to raise the money through crowdfunding platform Indiegogo, making this way about \$70,000; many students from the University of Texas worked as interns. Another issue that Maitland had to face is the fact that any re-enactment of the scenes would be impossible to film on University of Texas grounds. Consequently, they used animation as a solution to this problem, with actors playing the roles of the victims whose image was later matched using rotoscope techniques.

During an interview with *Variety*, director Keith Maitland claimed that he wanted to portrait the story from the point of view of the intimate memories of the survivors, making this way the terrible experience more vivid and close to the audience. Reviewer Rachel Wagner stresses that "This wasn't just a gimmick but a way to feel immersed in what was going on that could never be achieved through stale photos or live action reenactments" (2016). Certainly, the mix of the archival footage, rotoscoping animation, and interviews as well as the way they play with the colors and music brings the feelings of the confusing havoc and highlights the fear and suspense during the tragedy. Animation might seem an unlikely resource for this type of film but it works wonderfully.

Christopher Gray claims that "The film barely names the Austin shooter, and is careful not to get into subsequent debates about his mental and physical health, but the immediacy of Maitland's taut historical reconstruction is dampened by a lack of

argumentative thrust in the film's homestretch" (2016). It is true that the shooter is not explicitly mentioned in the documentary despite being the main reason of the unfortunate calamity. However, it is relevant to notice that the fundamental point of this (partly) animated documentary film is to transmit the personal feelings and the points of view of the survivors rather than focusing on the warped psychology of the shooter. The argument which Gray misses is that all of a society failed for allowing such an incident to happen in the first place. Instead of the shooter, the viewer gets to see the witnesses presented as heroes, risking their lives to carry the victims to safety. The fact that some of the remarkable scenes used are actual recordings of the tragedy makes the film even more overwhelming to the viewer.

Eric John states that "Though its final act lacks the sharp focus of the moments leading up to it, *Tower* is a fascinating blend of suspense and journalistic inquiry" (2016). The first part of the statement is not quite accurate, in fact, throughout the documentary the spectator can feel how the pace of the narrative ascends until it reaches the climax, which is the moment when the Police officers shoot the sniper at the top of the tower. The aftermath is an attempt to reach closure, in order to make the audience feel a sense of hope and have optimistic expectations that something will be done to prevent a similar incident.

All things considered, the diverse techniques used to transmit the message and the different points of view from the survivors of the massacre make this documentary film worth watching. Maitland's film makes implicitly a relevant contribution to the issue of whether the use of weapons should be restricted, although defenders of their unrestricted use can also claim that the sniper was ultimately defeated by the combined efforts of the Police and armed citizens. After the 1966 first shooting massacre little did Americans know that this was the beginning of a very dark chapter in America's history still very much present and with no end in sight.

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Yousra El Bair El Abbass

## ECONOMICS, CAPITALISM, AND THE 2008 CRISIS

Once the Cold War was over, in a process that started with the Fall of Berlin Wall in 1989, and the current wave of globalization set in it seemed as if capitalism had won a world-wide victory for good before its old foe, Communism. Even Communist nations, like China or Vietnam, embraced the enemy's system to the point that the USA's economic world leadership is now more questioned than ever. It seems safe to say that although the end of history announced by Francis Fukuyama has not arrived, China is now on the way to replacing the United States of America as the main economic engine of the planet, supposing that has not already happened (this is what *American Factory* (2019) suggests).

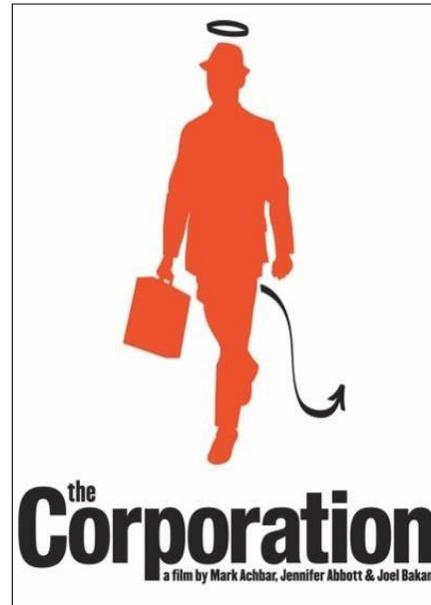
Capitalism, however, is a fickle system that passes through continuous crises and among them the 2008 financial crisis has been one of the major ones, perhaps *the* major one after the 1929 crash that led to the 1930s Depression. Watching *The Corporation* (2003) the impression that emerges is that the rise of this way of running businesses in the USA has had very negative consequences for the rest of the world, making not only economy but also our very lives dependent on faceless groups of investors with little human empathy. Michael Moore's *Capitalism: A Love Story* (2009) argues that same thesis, whereas *The Shock Doctrine* (2009), based on Naomi Klein's book, directly describes disaster capitalism as a sinister system that thrives on natural and man-made catastrophe to terrorize individuals in order to benefit corporations.

Among the many documentary films that have narrated the 2008 financial crisis, basically caused by the fraudulent sale as attractive products of mortgages that could never be repaid, two appear here. *Inside Job* (2010) explains how constant deregulation by US Republican Governments allowed bankers to act in the dangerous ways that led to the massive world-wide crisis. From a very different point of view, *Abacus: Small Enough to Jail* (2017) shows how while the bank owners too big to jail got away with their scams after being even bailed out by the Federal Reserve, racial prejudice resulted in a frontal attack against a small bank catering to the needs of the American Chinese community of New York City.

## **The Corporation (2003): Ruled by a Psychopath**

### **CREDITS**

**Directed by** Mark Achbar, Jennifer Abbott  
**Produced by** Mark Achbar, Bart Simpson  
**Written by** Mark Achbar, Bart Simpson (from Joel Bakan's book, *The Corporation: The Pathological Pursuit of Profit and Power*)  
**Music by** Leonard J. Paul  
**Cinematography by** Mark Achbar, Rolf Cutts, Jeffrey M. Hoffman, Kirk Tougas  
**Film editing by** Jennifer Abbott  
**Production company** Big Picture Media Corporation  
**Distributors** Zeitgeist Films  
**Runtime** 2h 25'



### **MAIN AWARDS**

**Amsterdam International Documentary Film Festival (2003):** Special Jury Award (winner)  
**Genie Awards (2005):** Best Documentary (winner)  
**Leo Awards (2004):** Best Direction in a Documentary Program or Series (winner), Best Documentary – History/Biography/Social/Political (winner)  
**Sundance Film Festival (2004):** World Cinema-Documentary (winner)

### **OTHER NOTABLE DOCUMENTARY FILMS BY THE DIRECTOR(S)**

**By Mark Achbar** *Manufacturing Consent: Noam Chomsky and the Media* (1992), *Two Brides and a Scalpel: Diary of a Lesbian Marriage* (2000)  
**By Jennifer Abbott** *A Cow at My Table* (1998), *The Film That Buys the Cinema* (2014)

### **REASONS TO SEE *The Corporation***

- Its main idea connects perfectly with other documentaries also analyzed in this e-book. For example, *Bowling for Columbine* (which delves into gun culture and violence in the US), *Tower* (in which this violence is exerted by a psychopath) and *Cocaine Cowboys* (which shows how violence is employed by organized crime to earn enormous amounts of money). Together with *The Corporation*, these documentaries could form a cycle that shows the connection between crucial elements of the American character.

- It raises fundamental questions of immense importance at present to understand the world beyond the United States but rooted in the economic practices of this nation.
- It is closely connected with various key social movements: environmental rights, animal rights, postcolonial issues and healthy food policies.

### CONNECTED WITH...

- *Manufacturing Consent: Noam Chomsky and the Media* (1992), directed by Mark Achbar and Peter Wintonick. The film is based on Noam Chomsky and Edward S. Herman's book. According to these authors, propaganda offers a one-sided perspective since it is used by mass media and the Government as a distorted device. In order to illustrate this in the film, the role of the USA in the Indonesian incursion into East Timor and American TV extensive airing of the cruelties in Khmer Rouge—a communist regime present in Cambodia during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century—are taken as examples.
- *The Big One* (1997), directed by Michael Moore. In this film, Moore records the promotion of his book *Downsize This!* (1996). During his itinerary, Moore explores the weaknesses of American economy and its relation to the un/employment rate. Interviews with working-class citizens intermingle with attempts to interview high-ranking members of corporations. These usually refuse, with one exception: Nike.
- *The World According to Monsanto* (2008), directed by Marie-Monique Robin. This French-German-Canadian documentary film focuses on one specific powerful American corporation, Monsanto. It warns that Monsanto's use of genetic modification and hormones results in detrimental effects on human physical and psychological health all around the world. The film exposes the manipulative and mendacious characteristics of the agricultural company.

### RE/PRESENTING AMERICA IN *The Corporation*

*The Corporation* is based on Joel Bakan's book *The Corporation: The Pathological Pursuit of Profit and Power* (2003). This documentary film describes the trajectory of corporate power since its very beginning in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and suggests that corporations have become legally like persons by abusing post-slavery legislation. Surprisingly, a comparison with an authentic psychiatric diagnosis kit shows that they have become psychopaths, a specific kind of person defined by their psychopathology. *The Corporation* discloses how these entities function by using several real examples and analyzes how they affect real people, whose lives are inevitably ruled by these psychopaths. Finally, this documentary tries to encourage common people to face these abusive rulers through their personal and political choices.

Corporations trace their origins back to the Industrial Revolution. They began simply as groups of people who had a common goal. However, their growth led to more ambitious aims until the main objective was making a profit that could always be enlarged. The achievement of this goal had a variety of consequences, which other entities separated from them had to tackle. This is known as externalities.

Corporations also changed how they were seen legally. They took advantage of the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment and declared themselves a person with the right to free life and property. Similarly to the human personality, the character of each corporation depends on how they behave.

*The Corporation* suggests that their detachment towards their workers, who live in poor foreign countries, their indifference regarding human and animal health and well-being, their indifference while polluting the environment, their falsehoods and their lack of guilt turn them into faceless psychopaths. This documentary film presents corporations as capable of taking advantage of disasters and of manipulating humans since they are born by making their powerful members predatory monsters. As a result, potential consumers fall into the trap of the ever-present advertising, thus helping the corporations to achieve their goal. Monsanto's use of the dangerous Posilac, IBM's relation to the Nazi regime or the purchase of ownership over rainwater in a Bolivian community are examples of how these psychopaths function. Fortunately, different communities in countries such as India and Bolivia are fighting against these monstrous American rulers.

This documentary film clearly shows an anti-corporation bias and can be said to defend socialism. Reviewer Stephen Hunter argues that "It's fair and balanced in exactly the way the right-wing variant of this sort of thing claims to be fair and balanced. That is, not a damn bit" (2004). Certainly, this film is unapologetically left-wing. Nonetheless, the depth of the investigation that it presents cannot be undervalued because of the lack of neutrality. In fact, the lack of total objectivity is a characteristic of every documentary film. Undeniably, *The Corporation* gives voice to dissimilar groups. Historians, economists, whistle-blowers, spies and important CEOs are present in this film. Nevertheless, the anti-corporate message is quite explicit. This can be appreciated not only by what the narrator says and the ideas that are presented but also by the portrayal of the people that work for corporations. One example could be a female Disney worker that spends a few second staring at the camera with a noticeably forced smile. In addition, the low pitch used by the narrator also contributes to the mystery that surrounds the telling of what American corporations do not want their consumers to know.

Roger Ebert claims that "its fault is that of the dinner guest who tells you something fascinating, and then tells you again, and then a third time. At 145 minutes, it overstays its welcome" (2004). This is partly true. Certainly, the first part provides the most shocking pieces of information. It presents a quite original idea—corporations are in fact psychopaths—that also illustrates perfectly to what extent they can hurt us and so triggers the much needed alarm. The second half is basically a collection of examples of the idea previously presented. However, it also plays an important role in the trustworthiness that the documentary film tries to convey. Additionally, this second half helps to arise not only the awareness but also the disappointment that is needed to revolt against such powerful entities as corporations are. This documentary has been remarkably influential and has worried the consumers. Nonetheless, in order to perfectly close this absorbing film, its second half could have been enriched with something that various reviewers miss: a solution.

A. O. Scott writes that "this movie occasionally ensnares itself in contradictions it does not quite acknowledge. One of the most basic of these is raised by the conceit of treating the corporation as a mental patient: is there a cure? Sometimes the film

seems to suggest that there is (...). But at other points, such reforms are viewed skeptically as instances of co-optation and public-relations spin” (2004). This is certainly true. This documentary film offers a much more exhaustive investigation about the problems that the corporations cause than how to really fight against them. Nevertheless, this reflects the difficulties that complicate the anti-capitalist fight. The documentary portrays perfectly how American corporate manipulation reaches all aspects of life with tremendous efficacy. As a result, finding a solution as big as the problem seems almost impossible, both in this documentary and in real life. Communism, so feared throughout American history, is not considered as an alternative in this documentary. It is true that the cure that this film hints at is a rebellion against American corporate control. Nevertheless, the filmmakers fail to give a clear response to some of the questions their documentary raises: is it enough if corporations change their personality? Have corporations a place in an ideal future? What would the perfect future really involve? To what extent is this future utopian?

*The Corporation* offers interesting insights regarding one of the most emblematic characteristics of the American character: capitalism. Corporations seem to be a basic element for the fulfilment of the American Dream since their main goal (earning as much money as possible) is deeply related to the search for success. At first sight, *The Corporation* can look like another conspiracy theory or paranoia similar to those that abound in US history, but it finally convinces the audience of its trustworthiness by presenting such a variety of testimonies. Finally, this documentary film shows the spectators that these rulers can be the most inhumane people they could ever meet. As the film’s poster suggests, they can look like angels but they hide the devil’s tail behind.

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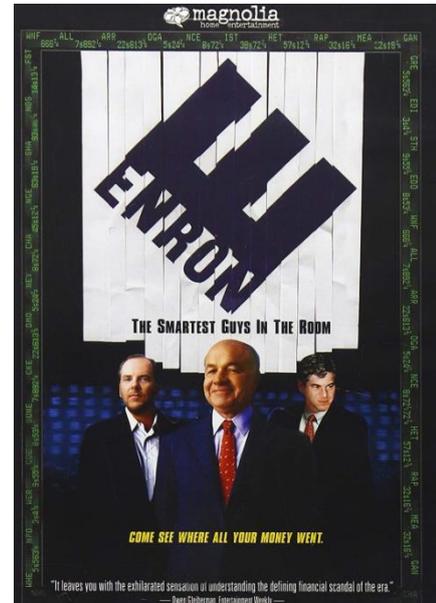
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Andrea Delgado López

# **Enron: The Smartest Guys in the Room (2005): Financial Dishonesty**

## **CREDITS**

**Directed by** Alex Gibney  
**Written by** Alex Gibney (from the book by Bethany McLean & Peter Elkind *The Smartest Guys in the Room: The Amazing Rise and Scandalous Fall of Enron*)  
**Produced by** Alex Gibney  
**Music by** Matthew Hauser  
**Cinematography by** Maryse Alberti  
**Film editing by** Alison Ellwood  
**Production companies** Jigsaw Productions, 2929 Entertainment, HDNet Films  
**Distributors** Magnolia Pictures  
**Runtime** 1h 49'



## **MAIN AWARDS**

**Academy Awards (2006):** Best Documentary Feature (nominee)  
**Deauville Film Festival (2005):** Best Documentary (winner)  
**Sundance Film Festival (2005):** Grand Jury Award – Documentary (nominee)  
**Writers Guild of America (2006):** Independent Spirit Award for Best Documentary Feature (winner), Best Documentary Screenplay (winner)

## **OTHER NOTABLE DOCUMENTARY FILMS BY THE DIRECTOR**

*Taxi to the Dark Side* (2007, Academy Award winner), *Client 9: The Rise and Fall of Eliot Spitzer* (2010), *Mea Maxima Culpa: Silence in the House of God* (2012), *We Steal Secrets: The Story of Wikileaks* (2013), *Going Clear: Scientology and the Prison of Belief* (2015)

## **REASONS TO SEE *Enron: The Smartest Guys in the Room***

- The Enron scandal led to the passage of the Sarbanes-Oxley Act to strengthen the supervision of the boards of directors and CEOs of corporations which is followed by a great many countries.
- The rise and fall of Enron reveal that ethics and morality are also indispensable factors in the pursuit of profit supremacy.

- Although the interviewees and the data images belong to different time and space backgrounds, each very diverse perspective shapes a debate (and a game) between the ‘smartest guys’ and the audience. Alex Gibney deepens thus his exploration of the real cause of the case.

### **CONNECTED WITH...**

- *Wal-Mart: The High Cost of Low Price* (2005), directed by Robert Greenwald. This documentary reveals the unknown side of Wal-Mart in its constant search for the lowest possible prices: the monopoly of local economy, environmental damage, the exploitation of domestic labor, the refusal to provide benefits, the transfer of factories to countries with imperfect labor laws and low labor prices, and the neglect of customer safety.
- *The Crooked E: The Unshredded Truth About Enron* (2003), directed by Penelope Spheeris. The film tells how Enron rose from rural Texas to become the largest energy trader in the United States, and how the company’s managers, who were overwhelmed by profits, did whatever they could to push Enron into the abyss. The film is adapted from *Anatomy of Greed*, a popular memoir of Enron’s former salesmen.
- *End of the Road: How Money Became Worthless* (2012), directed by Tim Delmastro. This is a documentary that chronicles the global financial collapse. Some of the world’s top economic minds share the hidden tale behind the mishandling of the world’s finances, give insight into how bad policy and a flawed monetary system joined together to create a catastrophe, as well as sharing their own personal advice on how the average person can best prepare for their financial future.

### **RE/PRESENTING AMERICA IN *Enron: The Smartest Guys in the Room***

Gibney’s film is based on the best-selling book by Bethany McLean and Peter Elkind *The Smartest Guys in the Room: The Amazing Rise and Scandalous Fall of Enron* (2003). This documentary records the biggest business scandal in the history of Wall Street, and exposes how a group of top smart high-level managers ruined the seventh largest company in the United States and easily took a billion dollars away, leaving investors with nothing and tens of thousands of employees without jobs.

The film begins with a profile of Kenneth Lay, who founded Enron in 1985. Because of the close ties with the Bush family, Enron monopolized the US natural gas industry in just a few years. When the company’s general manager was jailed for forging documents, Lay hired Jeffrey Skilling, a visionary who joins Enron on condition that they use mark to market accounting, allowing the company to record potential profits on certain projects immediately after contracts were signed, regardless of the actual profits that the deal would generate, which became the key point of Enron’s final collapse. With the vision of transforming Enron from an energy supplier to an energy trader, Skilling imposed his Darwinian worldview on Enron by establishing a review committee that graded employees and annually fired those in the bottom grade. CEO Andrew Fastow created a network of shell companies designed solely to do

business with Enron, for the ostensible dual purposes of sending Enron money and hiding its increasing debt. All of this was done with the permission of Enron's accounting firm Arthur Andersen and of the corporate board.

Most of these deals were leveraged with Enron stock, which resulted in potential dangers. Enron's executives, however, continued to induce the company's employees to invest their savings and retirement funds into Enron stock while they were selling their shares to cash out. As the public's view of Enron had changed greatly due to its role in the California energy crisis, Enron's investment in other industries failed and Enron's balance sheet was reviewed. When Skilling left Enron (also for other reasons) investors and customers lost all confidence. Enron's share price fell and finally forced the company to file for bankruptcy. As a result of Enron's bankruptcy, many of its employees lost their pensions and life savings, while investors lost much in shareholder value. Lay, Skilling and Fastow were jailed.

The focus of *Enron: The Smartest Guys in the Room* is not just the impact of the Enron case, the economic losses to the relevant stakeholders, and the causes of the related events. Through the interviewees' narratives, the film brings to the surface the despicable actions of Kenneth Lay, the most important person in Enron, and his trusted followers to quickly gather wealth through financial fraud and illegal business monopoly. The images of these crooked characters become more three-dimensional and enriched thanks to the descriptions of the persons who know them. As Jzappa noted, "The movie is amassed of a plethora of footage, from testimony at congressional hearings, and interviews with disillusioned Enron people. It's at its best when it sticks to factual footage, least when it goes for visual effects and representative inserts which give it more of the feel of a Discovery Channel special" (2008). All interviews and records are, in any case, used to show us the truth and the unfolding of the scandal to the greatest extent. Because the result of the Enron case is well known, Gibney works to elicit curiosity about the actual chain of event step by step and this works well.

James Berardinelli wrote in his review that "*Enron: The Smartest Guys in the Room* does two things exceptionally well. It provides a detailed autopsy of what happened (without becoming so technical that everyone except the lawyers and accountants in the audience become lost) and it warns against the culture of 'synergistic corruption' that has infiltrated all of corporate America" (2005). Part of this is collusion between Government and business in the Enron case, which is illustrated by the Bush family's strong support for Enron and Enron's support for George W. Bush to participate in the American Presidential election. At the same time, Gibney also stresses the cooperative cheating of intermediary agencies in the Enron case. Arthur Andersen, one of the Big Five accounting firms, endorsed Enron's absurd mark to market accounting system and allowed Andrew Fastow, Enron's chief financial officer, to set up a shell company network and cheat in many Enron's business transactions. The Enron case was not caused by one person but by the joint action of all parties, and synergistic corruption appears to be here a major source of wrongdoing.

Peter Sobczynski wrote in his review that "the real focus of Gibney's anger is the corporate culture that allowed [the scandal] to happen in the first place" (2005). This is partly incorrect for Gibney reveals the truth of the matter to us as far as possible, but we cannot see his emotional bias in the documentary. In any case, Enron's corporate culture is really outrageous. Skilling promoted a corporate culture of natural selection

in the company, which created a highly competitive and cruel work environment. When employees faced the temptation of grading assessment and high bonus, they did not hesitate to damage other employees' prospects. The influence of this corporate culture made employees abandon morality and humanity for money and interests. Corporate culture is at the core of the competitiveness of all companies and the most important factor of business management. The essence of corporate culture is people-oriented management, and its effect on people is mainly reflected in the restriction of ethics and morality. In Enron's case, corporate culture became extremely distorted. It totally eschewed the morality and ethics of the employees and became just a tool for Skilling to impose his own ideas and to drive his own desire for profit. Its radically distorted corporate culture was, thus, also one of the main reasons for Enron's decline.

Corruption is not just the problem of Third-World backward countries but a problem that has spread to the center of the advanced capitalist democratic Western countries. The bankruptcy of Enron confirms this truth. The USA has taken pride on its liberal outlook on capitalism but the anti-corruption measures are too often taken after loopholes in the system of regulation are abused by corrupt crooks, claiming in the process the financial safety of many Americans. It seems almost impossible to strike an adequate balance between regulation and free capitalist enterprise but the Enron scandal shows that if this is not done a few 'smart guys' may end up doing enormous damage to large sections of the whole American population.

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Xueran Zhu

## **Capitalism: A Love Story (2009): The American Disease**

### **CREDITS**

**Directed by** Michael Moore

**Written by** Michael Moore

**Produced by** Anne Moore, Michael Moore

**Music by** Jeff Gibbs

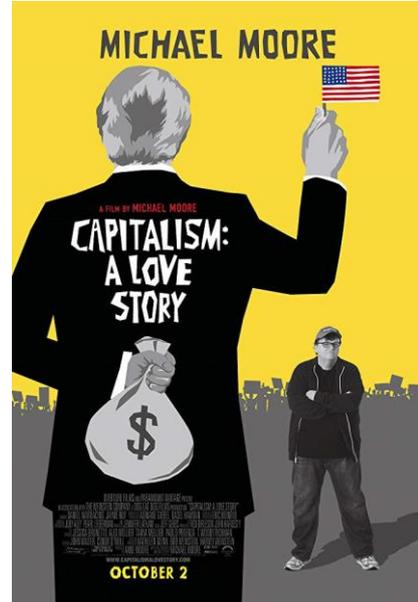
**Cinematography by** Daniel Marracino, Jayme Roy

**Film editing by** Jessica Brunetto, Alex Meiller, Tanya Meiller, Conor O'Neill, Pablo Proenza, T. Woody Richman, John Walter

**Production companies** Dog Eat Dog Films, The Weinstein Company

**Distributors** Overture Films (theatrical)

**Runtime** 2h 07'



### **MAIN AWARDS**

**Phoenix Film Critics Society Awards (2009):** Best Documentary (winner)

**St. Louis Film Critics Association (2009):** Best Documentary Film (winner)

**Toronto International Film Festival (2009):** People's Choice Award Documentary (nominee)

**Venice Film Festival (2009):** Little Golden Lion (winner), Open Prize (winner), Golden Lion (nominee)

### **OTHER NOTABLE DOCUMENTARY FILMS BY THE DIRECTOR**

*Bowling for Columbine* (2002, Oscar Award winner), *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004), *Sicko* (2007, Oscar Award nominee), *Where to Invade Next* (2015), *Fahrenheit 11/9* (2018)

### **REASONS TO SEE Capitalism: A Love Story**

- It provides a historical tour on the effects and consequences of capitalism in the United States of America since the ending of World War II until the moment the documentary was released.
- Moore puts the relationship between Catholicism and capitalism on the map. A priest is interviewed and he claims to be against capitalism even though the Catholic Church shamelessly benefits from it.
- The footage of Roosevelt regarding his Second Bill of Rights proposal, believed to be lost, was found while filming the documentary. This is helpful to show how

America's society could have worked if Roosevelt's proposals and suggestions to soften the economic consequences of World War II had been applied correctly.

### CONNECTED WITH...

- *Fahrenheit 11/9* (2018) directed by Michael Moore. An examination of the current state of the United States of America after Donald Trump's surprising election in 2016 and questionable defeat of Hilary Clinton. The documentary film also covers gun violence and gun control in America. The title connects with Moore's previous documentary *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004), which exposed the ties between the Bush family and Osama Bin Laden.
- *Michael Moore in TrumpLand* (2016) directed by Michael Moore. The documentary follows filmmaker Michael Moore during the three weeks preceding the November 2016 elections as he performs a stand-up show supporting Hillary Clinton in the American territories most favorable to her rival, Donald Trump. The cultural and political clash between performer and audiences is gritty and hilarious.
- *I.O.U.S.A.* (2008) directed by Patrick Creadon. About the impact and shape of the United States of America's national debt. The documentary follows Robert Bixby and David Walker as they tour the states informing different communities about the consequences of the national debt. Creadon shows that the USA spends much more than it gathers from taxation which makes applying for credits to other nations inevitable.

### RE/PRESENTING AMERICA IN *Capitalism: A Love Story*

*Capitalism: A Love Story* explains the dangers and consequences of capitalism, highlighting the devastating effects this economic system has for the middle- and low-class families of the United States of America. The documentary film tracks down the presence of capitalism in society since its instauration, but especially since the United States became the greatest world power after World War II and how it has evolved until the 2008 presidential elections, when Barack Obama was elected President. Moore describes in detail the many ways in which capitalism works and how the very few who truly benefit from it do so at the expense of millions of families that are victims of a system that exploits them without offering any reward.

Michael Moore, the documentary's well-known director, provides different examples of the devastating effects of capitalism and how it impacts the less privileged Americans. His film opens with a bank robbery, followed by real scenes that show how families are evicted from their homes by the Police because they cannot pay the mortgage which the banks have imposed on them. Moore presents, among other different cases, how more than 65,000 teenagers were sent to juvenile facilities after committing minor crimes or crimes not serious enough to deserve this sentence in order for these privatized institutions to receive money for imprisoning them. The documentary also tells the story of the Republic Windows and Doors factory that had to shut down in 2008, leaving a huge number of families without resources to survive since they depended entirely on the job. Followed by some superficial analysis on the politics and economics that surround capitalism, its relationship with the 9/11 attacks

and some interviews, Moore presents next the case that best explains how capitalism works: American companies receive millions of dollars from life insurances after the death of their own employees. In a capitalist environment, workers are more valuable dead than alive, their life (and their death) has a prize and companies benefit without caring about them or their families.

*Capitalism: A Love Story* is made from the point of view of Michael Moore, who, as he usually does, narrates and appears in the film. We follow Moore and his cameraman as they both traverse America's most important financial districts questioning, interviewing and asking for explanations regarding the effects and consequences of capitalism. Even though Moore interviews both Wall Street men in favor of capitalism and socialist politicians like Bernie Sanders, his tone and point of view remains intact: American capitalism is a disease that has to be stopped. And even though he does not provide any solution or alternative for it, he passionately proves the inexcusable truth about the abuses of capitalism.

Reviewer Mike Scott writes for *The Times-Picayune* that "the focus of [Moore's] outrage is the idea that the system is designed to be unfair, benefiting the ruling elite at the expense of the many. His message: Brother, we've been had" (2009). Indeed, the documentary explains how the middle and low American classes have been tricked by the system to make them think that they are benefiting from it. Since last century, concretely after World War II, capitalism has been promoted in the media and in all advertising fields mainly through the promise of the American Dream in order to whitewash what it truly is. This way, the low and middle classes thought that they could take something out of it, when in fact it was the system that was taking everything out of them.

Leslie Felperine writes in her *Variety* review that "there's still plenty here to annoy right-wingers, as well as those who, however much they agree with Moore's politics, just can't stomach his oversimplification, on-the-nose sentimentality and goofball japery" (2009). This is especially correct. Even though Moore's point of view is clear, it sometimes feels superficial. Moore spends more than two hours explaining the consequences of capitalism without going further or analyzing in more depth the causes of these consequences. The documentary is superficial enough to annoy those who are already against capitalism, know how it works and are watching this feature expecting something more, something that never arrives because Moore loses himself proving his point.

Reviewer Kyle Smith writes for the *New York Post* that "the movie turns out to be like a '70s sitcom that starts normally, but then somebody says, 'Say, this reminds me of that time Marcia got hit in the nose with a football...'", and we veer off into a clip show" (2009). This might seem a bit unfair. The documentary offers a critical vision of capitalism that will not and does not want to find a right-wing audience. A documentary about politics and economics cannot offer an objective point of view, and therefore the reaction of the audience will match their political opinions and beliefs. Critical viewing is required, especially on topics with sides so drastically delimited and with consequences as harmful as the ones presented in this feature, so the point of view of the viewers will influence the way they perceive the documentary.

Even though the documentary is far from perfect, *Capitalism: A Love Story* is essential to understand how America works. It is a constant reminder on how unfair the system is, and Moore is an expert on exposing that system. Capitalism is a problem

that, according to the documentary, has no immediate solution, and to be aware of its consequences seems to be the best option to confront it. Its title, 'A Love Story', is an ironic response to a system that makes people fall in love with capitalism and promises them a life that will never come, turning romance into a living nightmare.

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Àlex Dalmau Barreal

# The Shock Doctrine (2009): The Rise of Disaster Capitalism

## CREDITS

**Directed by** Mat Whitecross, Michael Winterbottom

**Writing credits** Naomi Klein (from her book *The Shock Doctrine*)

**Produced by** Alex Cooke, Andrew Eaton, Avi Lewis and Melissa Parmenter

**Music by** James Dandridge, Naomi Dandridge, Richard Davey, Gordon Ferris, Christer Melén, Joakim Sundström, Chris Treble

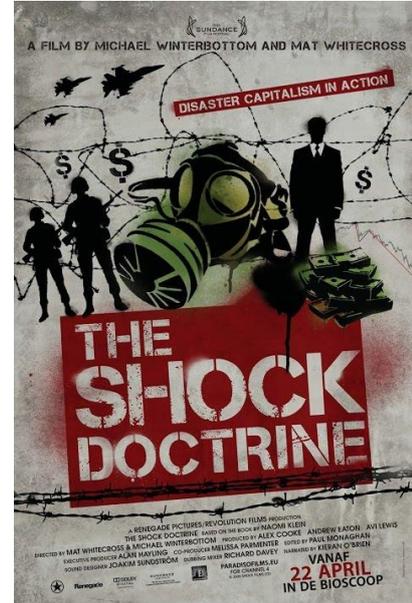
**Cinematography by** Ronald Plante, Filippo Viola, Krzysztof Honowski

**Film editing by** Paul Monaghan, Mat Whitecross, Michael Winterbottom

**Production companies:** Renegade Pictures, Revolution Films

**Distributors:** Channel 4, Sundance Selects

**Runtime:** 1h 19'



## MAIN AWARDS

This film has received no awards. The main reason might be that Naomi Klein disagreed with the directors' take on the adaptation of her bestselling book. They had some serious differences in terms of the argument and the whole assembling of the documentary, and she eventually decided to abandon the project because it was not what she had envisioned in the first place. Her name was removed from the credits and she took no part in the film's creation. However, she wished Whitecross and Winterbottom success.

## OTHER NOTABLE DOCUMENTARY FILMS BY THE DIRECTOR(S)

**By Mat Whitecross** *Moving to Mars* (2009), *Oasis: Supersonic* (2016), *Coldplay: A Head Full of Dreams* (2019)

**By Michael Winterbottom** *In this World* (2002, docudrama), *The Emperor's New Clothes* (2015)

**By Mat Whitecross & Michael Winterbottom** *The Road to Guantanamo* (2006)

## REASONS TO SEE The Shock Doctrine

- It is an eye-opening documentary, which seeks to unveil the secrets of capitalism and how (mostly America) corporations take advantage of natural and man-made disasters to shock and awe the world into submission.
- It works as a sort of introduction to Naomi Klein's far more sophisticated book.

- This documentary criticizes the empowered and the wealthy and tries to make the audience feel empathy for the poor, voiceless people impacted by US capitalism all over the world.

### CONNECTED WITH...

- *The Shock Doctrine* (2007), directed by Jonás Cuarón. This short documentary, scripted by Klein herself and the director's father Alfonso Cuarón, follows her book in connecting the expansion of US-dominated capitalism after WWII with the aid of the CIA. The film discloses how apparently local events, like the Pinochet's coup in Chile and its bloody subsequent repression of the population, were actually subsidized by American corporations and backed by the USA Government.
- *This Changes Everything* (2015), directed by Avi Lewis. Scripted by Naomi Klein and based on her best-selling essay *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate* (2014), this film is a sort of companion piece to the book. Klein shows how climate change denial has been endorsed by right-wing lobbies and thinktanks mostly unknown to most of those who deny the crisis is happening.
- *The End of Poverty?* (2008), directed by Philippe Díaz. Imperialistic colonialism is over but economic neo-colonialism has emerged to keep the wealthier nations exploiting the poorer nations in a ruthless, systematic way. Díaz's film examines why even though the situation is perfectly well known, nothing is really being done to alter this balance, despite the efforts of activists, many of them in the USA.

### RE/PRESENTING AMERICA IN *The Shock Doctrine*

*The Shock Doctrine* is an adaption of Canadian journalist and activist Naomi Klein's best-selling volume *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (2007). However, there was a disagreement over the adaptation between the author and the directors, which resulted in Klein's disowning of the documentary. She only appears in extracts from various public speeches, seemingly distancing herself from her own arguments and establishing the blurred connections she had drawn between psychiatric shock therapy treatment (invented in the 1950s) and the economic shock treatment developed by ultra-liberal economist Milton Friedman. In a more simplistic way than Klein's book, Whitecross and renowned British filmmaker Michael Winterbottom expose how local and international corporate greed feeds with no guilt whatsoever on people's inability to react against natural disasters, war, terrorism, and dictatorships to benefit from economic shock, and the ensuing free-market policies beginning with the privatization of public assets. That is how the power of pure capitalism came to dominate not only the USA but the globalized world from 1945 onward.

The main proponent of the idea of economic shock therapy was, according to Klein, American economist and Nobel Prize winner Milton Friedman (1912-2006). His idea allegedly sprouted from a physician's practice in the 1950s, by which he electroshocked patients who were suffering from serious mental health issues in an attempt to erase all their past and implant new ideas. Friedman then adapted this idea

to economics, proposing to implement this type of blank slate policy in troubled countries. Although Friedman's theories were supposed to create freer societies against tyranny, taking advantage of its downfall or provoking it, the consequences were demolishing. Examples of the implementation of Friedman's shock-and-awe economy are Pinochet's coup in Chile, Argentina and its dictatorial Junta, Yeltsin's chaotic post-Soviet Russia, and Bush's post-9/11 terror-ridden invasion of Iraq. Sadly, the supposed 'therapy' benefitted the economic elites (mainly through the nationalization of public assets and the deregulation of rampant capitalism) but was often backed by new tyrannical regimes that led most citizens to poverty and in the worst cases to brutal repression with the use of concentration camps and torture. Unsurprisingly, the American Government is portrayed in tight connection with war and even terrorism. The 9/11 terrorist outrage against the Twin Towers and the Pentagon was used to unleash a totally unjustified war against Saddam Hussein's Iraq, started in 2003, which reduced the country to violent and lawless anarchy and facilitated the rise of DAESH/ISIS. Consequently, millions of people had to leave their homes, and many died. To their eyes, and I quote from an Iraqi who was suffering from America's acts: "America is terrorism. Terrorism is America".

Kirk Honeycutt writes in the *Hollywood Reporter* that "Where Klein had a whole book to develop her thesis that famed neoliberal economist Milton Friedman's aggressive free-market theories led to and even promoted political catastrophes and much human suffering, this movie, clearly assembled in haste, throws surprisingly poor archival footage into the mix with a Klein lecture, scant original interviews and a narration from on high that will brook no dissent" (2009). The impression, certainly, is that this documentary is poor in terms of footage quality and edition. The narration is clear and straight to the point but it cannot make up for these shortcomings. In a similar vein, Kaleem Aftab from the *National* notes that "While the book offered an intricate journey through globalization, the film is more basic, at times to a fault" (2009). Although Whitecross and Winterbottom try "to update the book to show how Klein's theories have been put into practice in America's war on terror" their film is just "the bluffer's guide to Klein, useful for those looking for an introduction to the concepts but not much else" I completely agree: the documentary feels shallow, the filmmakers just bombard you with many concepts which are not further explored, perhaps because the documentary's limited runtime didn't allow it. Jason Bailey from *DVDTalk.com* writes, somehow more leniently, that this is "A skillful, illuminating cinematic position paper, a well-made documentary that slams more information and anger into 82 minutes than most networks convey in a full 24-hour news cycle" (2009). No doubt, plenty of information is provided but this is so compressed that audiences can feel overwhelmed or even uninterested, given the poorly assembled barrage of images which at points even feels amateur despite the filmmakers' solid credentials. Unlike the book, paraphrasing its title, the film fails to shock and generates no awe.

Naomi Klein proposes a solution, a way out of this nightmare. "The shock doctrine", she says in the film, "relies on us not knowing about it, for it to work. This tactic is getting tired because the element of surprise is no longer there. We're becoming shock resistant". She also sheds some light on the matter of the recurrent economic crises and how to overcome them. As Klein argues, "if we want responses (...) that would leave us to a world that is healthier, more just and peaceful, we are going to have to go out there and make them do it". Whether this can be a reality in

the near future or not remains to be seen because it is simply not true that the better informed we are the more we support activism. In this sense the USA is emblematic: as happens with many other issues affecting the whole world and originating in America, US citizens have been providing their fellow citizens with an enormous amount of information describing how disaster capitalism and shock-and-awe tactics work and how they are also applied in the USA (think of Hurricane Katrina). Yet, this had no effect on the election of Donald Trump as 45<sup>th</sup> President of the USA in 2016. No more comment is needed.

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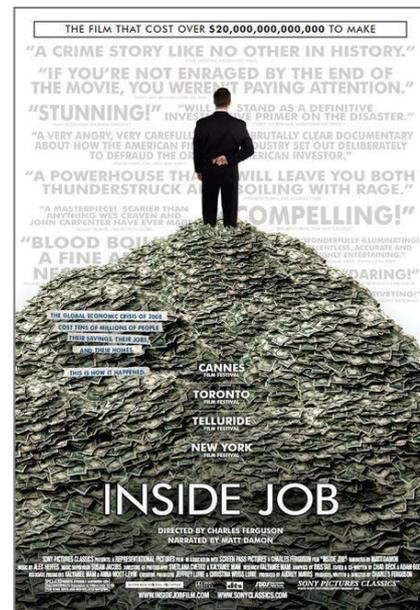
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Júlia Galceran Esteve

# **Inside Job (2010): The Greed of a Few and the Struggle of the Rest**

## **CREDITS**

**Directed by** Charles Ferguson  
**Written by** Charles Ferguson, Chad Beck, Adam Bolt  
**Produced by** Audrey Marrs & Charles Ferguson  
**Music by** Alex Heffes  
**Cinematography by** Gray Mitchell  
**Film editing by** Chad Beck and Adam Bolt  
**Production companies:** Representational Pictures (Founded by Charles Ferguson)  
**Distributors** Sony Pictures Classics (theatrical)  
**Runtime** 1h 48 minutes



## **MAIN AWARDS**

**Academy Awards (Oscars) (2011):** Best Documentary Feature (winner)  
**Directors Guild of America, USA (2011):** Outstanding Directorial Achievement in Documentary (winner)  
**National Society of Film Critics Awards, USA (2011):** Best Non-Fiction Film (winner)  
**Writers Guild of America, USA (2011):** Best Documentary Screenplay (winner)

## **OTHER NOTABLE DOCUMENTARY FILMS BY THE DIRECTOR**

*No End in Sight* (2007), *Time to Choose* (2015), *Watergate* (2018)

## **REASONS TO SEE *Inside Job***

- Ferguson's exhaustive knowledge about what caused the financial crisis in 2008 with helpful and pedagogical explanations to make the issue more accessible to audiences.
- It raises awareness about the false information being used to manipulate the general public. Although not a new phenomenon, this connects with the currently well-known 'fake news' phenomenon.
- The film presents an insightful psychological portrait of the so-called 'Wall Street-type', with relevant connections between their personality and their behavior

## CONNECTED WITH...

- *Too Big to Fail* (2011, TV fiction films), directed by Curtis Hanson. The film follows the actions of Treasury Secretary Henry Paulson, Ben Benanke (Chair of the Federal Reserve) and others during the days of the Lehman Brothers financial crisis to understand what decisions they could make and assess whether they made the right ones. *Inside Job* also identifies these two men as directly responsible for the effects of the crisis.
- *Heist: Who Stole the American Dream?* (2012), directed by Donald Goldmacher and Frances Casey. A film that depicts the financial crisis as the product of deregulation policies that the US Government under different Presidents was pushed to implement by American corporations. It blames politicians for always siding with the interests of the financial industry.
- *Time to Choose* (2015), directed by Charles Ferguson. In this film, Ferguson and his co-writer Chad Beck attempt to offer solutions to the impending catastrophe that climate change might cause world-wide. Instead of offering, as usual, a very negative panorama, they consider the alternatives that capitalism itself can offer by promoting climate-conscious ways of doing business and saving the planet. Narrator Oscar Isaac's beautiful voice adds a note of optimism.

## RE/PRESENTING AMERICA IN *Inside Job*

In 2008, many American banks guilty of extremely fraudulent financial malpractice were declared bankrupt and had to be bailed out. This was just the beginning of a recession period which would spread all over the globe and cost tens of millions of people their job, their savings and their homes. *Inside Job* dives deep into this financial crisis. From its origins to its consequences, the film shows us how some banks benefited from federal policies of deregulation and triggered a situation of inflation, with no equivalent since the Great Depression of the 1930s. This was only made worse by corruption and, at some points, the spectator cannot help but wonder whether nobody thought that the whole terrible set-up needed to be stopped.

Ferguson's documentary tries to preserve a tone of objectivity with accurate graphics and data, but it is, nevertheless, undeniable that it has a very clear mission to denounce the misconduct of key individuals. The sometimes outrageous depictions of the lavish lifestyle of bankers and executives seem to appeal directly to the anger of those who suffered from the consequences of the crisis in the hardest way, mainly working-class people and families. The documentary seems to be specifically designed to help the victims of the crisis understand how economics work and what exactly led them to this situation. Besides, it intends to make those who caused it uncomfortable and ashamed. As a matter of fact, the blaming of the American administration for its complicity is so strong that European banks and administrations seem to be idealized by comparison, as if they had acted flawlessly and had not contributed at all to the recession (which was simply not the case at all).

*Inside Job* argues that the first step towards catastrophe was the deregulation of the financial business, which became very lucrative, and of salaries (which were way

above the average). The shareholding market gradually became more complex as more people and companies started buying stocks and accumulating debt, which made inflation increasingly dangerous. This situation was sustained by means of deliberate lying. Some mortgages and deposits were rated AAA—which is meant to be the score for the safest investments—when they were actually considered high-risk by experts. Very notoriously, some banks were rated AAA at the time they had to be rescued. People were misleadingly convinced to invest on unaffordable mortgages and ask banks for credit. The film also mentions that the experts who were to rate deposits and advise customers might have seen their opinions influenced by their own economic benefit, since it was found that they were paid by entities in favor of which they wrote. This shows that not even academia could escape corruption.

Many other experts tried to point to the catastrophic consequences that this course of action could trigger on a world scale, but executives and politicians only denied these alarming scenarios and let the situation continue until the bubble burst. When the recession started, these people kept their fortunes virtually untouched. Despite all this initial impunity, Ferguson shows some footage of trials in which these people are asked to account for their decisions during the inflation period. In contrast with the bankers' false claims that it was impossible to predict that the whole world could be affected their financial conduct, it must be noted that the film draws international connections between the US economy and other countries (Iceland, Europe and China) from the very beginning. This may be interpreted as an ironic questioning of why no one thought in global terms when our economy is so blatantly conditioned by globalization. The film also argues that the financial crisis was not only due to unregulated economic activity based on lies and corruption, but also to the impulsive and greedy personality of the 'Wall-Street types' who only sought benefit regardless of the moral cost of their actions.

Roger Ebert writes that *Inside Job* is "an angry well-argued documentary about how the American financial industry set out deliberately to defraud the ordinary American investor. (...) Most of the big Wall Street players knew exactly [that] the more mortgages failed, the more money they made" (2010). Indeed, the documentary criminalizes all actions undertaken by Wall Street shareholders. It clearly wants to identify who is to blame and make public what they made in order to become richer, even if it meant more poverty for the working classes. This offers a self-evident depiction of how far their greed can go and makes it painfully ironic to realize that many of these people ended up holding top responsibilities in the American financial system even becoming in one case Treasury Secretaries of the USA.

Tim Robey observes that, beyond these unscrupulous people, the documentary criticizes the very essence of capitalism and writes that "the main thrust of Ferguson's argument becomes the corruption of a system whose gamekeepers are also its poachers: regulation and safety mechanisms are hardly top priorities when the alleged protectors of the economy have so much vested in its exploitation" (2011). It is evident that the film wanted to expose all those who were responsible for such degree of corruption but many black screens inform that most declined to be interviewed. This is because they certainly feared being exposed. In fact, the tone of the film is worth commenting on because of its aggressive straight-forwardness. Robey notes that "next to the scare-bomb tactics of a Michael Moore, Ferguson's cogency and patience feel like adult tools for an adult task". Thus, the documentary achieves a sense of quality

through a less personified approach than that of Moore's film. All this is proof that the documentary is doing a great job, since it started a discussion even though many people wanted to remain silent.

It is, however, worth noting that this documentary fails to deliver everything that the public expects. As Peter Bradshaw puts it, "What can be done about all this? Ferguson has no answers, other than a faintly unedifying hint that bankers could be brought low if rumours about their systemic addiction to drugs and prostitutes could be made to stick legally—like Al Capone's tax evasion. But only a new political mood for regulation will do, and this still seems far away" (2011). The film is pessimistic and fails to offer solutions while the spectators get the uneasy feeling that corruption will never be ousted from the public administration and that economic regulation still seems far from being implemented regardless of what political party is in office.

*Inside Job* depicts the financial crisis as the logical consequence of a system that is governed by greed, lies and corruption. This same system rescued the banks, even though they caused the problem, whilst ordinary people were forced to cope with unemployment, to lose their savings or even to face eviction. The aggressive tone of the documentary strongly criticizes the American Government, which sided with and preserved the interests of the upper classes, and the capitalist system as a whole. The financial crisis is seen to have greatly enhanced class differences in the USA, which are greater every day as upward social mobility collapses. After the end credits, it is blatantly shown that a country which led the world to recession alongside itself with such an immoral economic system can no longer be the main economic power of the world.

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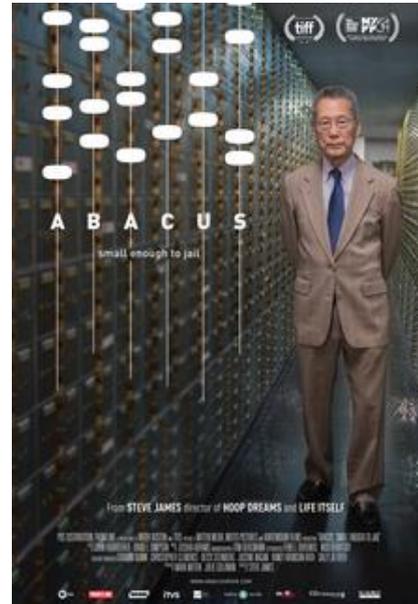
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Àitor Garrido Jiménez

## ***Abacus: Small Enough to Jail* (2017): Scapegoating the Immigrant Community**

### **CREDITS**

**Directed by** Steve James  
**Produced by** Mark Mitten, Julie Goldman, Fenell Doremus, Nick Verbitsky  
**Music by** Joshua Abrams  
**Cinematography by** Tom Bergmann  
**Film editing by** John Farbrother, David E. Simpson  
**Production companies** Blue Ice Films, Mitten Media, Motto Pictures, Kartemquin Films Production  
**Distributors** PBS Distribution (USA) (theatrical)  
**Runtime** 1h 28'



### **MAIN AWARDS**

**Academy Awards, USA (2018):** Best Documentary Feature (nominee)  
**Cinema Eye Honors Awards, US (2018):** The Unforgettables Award (winner), Audience Choice Prize (nominee)  
**Critics' Choice Documentary Awards (2017):** Most Compelling Living Subject of a Documentary (winner), Best Political Documentary (winner), Best Documentary (nominee)  
**News & Documentary Emmy Awards (2018):** Outstanding Business and Economic Documentary (winner)

### **OTHER NOTABLE DOCUMENTARY FILMS BY THE DIRECTOR**

*Hoop Dreams* (1994 Oscar Award nominee), *Stevie* (2002), *At the Death House Door* (2008, with Peter Gilbert), *The Interrupters* (2011), *Life Itself* (2014)

### **REASONS TO SEE *Abacus: Small Enough to Jail***

- It focuses on the Chinese community, a group of migrants and American-born people usually overlooked by American filmography. Here they are involved in an emotive though scandalous story against the legal framework.
- It shows how the unity, tenacity, strength, integrity, and courage of a family can overcome any obstacles and defeat unfairness.

- It helps to understand how the American judicial system works unfairly, prosecuting the small and defenseless businesses rather than pick on the big and powerful corporations.

### CONNECTED WITH...

- *The Emperor's New Clothes* (2015), directed by Michael Winterbottom. The film, written by Winterbottom and comedian Russell Brand, deals with the increasing inequality between different socioeconomic classes and how this disparity has not changed since the economic crisis in 2008. The documentary seeks to unveil the shocking extremes of Western society and provides revealing insight on the reasons behind it, such as how billionaires avoid paying taxes in their own country by claiming residence in tax havens.
- *Inequality for All* (2013), directed by Jacob Kornbluth. The documentary film examines the growing income inequality in the United States following the narration by Economic Politics professor and USA ex-Secretary of Labor Robert Reich. The film intertwines his Berkeley lectures with interviews of average Americans in the middle class who are having serious financial trouble. Reich claims that there is an enormous income gap between middle-to-low class Americans and the top 1% in the United States. And although inequality in capitalism is necessary for incentivizing people to work, too much inequality will result in an undemocratic system. Inequality can never be too low for democracy to be protected.
- *Inside Lehman Brothers* (2018), directed by Jennifer Deschamps. The documentary film explores the 2008 real estate crisis caused by the Lehman Brothers' fraudulently granted mortgages in the USA. Altogether, their passing around of sub-primes as good financial products, which they were not at all, led the world into a financial crisis. The French director analyses and investigates the reasons and consequences that drew the Lehman brothers into bankruptcy. Intimidation, greed, and corruption left millions of Americans homeless but the bigger banks hardly paid for that.

### RE/PRESENTING AMERICA IN *Abacus: Small Enough to Jail*

*Abacus* tells the story of how the Abacus Federal Savings Bank, a small institution in Chinatown, New York, became the only US bank to face criminal charges after the events of the financial crisis in 2008. Founded and owned by Chinese immigrant Thomas Sung and his family since 1984, they aimed to help and serve the always neglected Chinese immigrant community's needs, facilitating loans to aid people to pursue their dreams of buying a house or rebuilding their business. However, on 31 May 2012 Abacus was criminally accused of mortgage fraud, security fraud, and conspiracy fueled by greed according to Manhattan District Attorney Cyrus R. Vance Jr.. Consequently, the Sung family was forced to defend the bank's legacy and their survival during a tough five-year-long legal battle against the US law.

Founder and Chairman Thomas Sung, a former lawyer born in Shanghai, realized that there was no bank owned by the Chinese and serving the Chinese community in Chinatown, New York. So, he decided to start a bank to cover the unsatisfied loan needs of the Chinese immigrant community. He named the bank after a national treasure, the Chinese calculator abacus. This was a family concern with two of his four daughters working alongside him. Everything went well until December of 2009, when Vera Sung had a closing with one of their most popular and charismatic loan officers, Ken Yu. The closing was somewhat tense, and it unveiled that Yu had lied about the loan, charging a fee which he directly pocketed. They fired him, canceled the closing, and reported Yu to the Office of Thrift Management after discovering that their employee had stolen money, ran a money-laundering operation on his own, and had committed fraud many times.

However, the DA started investigating the whole loan department and eventually the whole Abacus bank. Vance's office charged them with falsifying and fabricating loan applications to Fannie Mae, the Federal National Mortgage Association, despite Abacus' submission of 600,000 pages of documents disproving the charges. The members of the board were brought into court in handcuffs, an unusual and humiliating spectacle for reporters to spread photographs of the event. Nevertheless, they refused to plead guilty as the DA told them, a brave decision that resulted in five years of misery and hundreds of lawyers to carry out the grand jury investigations and reach a final verdict. After this exhausting legal battle, full of trials, prosecutors and mental health consequences for the Sung family, the jury finally reached a unanimous decision: they were found not guilty of all the charges. Excited and relieved, Thomas Sung claimed that their not having been declared innocent was "a gross injustice not only to a small bank but is casting a shadow on our community. This is prejudicial and incorrect". Finally, Ken Yu was the only employee sentenced to six months in jail and five years' probation. The documentary concludes that defeating America's justice is possible, but it will cost you ten million dollars.

Given that the accusations made by the DA against Abacus Bank were ridiculous compared to what the big banks were doing before 2008, this can be seen as an attack on their 'community. The 'too big to fail and go to jail' banks all around the country, such as Morgan Stanley, Goldman Sachs, JP Morgan Chase, or CitiCorp admitted to massive crimes regarding fraudulent and dangerous loans that blew up after 2008. However, criminal action could not be brought against them because there were too huge collateral consequences because of their size and their internal connections; any major trial would wreck the entire US financial system. For them, money was the best option to get away with their crimes: they accepted paying 110 billion dollars in fines to make the problem go away, after being bailed out by the Federal Reserve. The Sung family were not offered a similar deal; instead, the DA tried to force them to accept a guilty plea for felony plus a fine. Abacus seemed an easy prey with scant collateral damage to the system, so picking on them, a family-owned company in Chinatown, seemed the easiest target. The miscarriage of justice backfired but it cost the Sung family dearly.

Lauren Wissot defines the documentary film as "a heartfelt portrait of a close-knit family facing overwhelming adversity and an infuriating indictment of our US justice system gone seriously awry" (2017). Even though the bank had one of the nation's lowest default rates, with only 9 defaults out of the 3,000 mortgages Abacus

sold to Fannie Mae, which looked ridiculously low compared to what bigger banks issued in fraudulent loans, the DA's prosecutor decided to pursue charges, nonetheless. But thanks to the wit, determination, and unity of Sung Family, they were able to defend themselves and prove the DA wrong, winning the legal battle. Family values won the day.

In the same vein, Ben Nicholson stresses that "By focusing on the family, James makes *Abacus* about resilience and humility rather than the mechanics of litigation and in doing so underscores—perhaps more strongly than in other louder films on similar subjects—the injustice of the situation" (2016). Indeed, it is true that the documentary is very much a character study of the Sung, and the spectator can see through their eyes and feel through their expressions all the pain, fear, and desperation they had to undergo. There are many scenes in which all the family, Mr. and Mrs. Sung, and their four daughters, are having lunch or dinner at a restaurant or the office, discussing the matter and showing true bonding. Also, when they were indicted, they were never impolite or greedy, their behavior was outstandingly admirable, and that makes the audience sympathize with them and get even more enraged with the unfairness of the situation.

Phil Guie writes in his review that "*Abacus: Small Enough to Jail* is nearly a tragedy, the story of a good man brought down despite having the best of intentions" (2017). Throughout the documentary, Mr. Sung and his family show goodness, kindness, and a correct business practice; there is no harm intended in anything they do. The very existence of Abacus emerged from the Sung's desire to help the Chinese immigrant community pursue their American Dream and serving them with loans as no other US bank did for racist reasons. The spectator can feel the love, hard work and passion the Sung family put into their bank, and how they are outraged by Ken Yu's fraudulent practices. In the face of their unfair, undeserved persecution, they fought fiercely for their survival and the bank's reputation.

The documentary depicts the institutional arrogance and unfairness of American justice and how it mistreats minorities. Other personal issues are also involved, since District Attorney Cyrus R. Vance Jr. knew that the Chinese community would not determine the result of the oncoming elections to the DA office; he possibly expected the long battle to reinforce his candidacy. Besides, sentencing the Abacus board could be regarded as a victory in the eyes of the public concerning the 2008 financial crisis that shook not only the USA but also the global economy. Someone had to pay and be responsible for the consequences that sank the world into a deadlock, and of course, that someone better be "small enough to jail". After all, picking on an immigrant minority community is always easier and safer than prosecuting a big, interconnected and powerful American corporation. This is how racism operates, though the Sung's show that it can be opposed successfully.

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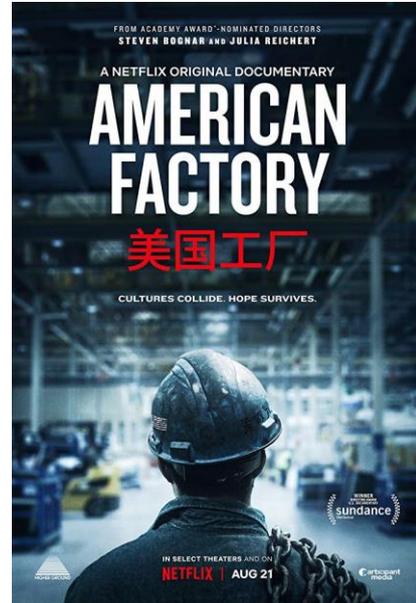
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Júlia Galceran Esteve

## American Factory (2019): Clash of Cultures

### CREDITS

**Directed by** Steven Bognar & Julia Reichert  
**Produced by** Steven Bognar, Mijie Li, Julie Parker Benello, Jeff Reichert, Julia Reichert, Yiqian Zhang  
**Music by** Chad Cannon  
**Cinematography by** Steven Bognar, Aubrey Keith, Jeff Reichert, Julia Reichert, Erick Stoll  
**Film editing by** Lindsay Utz  
**Production companies** Higher Ground Productions, Participant  
**Distributors** Netflix USA (theatrical, streaming)  
**Runtime** 1h 55'



### MAIN AWARDS

**Academy Awards (Oscars) (2020):** Best Documentary Feature (winner)  
**Directors Guild of America, USA (2020):** Outstanding Directorial Achievement in Documentary (winner)  
**International Documentary Association (2019):** Best Director (winner), Creative Recognition Award/Best Editing (nominee), Best Feature (nominee)  
**Sundance Film Festival (2019):** Directing Award US Documentary (winner), Grand Jury Prize Best Documentary (nominee)

### OTHER NOTABLE DOCUMENTARY FILMS BY THE DIRECTOR(S)

**By Steven Bognar** *Personal Belongings* (1996)  
**By Julia Reichert** *Growing Up Female* (1971, with Jim Klein, Oscar Award nominee), *Union Maids* (1976, with Jim Klein and Miles Mogulescu, Oscar Award nominee), *Seeing Red* (1983)  
**By Steven Bognar and Julia Reichert** *A Lion in the House* (2006), *The Last Truck: Closing of a GM Plant* (2009, short documentary, Oscar Award nominee)

### REASONS TO SEE American Factory

- Its focus on working-class America, a segment of society usually ignored by media representation.
- The effort made by its American filmmakers in attempting to represent the Chinese management and workers fairly in this clash of cultures.

- This is the first documentary backed by Barack Obama and Michelle Obama's company Higher Ground Productions, in association with Netflix. It was purchased by them after winning the Directing Award at the Sundance Film Festival.

### CONNECTED WITH...

- *Harlan County USA*. (1976), directed by Barbara Kopple. The film deals with a coal miners' strike started in June 1973 against the Eastover Mining Company, owners of the Brookside mine in Harlan County, Kentucky. The protest was motivated by Eastover's refusal to sign a contract after the miners voted to join the United Mine Workers of America. During the year-long strike Eastover employed armed thugs against the men and women in the picket lines, as Kopple documented.
- *Roger & Me* (1989), directed by Michael Moore. In this, his first very successful documentary, Moore chases and harasses General Motors' CEO Roger Smith to demand from him an explanation for the closure of the GM plant in his own hometown, Flint in Michigan. Although the plant was making a profit, Smith moved production to Mexico, causing the loss of 30,000 jobs. The document chronicles Moore's constant failure to meet Smith.
- *The Last Truck: Closing of a GM Plant* (2009), directed by Steven Bognar and Julia Reichert. This short film (40') made for TV documents, as its title announces, the sudden closure of the GM plant in Moraine (Dayton), Ohio, in 2008. GM Chairman Rick Wagoner justified the decision, which left 2,400 workers unemployed, on the ground of high fuel prices and limited demand for the SUV and trucks made there. This is the same plant, later purchased by Fuyao, which appears in *American Factory*.

### RE/PRESENTING AMERICA IN *American Factory*

*American Factory* continues the story which film directors Steven Bognar and Julia Reichert started narrating in their short film *The Last Truck: Closing of a GM Plant* (2009). Back in December 2008, General Motors' brutal, quite unjustified decision to close the Moraine plant (in the suburb of Dayton, Ohio), invoking its supposedly limited profitability, made 2,400 workers redundant. While the 2009 film documented the making of the last vehicle ever produced in that plant, the 2019 long film describes the culture clash resulting from the purchase of the abandoned plant in 2016 by Fuyao Glass Industry Group, a Chinese manufacturing company specializing in making glass for cars. Ironically, GM is among its new American customers.

Chairman Cao Dewang, a Chinese billionaire, invests 500\$ million in Dayton expecting to send Americans the message that China looks forward to a future of mutual collaboration as soon as the USA welcomes Chinese investors like himself. The 2,000 local workers whom Cao hires (many former GM employees left stranded with no jobs for years) are initially grateful, despite the communication problems with the 200 Chinese workers imported to train their American fellow employees. Soon, however, impatience grows on the side of the Chinese: concerned that the plant is operating at a loss, Chairman Cao fires his American management team; the Chinese overseers complain that American workers are too slow, too inefficient, and more

interested in their rights rather than in the factory. On the American side, the constant monitoring of all activities, the lax safety standards, and worries that without the protection of a union they will be as exploited as their Chinese counterparts are, lead to a crisis. None of the strategies that Cao tries (sending an American delegation to Fuyao's central in China to learn how to improve performance, offering a pay rise) appeases the workers. After an ugly campaign, with workers fired for their pro-union activism and the intervention of consultants paid by Fuyao to convince the workers to give up their rights, a majority of 60% vote to join the United Autoworkers Union. An epilogue shows Cao inspecting the new robots which have started replacing the workers (at a ratio of four per each machine) in the Dayton plant but that might soon replace all workers anywhere in the world, including China.

In the featurette that accompanies *American Factory* on Netflix, directors Bogner and Reichert explain to Barack and Michelle Obama—whose company Higher Ground Productions purchased their film for distribution together with Netflix—that they tried not to take sides as far as the evident cultural clash was concerned, though they did side with the workers in their right to unionize, for family reasons and personal convictions. Reviewer Peter Sobczynsky writes that *American Factory* is “a stirring testament to the importance of the labor movement in this country and how it remains as important as ever even as the face of industry changes irrevocably” (2019). However, there is an immense difference between a situation in which the exploitative employer is also American (as happens in *The Last Truck*, in which GM is the villain) and a situation in which the overbearing capitalist is a foreigner. That Cao happens to be technically a Communist only makes things more confusing to his American employees, who feel trapped between the need for a job and the subservience to an employer coming from America's main political rival for world leadership.

Peter Debruge writes in his review that “if there was ever any kind of overt racism expressed toward the situation” presented in their documentary, Bogner and Reichert “either had their cameras turned the other way when it happened or chose not to include it in their film” (2019). This is not quite true. The Chinese are presented as racist in their frequent negative comments on the “fat fingers” and the laziness of their hard-to-train co-workers. The cultural training that management offers on American values might seem to celebrate American freedom but ends up presenting US workers as individualists with a strong sense of entitlement by no means willing to work in disciplined teams. On the other hand, the scenes filmed in China are intended to stress how workers are ruthlessly exploited there but also present Fuyao's employees as quite willing to accept harsh discipline and eagerly join in the company's over-enthusiastic celebrations. Nonetheless, the contrast between the lean, fast-moving Chinese bodies and the overweight, slow-moving American bodies (of diverse races and both genders) highlights Chinese dynamism while (perhaps unwittingly) signaling the inability of America to ever defeat its main business competitor.

David Fear notes that *American Factory* “goes to great pains to avoid easy finger-pointing or stock East-vs.-West villainy. Everyone has their reasons, even the somewhat aloof Chairman Cao; everyone has their familiar business practices that feel foreign or outright fucked-up to outsiders” (2019). That is in part correct but, arguably, only an outsider—neither American, nor Chinese—could strike the proper balance and present the situation with equanimity. Since both directors are American, the discourse of the film is necessarily lopsided, favoring the perspective of the US

workers. Apart from Cao, the other Chinese person who most often appears in the film is Wong, a friendly man who does his best to connect with his American co-workers. He represents, besides, all the 200 workers imported from China for a stretch of two years, forced by Cao to leave behind their families and accept moving to the USA with no extra income or else lose their jobs. Wong is, however, the only immigrant of his kind the film focuses on. When his friend Rob is terminated after two and a half years at the plant for being too slow at using a computer, Wong is seen next finally enjoying the company of his family. The lack of comment about whether this is a visit or their moving in from China produces the uncomfortable impression that Wong and his colleagues are ready to set in and take the jobs from Rob and the other American workers.

Given the situation of dominance in the film of the Chinese employer over the US employees, it is to be wondered whether the very title, *American Factory*, is ironic. The adjective American is mostly used as a badge of pride but, in this case, it highlights the fact that the factory may be in America but is in fact Chinese. This is a bitter reminder that the post-Cold War global economy set up to consolidate American world leadership is now in the hands of China. Whether this nation will export its Communist regime's values or eventually import the American sense of personal freedom—which was essential in the Fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989—remains to be seen.

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Sara Martín Alegre

## ENVIRONMENTAL ACTIVISM, ANIMAL RIGHTS, AND FOOD CONSUMPTION

Writing in the middle of the first (and hopefully last) Covid-19 crisis, it is now obvious that there is a close connection between the uncontrolled exploitation of nature and the current pandemic. We are putting at risk not only the survival of other species but of ours, whether we are wiped out by a plague that allows the planet to move on or whether we are extinguished when Earth becomes uninhabitable by our own actions. The ten documentaries in this section explore these issues from different angles, from the trash we freely choose to eat (Morgan Spurlock's *Super Size Me*, 2004) to how our actions cause natural catastrophes of brutal social consequences (*Trouble the Water*, 2008), passing through how we sadistically mistreat animals all over the world for absurd purposes (*Earthlings*, 2005). Regrettably, we found no room for *If a Tree Falls: A Story of the Earth Liberation Front* (Michael Curry, 2011) focused on the thin line dividing legitimate and illegitimate environmental activism and on how eco-terrorist is a label applied to demonize activists instead of the predatory corporations destroying Earth.

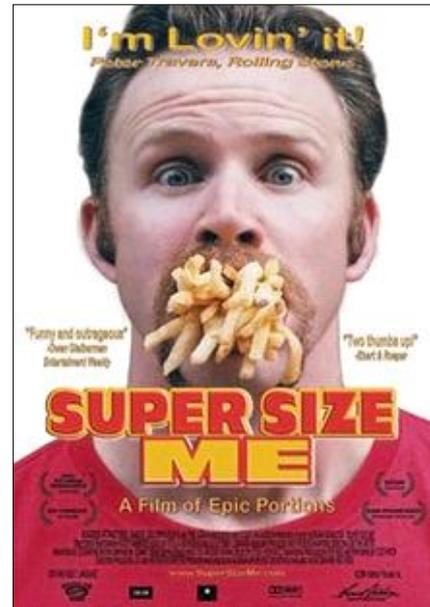
What emerges from this mixed bag of films in this section is that we seem to have entered an endless loop. *An Inconvenient Truth*, sponsored and narrated by former United States Vice President Al Gore offered back in 2006 key arguments about the very real dangers of climate change that are still being publicized years later in, for instance, *Before the Flood* (2016). Likewise, *Food, Inc.* (2009) already warned a decade ago that American agribusiness is killing the planet and failing to feed the persons by insisting on the dominance of cattle raising and by forcing farmers to accept genetically modified plants. *Cowspiracy: The Sustainability Secret* (2014) follows a similar path, outing besides the hypocrisy of key environmental groups. The big American corporations may win this sinister game but might end up losing in the long term if the planet simply gives up and stops sheltering us. *GasLand* (2010) shows what we know but still do too little about: oil and gas must be replaced as fast as possible with renewable power sources before we literally break Earth in smithereens.

*Project Nim* (2011) and *Blackfish* (2013) expose our deeply ingrained speciesism, presenting two very different cases of how we exploit animals for absurd ends. A chimp used for a rather unethical experiment in adoption with the backing of a major US university and a killer whale imprisoned to please ignorant SeaWorld crowds show how important it is to radically change our relationships with animals and stop thinking of Homo Sapiens as a species entitled to dominating the rest.

## **Super Size Me (2012): Unmasking McDonald's**

### **CREDITS**

**Directed by** Morgan Spurlock  
**Written by** Morgan Spurlock  
**Produced by** Morgan Spurlock, Joe Morley, David Pederson & Heather Winters  
**Music by** Steve Horowitz  
**Cinematography by** Scott Ambrozi  
**Film editing by** Stela Georgieva & Julie Bob Lombardi  
**Production companies** The Con, Kathbur Pictures, Studio On Hudson  
**Distributors** Samuel Goldwyn Films (theatrical), Roadside Attractions (theatrical), Showtime Independent Films (theatrical)  
**Runtime:** 1h 40'



### **MAIN AWARDS**

**Academy Awards (Oscars) (2004):** Best Documentary Feature (nominee)  
**Edinburgh International Film Festival (2004):** New Director's Award (winner)  
**International Documentary Association (2004):** Pare Lorentz Award (nominee)  
**Sundance Film Festival (2004):** Directing Award (winner), Grand Jury Prize (nominee)

### **OTHER NOTABLE DOCUMENTARY FILMS BY THE DIRECTOR**

*Where in the World Is Osama Bin Laden?* (2008), *The Greatest Movie Ever Sold* (2011), *Mansome* (2012), *Rats* (2016), *Super Size Me 2: Holy Chicken!* (2017)

### **REASONS TO SEE *Super Size Me***

- It depicts American society in its purest form. The film reflects on the issues American people face on a daily basis. It raises the question of "To what extent should we exercise personal responsibility?" in their eating habits and how the information—or lack of it—that they are provided with makes answering this a difficult task.
- As well as portraying the effects that the ubiquitous presence of fast food restaurants has in America, the documentary also attempts to tackle the source of this: the corporative system that controls the American Government, which only protects its own political and, ultimately, economic interests. This film, as well as

many others that came before (and after) it, throws light on the issue of how lobbies make a profit at the cost of the American population.

- Aside from dealing with the effects on American society, it has—or should have—an overall impact on how everyone sees fast food, its risks, and the need for a bigger awareness towards nutritional education. After watching this documentary, one should think twice before deciding where to eat out.

### CONNECTED WITH...

- *The Founder* (2016, fiction film), directed by John Lee Hancock. Written by Robert Siegel and starring Michael Keaton the film deals with Ray Kroc, the founder who took McDonald's away from their original owners, the McDonald brothers. It focuses on the quarrels and investment deals which took place when this new business was set up, as well as the treachery and ambition that reveal themselves as the brand becomes more and more successful.
- *That Sugar Film* (2014), directed by Damon Gameau. Written by Gameau himself, this Australian documentary film narrates an attempt to document the effects of a high sugar diet on a healthy body. Gameau takes on the challenge, as Spurlock did, submitting himself to a low-fat but high-sugar diet based on a variety of foodstuffs. His main aim is to denounce the sugar hidden in the food that we consume often thinking it is healthy.
- *Fat, Sick & Nearly Dead* (2010), directed by Joe Cross. This documentary film follows Cross in an inspiring personal mission to regain his health. Weighing 310lb and suffering from a debilitating autoimmune disease, he abandons his junk food diet and hits the road with juicer and generator in tow, vowing only to drink fresh fruit and vegetable juice for the next 60 days.

### RE/PRESENTING AMERICA IN *Super Size Me*

*Super Size Me* was conceived when two girls from New York sued the McDonald's corporation claiming that the company was responsible for their obesity—one was 14 and weighed 170 lbs (77kg) and the other was 19 and weighed 270 lbs (122.5 kg). The McDonald's lawyers argued that if the girls could prove that the intended purpose of the company was for its food to be eaten for every meal of every day, and that this proved to be unreasonably dangerous, they would be able to stake a legal claim. And so, Morgan Spurlock attempted to prove just that, beginning his project of eating at McDonald's for 30 days straight all his meals. He had to abide by the following rules: only super-size his meal when asked, solely eat food from McDonald's (including the water), eat everything on the menu at least once, and eat three meals a day. In order to keep track of his project he visited a series of health experts. A general practitioner, a gastroenterologist (and hepatologist), a cardiologist, a dietitian and nutritionist, and an exercise physiologist. All of them determined that he was in great shape (above average for his age). This was not the case at the end of the 30 days.

Spurlock's risky personal journey is accompanied in the film by the many interviews he carried out with experts on the various fields connected with food consumption, from nutrition experts to corporate businesspeople. Amongst them we see David Satcher, a former US Surgeon General who was one of the first people to draw attention to the issue of obesity in America and go as far as to call it a national epidemic (which is how it is understood nowadays). At the time the documentary was released, obesity was second to smoking as a preventable cause of death in America. Since then it has become the first one.

The documentary is structured from specific to generic. While Spurlock is on his only-McDonald's diet, he takes a look at how the corporation itself works, beginning with their food. He, alongside the experts, analyses the evolution of the sizes as well as the contents of their products. Spurlock successfully draws light on the fact that the portions offered by McDonald's are intrinsically instigating people to eat more than the average recommended calorie intake, i.e. 2000-2500 calories a day (depending on sex, height, weight, and daily exercise). To give an example, the largest size of fries McDonald's offers, the *super size*, contains over 600 calories. Unfortunately, this is not just a matter of calories. A healthy diet is achieved through a balanced intake of all kinds of food, which we can see in the nutritional chart on the products that we buy. These labels usually specify the number of calories and nutrients and relate them to the Daily Value (%DV), that is, the recommended daily intake of fat, sugar, fiber, protein, etc. To put it into perspective, the DV for sugar is 25 (for women) to 37.5 (for men) grams a day. That would mean that Spurlock, by the end of the 30-day period, should have consumed somewhere between 750 to 1,125 grams of sugar (1.65 lbs. to 2.48 lbs.). However, that was nowhere near the truth. As they analyzed the nutritional diary he had been keeping, his doctors concluded he had ingested about 30 lbs. of sugar, 91.7-94.5% over the recommended intake.

Moving away from the product itself, Spurlock talks with various people focusing on the direct implications of the presence McDonald's has on America. From body-image issues to coronary heart diseases, he exposes the consequences of a corporation like McDonald's having as much power and influence over the American population. This follows a long list of future medical problems people who have a high-fat diet or high-sugar diet are likely to develop; the Secretary of Health himself reveals statistics as horrifying as the data that 1 in 3 American children suffer from diabetes.

From this, Spurlock moves on to the source of this extensive presence and influence: marketing. McDonald's spends \$1.4 billion on marketing campaigns, not just in advertising their food, but selling the brand itself. To Americans, who are exposed on average to 10,000 ads a year (95% of which are about sugared cereal, soda, fast food, etc.), McDonald's is not just the restaurant, it is the toys they sell, it is the cartoons they show on TV, it is the playground where their kids can play, it is a brand that goes beyond their product. And this brand targets the most impressionable minds that (obviously) expose themselves to the advertisement: children.

The film cares particularly to explain that the most vulnerable people exposed to all of this are children, by going to (public) schools to see the food they serve, interviewing children to understand who or what aspects of American culture they recognize. Some of them recognized George Washington, none of them recognized Jesus, one of them recognized Wendy (from the restaurant chain Wendy's), but ALL of them knew who the clown Ronald McDonald was. With the help of John F. Banzhaf

(the lawyer that sued the tobacco companies), Spurlock's team draws a parallelism between these marketing campaigns and the toys that tobacco companies used to sell to make children addicted to the idea of smoking before they could smoke or even knew what smoking was. This kind of devious strategies are carried out by corporations all the time, and so the documentary takes a look at how they work in the specific case of fast food.

The last part of the film focuses on the origin of it all, the mastermind behind this big, successful corporation. Perhaps the most relevant interview is with the VP for Grocery Manufacturers of America (GMA), Gene Grabowski. GMA represents the interests of many food corporations, to name a few: The Hershey Company, Kellogg Company, Pepsico, The Coca-Cola Company, Nestlé USA Inc, and H.J. Heinz Company. Representing them means that the CEOs of these companies are part of the board of directors. And this interview is not only the most relevant, but one of the very few this kind of top executive has granted; most of them at McDonald's and similar corporations evaded Spurlock's questions or simply ignored his calls. This may have to do with the risks of facing a liberal documentarian in an unfriendly kind of interview. If you slip once, it's on camera and the format of the documentary will support the veracity of the statement and use it against you. Sure enough, during the credits the film implies that Grabowski was fired after the release of the film, presumably for acknowledging that "we're part of the problem, and we're also part of the solution."

Peter Bradshaw wrote for *The Guardian* that "To add to the important book on the subject" by Eric Schlosser, *Fast Food Nation*, (...) documentary-maker Morgan Spurlock has produced a very funny and disquieting film about McDonald's in the Mooresque style, complete with graphics, wacky voiceovers, sympathetic interviews with experts and unreturned phone calls from evasive flacks" (2004). I agree with Bradshaw's comment that the documentary has a *Mooresque* style, inspired by Michael Moore. However, I would argue that Spurlock is a much more charismatic documentarian and, most importantly, more down to earth. He's "brilliantly and horribly simple" idea, to quote Bradshaw, has more power than any staged "showdown with a corporate kingpin", as seen in *Roger & Me* or other Moore films.

An anonymous reviewer on IMDB noted that "There is no 'Ronald is Satan' message here, and no 'look how bad Americans are.' It is simply a down-to-earth, well-paced, insightful and humorous look at how insidiously entrenched The United Corporation of America has become in our institutions and minds, and the consequences therein" (2005). I chose to include this review because, even though it was written by someone without a creditable background as a film critic, they have a point when they say the documentary deals with "how insidiously entrenched The United Corporation of America has become in our institutions and minds". Spurlock's film is in no way different from other documentaries, at least not radically. But it is interesting how the only factor that sets it apart from other anti-corporation films is that the topic it discussed is more grounded on daily experience, and relates better to average American people.

Caroline Westbrook, writing for the BBC, observes that "Although the tone of the film is light-hearted, there's a serious message here, which comes across best when Spurlock is travelling across the US to see the effect fast food has had on the country." However, she seems to contradict herself when she goes on to say that "[u]ltimately, the high comedy factor and over-familiarity of the subject matter render

it less powerful than other recent documentaries” (2004). In my view, this documentary has plenty of power and has helped shape the image that most of us have of McDonald’s as something to be wary of. It’s not just that their food is not too healthy, or that kids might choke on the little pieces of their toys. There’s much more behind this corporation and Spurlock’s documentary shows exactly that.

Although *Super Size Me* exposes not only McDonald’s but all the American food corporations that work in similar styles and have a similar impact, not much has changed since it was released, as Spurlock admitted in a recent interview (2019). The marketing is better, and the new look of the restaurants has made us believe that things have changed, but the food is the same, or practically. Taking down a corporation with the huge national and international presence of McDonald’s is going to take much more than a well-crafted, down to earth documentary.

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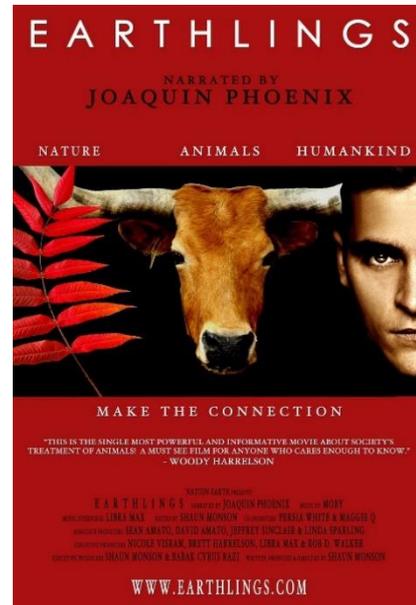
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Helena Martínez Pijuan

# **Earthlings (2005): Humankind's Blindness to Species Equality**

## **CREDITS**

**Directed by** Shaun Monson  
**Written by** Shaun Monson  
**Produced by** Libra Max, Shaun Monson, Nicole Visram  
**Music by** Brian Carter, Natalie Merchant, Moby, Gabriel Isaac Mounsey, Barry Wood  
**Cinematography by** Mark M. Rissi  
**Film editing by** Shaun Monson  
**Production company** Nation Earth  
**Distributor** Nation Earth  
**Runtime** 1h 35 min



## **MAIN AWARDS**

**Artist Film Festival 2005:** Best Documentary Feature (winner)  
**Boston International Film Festival:** Best Content Award (winner)  
**San Diego Film Festival:** Best Documentary Film (winner), Humanitarian Award (Joaquin Phoenix, winner)

## **OTHER NOTABLE DOCUMENTARY FILMS BY THE DIRECTOR**

*Bad Actors* (2000), *Holy War*, *Un-Holy Victory* (2001), *Unity* (2015)

## **REASONS TO SEE *Earthlings***

- It is a hard-to-watch-yet-necessary documentary that unmasks the cruel, harsh reality animals endure in the hands of profit-makers with unquestionably real footage.
- It puts forward the paradox that is the human principle of equality. This has been around and defended by many throughout history, however, the documentary states how easy it was (and still is) to exclude living beings from the right of being equal under pretexts of race, class and gender. Departing from this premise, the film comments on the need to expand the principle of equality to all earthlings and end humanity's dominion over the rest of species.
- It gives the audience an overview of the different industries that profit from the exploitation of animals. This is important because, while there are quite a lot of

documentaries about factory farming and food production, other controversial practices such as pet breeding or the use of animals in the fashion industry tend to go more unnoticed.

### CONNECTED WITH...

- *Best Friend Forgotten* (2004), directed by Julie Lofton. This documentary, hosted by David Duchovny, sheds light on the issue of pet overpopulation. *Best Friend Forgotten* makes the viewer accompany Oreo the cat and Clover the dog as they face the harsh realities of pet overpopulation, while it also invites them to take a look at discussions among leaders of the US Government and animal right groups about the controversial practice of euthanasia, spaying, neutering and pet overpopulation's impact on communities.
- *Hidden Crimes* (1986), directed by Javier Burgos. Through exclusive secret footage the Animal Liberation Front took at animal research facilities in California and Pennsylvania, this documentary denounces the cruelty and abuses of animal experimentation. Moreover, it exposes the economic repercussions of this practice and also the unimaginable damage those pseudo-scientific practitioners inflict upon human health.
- *The Animals Film* (1981), directed by Myriam Alaux and Victor Schonfeld. Narrated by Julie Christie, this film offers an eye-opening analysis of the exploitation of animals for the benefit of humans in modern society. It shows how humans use and profit from animals turning them to food, pets, source of entertainment and research, while incorporating secret footage and excerpts from cartoons and propaganda and also giving voice to the international animal rights movement.

### RE/PRESENTING AMERICA IN *Earthlings*

*Earthlings* (2005) deals with how humanity has shaped the lives of all living creatures and, more specifically, animals, so that they are in a relation of submission to humans. Shaun Monson's documentary is divided into five different parts, and each section is dedicated to one of the five main uses animals have for humans: pets, food, clothing, entertainment, and scientific research. The segments of the film, therefore, presents animals as subordinated to humankind, their only value coming from whether we can obtain something from them or not. Moreover, Monson's film also denounces how cruelly we treat and even get rid of animals when they no longer serve any purpose for us.

It is interesting to note that *Earthlings* (2005) began as a series of PSAs regarding spaying and neutering pets in 1999. PSA or Public Service Announcements work as a message aimed at the general public with the objective of raising awareness and changing public attitudes towards an issue. Director Shaun Monson filmed a few Los Angeles animal shelters and what he saw disturbed him so much that the project soon evolved into a documentary. Since it was the first topic Monson investigated regarding animal cruelty, 'pets' is the first section of the film. The film was released six

years after Monson first started filming not only due to how difficult it was to get footage, but also to the lack of distributors.

From the very beginning, through actor Joaquin Phoenix's voiceover, the narration poses a moral dilemma to the viewer that has to do with our existing principle of equality. Nowadays, we understand equality as the right to live and receive the same treatment regardless of race, gender, class, nationality, religious beliefs, or personal background. When this principle of equality is not present, the society in question encourages a clear power-based relationship of supremacy between the oppressor who exploits the one who does not have power and the oppressed; this happens between men and women in sexist situations or between whites and blacks in racist crimes. Nevertheless, our current principle of equality is limited to humans and does not contemplate animal rights, or only in very limited ways. The documentary, right from the very first images, clearly advocates that animals rights should be respected by presenting the viewers with a concept they might not be familiar with but that they should know: 'speciesism'. Speciesism is the ideology by which humans tend to dominate and exploit other earthlings for their own benefit, therefore violating the principle of equality by putting the interest of the human species above the wellbeing of other species.

This documentary has been described as one of the hardest films one could ever watch, and I could not agree more with this statement. *Earthlings* (2005) provides the viewer with explicit footage of animal torture which cannot be justified by any means. While nowadays we are more or less aware of the horrible conditions cattle raised for the food industry live and die in, the film gives a sickening 'reality check' regarding other industries that perhaps we do not know that much about, such as pet breeding or animal training for entertainment purposes. The footage is indeed horrifying and, when you think you have seen the worst of it, the next section proves you wrong. If you have ever had a pet or you simply love animals, this will not be an easy documentary to watch.

In fact, most of the reviewers have confessed to have stopped the film a few times to take in all they were watching. In this regard, vegetarian journalist Matt Frazier writes in his blog that he neither could find the words "to describe the gruesome scenes in *Earthlings*". However, after having suffered through an hour and a half of the most sickening footage he had ever seen, he acknowledged that "there's tremendous power in the shock-and-awe approach" (2010). I completely see eye to eye with Frazier. There is no word that could describe watching *Earthlings* better than "to suffer" the documentary. It will not leave anyone indifferent, whether the viewer is a fur enthusiast or the most committed vegan. That is, in my opinion, the most powerful achievement of this film and its approach to the topic.

In the blog *Evolving Wellness*, Evita Ochel writes that "if we stay unaware or ignorant, paralyzed by fear or annoyed by the inconvenience to change, we are directly contributing to so many of these horrors and allowing them to happen" (2009). By depicting so explicitly the needless cruelty animals suffer in human hands, the documentary cleverly denounces that, even though change can be inconvenient or difficult, it is necessary. Otherwise, you are supporting the perpetuation of what you are watching. As archbishop Desmond Tutu claimed, "if you are neutral to situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor". Nonetheless, Katherine Sullivan states in her review that "although difficult to watch, *Earthlings* is an extremely moving

film that does a fantastic job of detailing the impact that humankind's mistreatment of animals has on our planet" (2017). That is absolutely true. As hard as it is to watch it, it is a necessary film that considers in depth not only humanity's dependence on animals, but also the impact of this dependence on environmental issues such as climate change.

In conclusion, *Earthlings* (2005) is an eye-opening film that goes beyond exposing the different industries that profit from animal cruelty and reflects on the legitimacy of humanity's wish to dominate over the rest of our planet's living species. It claims that animals should not be measured by humankind, that is to say, by how useful or not they can be for humans. In addition, it states that the principle of equality makes no sense if it is not applied to all earthlings, for violence is still violence no matter who the victim is. Sadly, these statements currently resonate more than ever with America, and that is the link that can be established between the documentary's narrative and the USA. Even though the US Declaration of Independence of 1776 stressed the self-evident truth "that all men are created equal", slavery was legal until 1865, and it cannot be denied that nowadays racism, sexism and other forms of discrimination continue to be present in American society. Therefore, in order to see a world ruled by the principle of equality, *Earthlings* (2005) claims it is as important for humanity to erase speciesism as it is to end any other kind of human prejudice.

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Naiara López Alcázar

## **An Inconvenient Truth (2006): Fight for the Planet**

### **CREDITS**

**Directed by** Davis Guggenheim  
**Written by** Al Gore  
**Produced by** Lawrence Bender, Scott Z. Burns, Lesley Chilcott, Laurie Davis  
**Music by** Michael Brook  
**Cinematography by** Davis Guggenheim and Robert Richman  
**Film Editing by** Jay Cassidy and Dan Swietlik  
**Production company** Lawrence Bender Productions, Participant Productions  
**Distributors** Paramount Vantage USA (theatrical)  
**Runtime** 1h 39'



### **MAIN AWARDS**

**Academy awards (Oscars) (2007):** Best Achievement in Music Written for Motion Pictures, Original Song (winner), Best Documentary Feature (winner)  
**Broadcast Film Critics Association Awards (2007):** Critics Choice Award - Best Documentary Feature (winner)  
**National Board of Review, USA (2006):** Best Documentary (Top Five Documentaries)  
**National Society of Film Critics Awards, USA (2007):** Best Non-Fiction Film (winner)

### **OTHER NOTABLE DOCUMENTARY FILMS BY THE DIRECTOR**

*It Might Get Loud* (2008), *Waiting for Superman* (2010), *From the Sky Down* (2011), *Teach* (2013), *He Named Me Malala* (2015), *Inside Bill's Brain: Decoding Bill Gates* (2019, mini-series)

### **REASONS TO SEE *An Inconvenient Truth***

- In this documentary, Guggenheim presents an illustrated talk on climate by Al Gore, aimed at alerting the public to the urgent “planetary emergency” due to global warming.
- Part of Guggenheim’s film works as Al Gore’s autobiography and re-enacts incidents from his life story, which influenced his concerns about environmental issues.
- It is a critique of American politicians, specially the Republican party, about how they had dealt so far with climate change basically by denying it.

## CONNECTED WITH...

- *An Inconvenient Sequel: Truth to Power* (2017), directed by Bonni Cohen and Jon Shenk. The sequel of *An Inconvenient Truth*, the film addresses the progress made to fight against the problem and Gore's global efforts to persuade leaders to invest in renewable energy, leading to the landmark signing of 2016 Paris Agreement. Later on the documentary was re-edited to expand on Trump's role as an antagonist, after his withdrawing of the United States from the Paris Agreement.
- *The 11th Hour* (2007), directed by Nadia and Leila Conners. A documentary film on the state of the natural environment created, produced, co-written and narrated by Leonardo DiCaprio. The documentary shows the contribution of over 50 politicians, scientists, and environmental activists, from Mikhail Gorbachev to Stephen Hawking, passing through journalist Armand Betscher. The film documents the dangerous problems which the planet is facing, such as global warming, deforestation, mass species extinction, and depletion of the oceans' habitats.
- *Time to Choose* (2015), directed by Charles Ferguson. Ferguson turns his camera to address worldwide climate change challenges and solutions. The film features the narration of Oscar Isaac, this documentary makes people understand not only what we are doing wrong, but what we can do to fix this global problem and shows interviews with world-renowned leaders, scientists, and so on, remarking their fight to save our planet.

## RE/PRESENTING AMERICA IN *An Inconvenient Truth*

*An Inconvenient Truth* presents in a unique way Al Gore's popular lecture about climate change, which works to raise awareness about the situation and as an autobiography. Al Gore is an American politician and environmentalist who was Vice-President during Bill Clinton's presidency from 1993 to 2001. Later on, Al Gore was selected as the Democratic nominee for the 2000 presidential election. He lost against George W. Bush; there was a scandal connected with the possibly manipulated counting of votes in Florida but the US Supreme Court ruled in favor of Bush. After his term as Vice-president ended, Gore became an author and an environmental activist, whose work focused on the climate change, which earned him the Nobel Peace Prize in 2007.

The documentary starts with the accident of Al Gore's 6-year-old son. He had to stay in hospital for several months and during that period of time, Al Gore started to think about the future his boy would have depending on how the planet is treated, which motivated him to start investigating the consequences of climate change. Another inspiration for his study was a former college professor of his, who lectured on environmentalism. The film shows next Al Gore presenting his lecture about climate change, what it is and the outcome for the planet and humanity if things go wrong. *An Inconvenient Truth* was a revolutionary documentary fourteen years ago, raising issues now well known. Most people are aware of what climate change is and its consequences and, although we are seeing some solutions today and what has been

already done to solve this problem, there is a long way to go and the clock is ticking against us.

One of the most interesting points about this documentary is how it is edited. The film goes back and forth between the lecture and Al Gore's own life and what critical moments have led him to this precise situation. Guggenheim not only shows the struggles the planet is suffering to survive but connects them as well with Al Gore's own life struggles. However, the main focus of the film is the lecture, showcasing plenty of evidence about how humanity is destroying the planet without any control. From extinguishing animals for pure selfishness to use them as products, to drying the land out of water and destroying the planet's rainforest. The technological advances have also been one of the most important elements of destruction of the planet, as the industries are releasing contaminant fumes that destroy the ozone layer, and as a consequence, the Earth's temperature increases, causing dryness and deforestation. Nevertheless, Al Gore not only shows the pessimistic side of human impact on the planet but also presents some solutions to the ecological problem, highlighting that humanity, as a whole, is not lost and there is still time to make things right, saving the planet and ourselves. Throughout the course of the film, Al Gore as a narrator also explains to the viewer what he has been doing before and after preparing his lectures, as he has been travelling around the world trying to convince presidents and companies to join his fight and do the right thing to save the planet.

Outdated to a certain point as the documentary can be, it is still as shocking and alarming as it was when it was released because even though the Governments are taking action, we are still destroying the planet and not switching to renewable ecological energies, full recycling and other effective strategies for change. The scariest part of *An Inconvenient Truth* is how some of the predictions Al Gore shows in his lecture are already being fulfilled and are worse than it was expected fourteen years ago, as for example the melting of the Poles, the rise of the temperatures and the ensuing rise of the sea level. But as dramatic as the situation may seem, Guggenheim's film also shows that there is still hope before we get to the point of no-return.

Paul Arendt states in his review that "Over the course of 90 minutes [Gore] explains, in simple but unpatronizing terms, just how very badly we have screwed up the planet. There are diagrams to this effect, although they all seem to show the same, alarming image: a single line, climbing towards disaster" (2006). This is an opinion I do not completely agree with. It is true that Al Gore shows how badly we are destroying the planet but as I stated before, his talk not only shows what humanity is doing incorrectly but also what we are doing to solve the many problems, how countries are fighting back and making laws that are environmentally friendly. Gore emphasizes that humanity has not given up yet on the planet and how American society is fighting to save the Earth opposing their elected representatives and President.

Desson Thomson argues that "While Gore's onstage presentation tells us nothing new, it has a renewed—call it recycled—potency, in light of a growing scientific consensus about changing weather patterns. There will be those speculators who see, in their organic tea leaves, the stirrings of a presidential run. But for viewers of any stripe, there's something perhaps even more fascinating here. Between the lines, *An Inconvenient Truth* is a quintessentially American story of reinvention" (2006). This is correct and as I have stated before, the documentary does not show us anything new, but it has that power to awaken people's awareness even today. It is true, however,

that the end of the lecture is only focused on America's power to rise up and reinvent themselves when this is a matter that calls for a global solution and when the USA are responsible for the greatest share of world pollution. Throughout the whole documentary, Al Gore criticizes the inactivity of the Republican US Government and American companies to fight global warming but he seems to rely too much on his fellow American citizens to fight patterns of consumption that the USA has sold to the rest of the world and that is not really ready to abandon.

As Scott notes in his review "Luckily, [this] happens to be a well-made documentary, edited crisply enough to keep it from feeling like 90 minutes of C-Span and shaped to give Mr. Gore's argument a real sense of drama. As unsettling as it can be, it is also intellectually exhilarating, and, like any good piece of pedagogy, whets the appetite for further study" (2006). Scott calls Guggenheim's film "a good place to start, and to continue, a process of education that could hardly be more urgent" and "a necessary film". I completely agree with this opinion, since in 2006, humanity barely knew anything about climate change but we do now. The documentary worked as pedagogy not only for those who did not know a lot about climate change but also for those who did not believe the crisis was real and instigated researchers to investigate further, raising our collective consciousness about how humankind is destroying the planet and wanting to find ways to save it.

As I stated before, there still is a long way to go in order to save the planet and humanity. It can be stated that the most problematic aspect of this issue is the United States of America, since as Al Gore shows how whereas the rest of the world are taking action to change things and be environmentally friendly, the USA authorities are still denying the problem and doing nothing to fight back, even withdrawing from the 2016 Paris Agreement (during Trump's current Presidency). Al Gore talks about the power that the American population has and their spirit to fight against every problem they face as a society, yet he sounds overoptimistic and even chauvinistic. Americans need to join a common fight, and stop voting for corrupt, selfish politicians that are more interested in the economy than in fighting against the end of humanity and of the world. America alone cannot be the solution to every problem in the world, and needs to consider, to begin with, to what extent the world is suffering for decisions made in America and by Americans.

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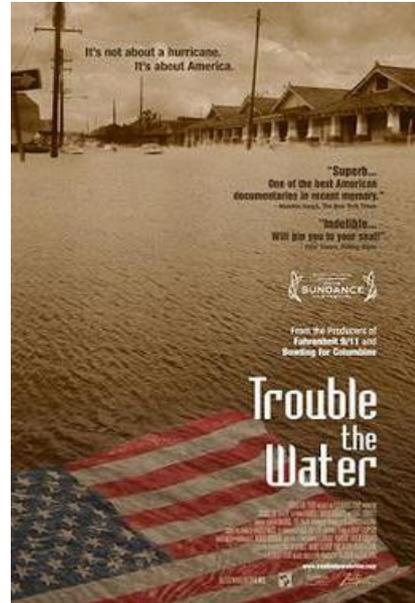
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Laura Hidalgo Gutiérrez

## **Trouble the Water (2008): A Story of Survival**

### **CREDITS**

**Directed by** Tia Lessin, Carl Deal  
**Produced by** Tia Lessin, Carl Deal, Amir Bar-Lev, Todd Woody Richman  
**Music by** Neil Davidge, Robert Del Naja  
**Cinematography by** PJ Raval, Nadia Hallgren, Kimberly Rivers Roberts  
**Film editing by** T. Woody Richman  
**Production companies** Elsewhere Film, Louverture Films, Zeitgeist Films  
**Distributors** Zeitgeist Films (theatrical)  
**Runtime** 1h 38'



### **MAIN AWARDS**

**Academy Awards (Oscars) (2008):** Best Documentary (nominee)  
**Emmy Awards - News & Documentary (2010):** Outstanding Informational Programming - Long Form (nominee), Outstanding Individual Achievement in a Craft (Research) (nominee)  
**Full Frame Documentary Film Festival (2008):** Full Frame/Working Films Award (winner); Jury Award - Best Picture (winner), Kathleen Bryan Edwards Award for Human Rights (winner)  
**Sundance Film Festival (2008):** Best Documentary (winner)

### **OTHER NOTABLE DOCUMENTARY FILMS BY THE DIRECTOR(S)**

**By Tia Lessin:** *Behind the Labels* (2001)  
**By Carl Deal and Tia Lessin:** *Citizen Koch* (2013)

### **REASONS TO SEE Trouble the Water**

- Lessin and Deal offer a very different perspective of what happened on the 28th of August 2005 in New Orleans when Hurricane Katrina hit the one displayed by the media, privileging the point of view of the victims.
- Their film denounces the mismanagement of the catastrophe by the US Government.

- *Trouble the Water* goes beyond the aftermath of the natural disaster itself and attempts to portray the neglect of the local working-class African American community, a product of centuries-long racism.

### CONNECTED WITH...

- *When the Levees Broke*. (2006–2007), directed by Spike Lee. This TV mini-series documents, like *Trouble the Water* but more extensively, the consequences of Hurricane Katrina for the African-American community of New Orleans. The series focuses on the mismanagement of the situation by the US Government after the flooding and portrays the indignation and exasperation of the victims for receiving little help from the authorities after the calamity. In order to depict the social impact that Katrina and the post-Katrina period had on the locals, the documentary offers a set of survival tales narrated by the victims.
- *Katrina Cop in the Superdome* (2010), directed by Paul Lisy. This documentary film approaches the impact of Hurricane Katrina through the eyes of an African-American member of the Police Department in New Orleans. It deals with the conflict between obedience and morality of those who had to execute orders from the US Government knowing the negative repercussion these orders would have on the locals. It presents, moreover, the severe political tensions that arose during the environmental and social crisis.
- *Fear No Gumbo* (2016), directed by Kimberly Rivers Roberts. This is a documentary film that serves as a continuation of the film *Trouble the Water*, for it presents the situation of the community of New Orleans ten years after being devastated by Hurricane Katrina in 2005. In *Fear No Gumbo* Kimberly Rivers Roberts takes once more her camera to report how Louisiana's African-American civilians are still recovering economically and emotionally from the consequences of the natural disaster. In her film, the director aims to call once more for social justice and uses her skills as a rap singer to denounce the injustices that her community was, and still is, enduring.

### RE/PRESENTING AMERICA IN *Trouble the Water*

*Trouble the Water* is a documentary film that provides a first-hand experience of the consequences that Hurricane Katrina had for the working-class, African-American community of New Orleans, Louisiana. The natural disaster took place on 28th of August 2005, two weeks after the area was evacuated, when the levees protecting the city broke. However, not all the citizens had the physical or financial means to abandon the worst hit districts. The unprivileged ones did not receive any kind of help from the US Government and, consequently, had to remain in their homes, awaiting for the worst to happen. When the storm ceased, 80% of the neighborhood was flooded and the number of victims remained unknown. A central part of the documentary reports the weeks and months after Katrina, showing the emotional and financial struggle that the victims had to endure after such a devastating event.

Hurricane Katrina was expected to affect the area of New Orleans, Louisiana, on the announced date and there was if not much at least sufficient time for preparations. With a wind speed of more than 280 km/h, it was considered a first-rank menace for the public safety. The Government of the United States, led by the former President George W. Bush, decided to implement measures for the evacuation of the area two weeks before the arrival of the hurricane. Although many citizens could leave the district successfully, more than 100,000 people did not have the financial means to flee.

Amongst the persons left behind were the Roberts, a young African-American married couple who recorded the experience of being in the eye of the storm with their own video camera. Their recording allows us to witness the suffering and desperation of the survivors of the natural disaster and shows how, left without any kind of assistance or service, the victims sought each other's help to avoid being drowned inside their homes or later die of starvation. When the gale faded out, the whole neighborhood was flooded, which made it impossible for thousands of people to still inhabit their homes. Regardless of the gravity of the situation, the Government did not provide aid nor accommodation to the refugees. Left without any place to go, the locals asked permission to occupy a Naval Military Base about to be dismantled, yet their access was denied under the threat of using firepower in retaliation. As a result, thousands of people looked for shelter in the most elevated areas of the district, including roads and clearings, and the crowd soon experienced a growing sense of discontent and worry, as the names and quantity of victims remained unknown a month after the natural disaster took place.

The documentary emphasizes the exasperating inefficiency of the search parties, whose work was often carried out by the citizens themselves, in their attempt to look for survivors among the rubble. Two months after Katrina, the US Government initiated a bailing out plan to provide financial support to the victims. However, the funding process was slow and lax, and for some families months went by before they could enjoy the revenue. The last segment of the film shows the state of the city one year after the hurricane, altogether with the citizens' attempt to commemorate the more than 1,484 victims that perished during the storm. However, this commemorative demonstration was perceived as a menace by the authorities and, thereby, it was quickly repressed by the Police, which suggests that President Bush wanted the Katrina incident to be preferably forgotten, if not erased, from the history of the United States.

*Trouble the Water* offers a pungent critique of the Bush's Government's negligence after Hurricane Katrina and serves as a call to social justice by giving voice to those who are expelled from society because of their race and social class. As reviewer Matthew Lucas puts it, *Trouble the Water* "Invites us to step into the shoes of people who the Government forgot, and demands that we refuse to do the same" (2008). The directors' purpose is, precisely, to depict what was really going on in New Orleans after having been devastated, for the media provided little evidence, if any, of the suffering that the population was experiencing and the lack of assistance that they were enduring. In a way, the documentary could be labeled as activist in its essence, as it clearly advocates for human rights; not by taking direct action, but by providing irrefutable evidence of the struggle that the unprivileged ones undergo at the cost of the authorities' decisions. This makes it difficult for the audience to adopt a critical

attitude towards the pro-human rights approach of the documentary, as it is based on actual facts that can hardly leave the viewer indifferent.

Marjorie Baumgarten states that “The Roberts are unforgettable figures, and their insiders’ perspective and ultimate survival and rebirth provide an exhilarating example of how wondrous things can emerge from the flood” (2008). It is interesting to see the metaphorical way in which the word flood is used by this reviewer. It is thanks to the flooding caused by Katrina that the long-lasting tensions between the US Government and the country’s marginalized communities paradoxically resurfaced. The first community to be considered is the African-American. The issue of racial discrimination has been present in the United States even after the abolition of slavery, which initiated a systematic oppression of African-Americans under the power of a white supremacist society. The documentary explores how the absolute abandonment of a predominantly African-American neighborhood by the Government suggests that the issue of post-slavery racism is still present in American society. What is more, this racial issue goes hand in hand with another type of marginalization: the one due to social class. Since the district that suffered the fury of the hurricane is precisely characterized by being an impoverished working-class area, it was to be expected that it would lack the financial means to carry out the evacuation plan. Nonetheless, those who most needed to be aided by the Government did not receive any kind of monetary help whatsoever to ensure their survival. The film puts special emphasis on the lack of financial support that the locals received before and after Katrina, which evidences how the political powers deliberately determined to ignore the helpless.

Ian Buckwalter states that “The most affecting footage of Hurricane Katrina ever seen comes from an amateur camcorder bought on the street for twenty bucks” (2008). This is very accurate. While it is true that the Roberts’ footage appears to be rather raw and unprofessional, the role that it plays is crucial to understand the essence of the documentary. Narrating a story of survival in potentially mortal circumstances, Kimberly Robert’s homemade rustic videotape not only evokes a sense of realism, but also serves as an irrevocable proof of the terrible conditions that some New Orleans citizens had to endure. The footage and editing, thus, serve as essential device to support the documentary’s aim to criticize the authorities’ poor decisions, together with its attempt to achieve social justice.

Although Katrina was a punctual incident, it exposed many of the issues that are still relevant more than a decade later regarding race and class in the US. The many narrative voices of the victims together with the realist recording and editing, make it almost impossible to dissent from the critical tone and the political activism of the film. *Trouble the Water* not only advocates for social justice, but also presents a disturbing question that goes beyond being part or not of the unprivileged communities; it makes us wonder whether the US Government and other high authorities of the nation are really concerned about the American citizens’ well-being or if, contrarily, their interests are aligned only with the economic profit that they can get from them.

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Mariona Llacuna Vidal

## **Food, Inc. (2009): What we Really Eat**

### **CREDITS**

**Directed by** Robert Kenner

**Written by** Robert Kenner, Elise Pearlstein, Kim Roberts

**Produced by** Robert Kenner, Elise Pearlstein, Melissa Robledo, Eric Schlosser

**Music by** Mark Adler

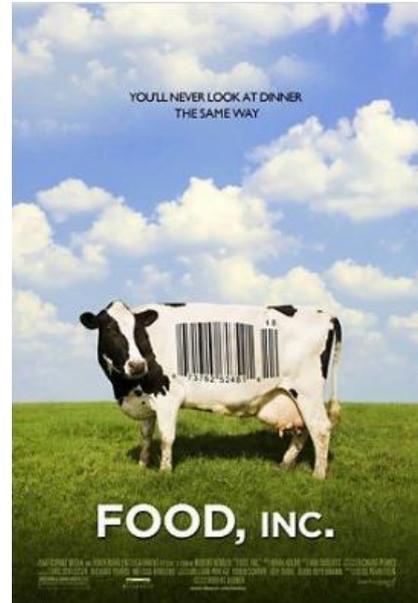
**Cinematography by** Richard Pearce

**Film editing by** Kim Roberts

**Production companies:** Magnolia Pictures, Participants, River Road Entertainment

**Distributors:** Magnolia Pictures (theatrical)

**Runtime:** 1h 34'



### **MAIN AWARDS**

**Academy Award (Oscar) (2010):** Best Documentary (nominee)

**Gotham Award (2009):** Best Documentary (winner)

**International Documentary Association (2009):** Feature Documentary (nominee), Pare Lorentz Award (nominee)

**News & Documentary Emmy Awards (2011):** Outstanding Informational Programming - Long Form (winner), Best Documentary (winner)

### **OTHER NOTABLE DOCUMENTARY FILMS BY THE DIRECTOR**

*The Lost Fleet of Guadalcanal* (1993), *When Strangers Click* (2011), *Merchants of Doubt* (2014), *Command and Control* (2016), *The Confession Killer* (2019, mini-series, with Taki Oldhan)

### **REASONS TO SEE *Food, Inc.***

- This documentary film shows us what Americans really eat and how their ultra-processed, unhealthy food is controlled by corporations.
- Kenner shows how these corporations force farmers to ill-treat the animals, also further mistreated in the slaughterhouse.
- The film also shows how the health of US citizens is affected by the food they consume because of the additives it contains.

## CONNECTED WITH...

- *Food Chains* (2014), directed by Sanjay Rawal. This documentary film deals with what agricultural labor in America is like, exploring the poor, unhealthy working conditions of migrant farm workers in Florida's tomato industry. Because of the exploitation these workers suffer, the CIW (Coalition of Immokalee Workers) is created in order to improve their circumstances. Rawal shows workers' campaigning to be better paid, including a hunger strike.
- *Fed Up* (2014), directed by Stephanie Soechtig. The film deals with worrying health issues like childhood obesity or diabetes and how it is affecting the life of the American society. Soechtig shows that processed food contains plenty of sugar, though consumers may not be aware of this, and that Federal food regulations are woefully outdated. The health of children and adults is subordinated to the interests of the sugar lobbies protecting the industry.
- *Food Choices* (2016), directed by Michael Siewierski. The film deals with the impact that food choices have on human health, the environment and the lives of other species. To do so, Siewierski interviewed along three years of filming a long list of experts, among them popular names like Dr. T. Colin Campbell, Dr. Richard Oppenlander, Rich Roll, Joe Cross, Dr. John McDougall, Capitan Paul Watson, Dr. Toni Bark, and a long etcetera.

## RE/PRESENTING AMERICA IN *Food, Inc.*

*Food, Inc.* is a documentary film that deals with several topics: how the food industry works, how animals and workers are mistreated, how the food we consume affects our health, among others. After watching this documentary, you will not be able to look at the food you are eating in the same way you did before. The documentary starts by showing how companies lie to the customers. They use the image of rural America in order to commercialize their food. They sell products claiming that they are fresh from the farm when they are not. In fact, the products that Americans buy at the supermarket are the same products that they buy at fast food restaurants. The reason is that the same five big corporations that own the food industry in America distribute the same food to supermarkets and fast food restaurant chains.

Those corporations produce plenty of meat. To do so they have hired farmers around the country who must obey their instructions about how they have to raise and keep the animals. For example, chickens have to live in dark houses with tunnel ventilation and its feed always contains antibiotics. Chickens grow bigger and in a shorter period of time in this way. If the farmers disagree with the corporations, they can be fired. Cows are also fed with corn, even though they need to eat grass. If we take a close look, we will see that corn is everywhere, not just in cattle fodder. We can find it in diapers, batteries, ketchup, fast food, and a large etcetera. Apparently, there is an agreement between the American corporations and the US Government to subsidy farmers in exchange for producing corn. If cows are only fed with corn this

causes their system to be contaminated with the bacteria E-coli. The sad case of a two-year-old named Kevin who died because of E-coli inspired his mother to campaign for the bill known as Kevin's Law, so that processing plants that had E-coli or salmonella would be closed; yet the law was not approved. What corporations did to stop E-coli was just put ammonia in their products.

Because of the preservatives that food contains, the ammonia, the fats, the sugar and salt, people all over America suffer from diseases like obesity or diabetes. This is in part also due to the food prices. Low-income families are not able to pay for their medicines and good quality food, so they buy processed food. The good quality food, which comes from organic farms, is more expensive, but it is, of course, healthier. Because of this issue corporations like Wal-Mart are beginning to buy more environment-friendly products. On the other hand, gigantic corporations like Monsanto try to keep the food industry the way it is. They even want to control the seeds. Before, farmers could save their best seeds for the next year; they could also clean seeds. But Monsanto has forbidden that practice. If farmers save or clean seeds and Monsanto finds out they can be prosecuted or blacklisted. Monsanto enjoys near immunity against the law. They had connections with the US Government during the presidencies of Bush son and Clinton. The only way to stop this abuse is by buying good quality food and stop buying food from the corporations.

Reviewer Manohla Dargis writes that *Food, Inc* "is such a good case that you soon realize there are a dozen more documentaries tucked inside this one. The section on Monsanto is particularly eye-opening and could be spun out in more detail" (2009). This documentary is organized in different sections that are introduced with different titles. The film deals with topics like corruption, infections and how animals live. The Monsanto part is one of the most interesting ones. It explains how this corporation controls the food industry in America and how farmers are not free to do what they want. They have to obey and follow, as noted, Monsanto's rules. Even though this is the most interesting part, because of the limited runtime of the documentary, it feels too short. The other parts of the documentary suffer from the same problem: all are important too but none is dealt with in sufficient depth.

Peter Travers writes that "High-fructose corn syrup and its friend the E.coli virus are declaring war on national health, and federal agencies, lobbied by Big Agriculture, ain't doing a thing to stop it. Reason? Profits" (2009). It is shown in the documentary that the US Government and companies are more interested in making money than in protecting the consumer's health. For the corporations what happens to the citizens that eat their products is less important than the profits they get from them. If they wanted to stop the E.coli virus, the companies would have stopped selling and producing contaminated food. What they did is keep producing this unhealthy product but using ammonia in order to kill the bacteria. The Government and the companies knew that if they threw away any contaminated meat, they would lose too much money, and they did not want that to happen.

Reviewer Sonia Cerca writes that "there's, however, something about *Food, Inc.* that really didn't work for me. Other than the fact that it often feels unfocused as it randomly jumps from a topic to another, at some point, it shows how hard it is to eat healthy on a budget" (2018). Certainly, this is a topic that deserves more attention but that Kenner hardly stops to consider. American food consumption can only be altered if healthy food can be afforded by low-income families, and the other way round:

ultra-processed, unhealthy food is so popular because it is extremely cheap. Budget constraints make people buy and consume unhealthy food even though they may know this is harming their health and shortening their lives; they have no other option. Bad food, so to speak, has pushed good food out of the market, leaving most low-income families stranded in a vicious circle: eating bad food causes poor health, which demands expensive medicines and diminishes their budget for better food.

The American companies try to trick US citizens, in short, by telling them that the food they are consuming is fresh even though it is not. They lie to the consumers. Companies keep producing bad quality and contaminated food in order to make money. These bad products produce illnesses in consumers. People in the United States suffer illnesses like diabetes or obesity at amazingly young ages. Because of these bad quality products, people do die. The problem is that corporations do not want to change their bad practices. They are only interested in making money. Also, corporations like Monsanto, manipulate people and force them to follow their rules. Farmers in America are not free. They have to do what bigger corporations tell them. But there is a solution to all of this. Kenner addresses his fellow Americans directly asking them to start consuming more organic and ecological products. Even though this is more expensive, it will help them to improve their health. Also, it will help small farmers and stop with big corporations. If Americans do so, they might win the war against the corporations that are slowly but surely killing them.

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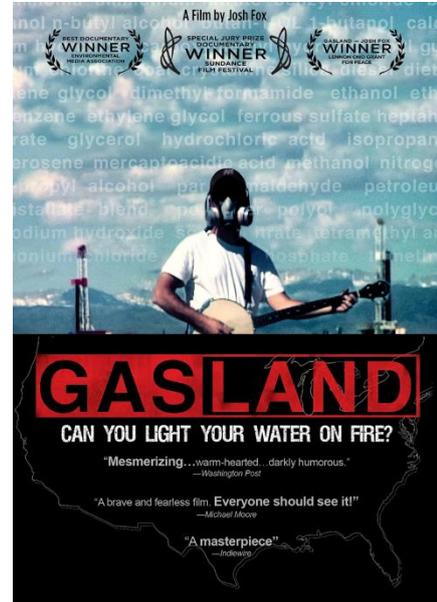
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Ainhoa López Caurel

## GasLand (2010): Underestimated Risks

### CREDITS

**Directed by** Josh Fox  
**Written by** Josh Fox  
**Produced by** Trish Adlesic, Molly Gandour, Josh Fox, David Roma, Don Guarnieri, Laura Newman  
**Music by** Susan Jacobs, Jackie Mulhearn  
**Cinematography by** Josh Fox, Molly Gandour, Matthew Sanchez, Noah Hutton, Raye Levine, Laura Newman, Alex Tyson  
**Film editing by** Matthew Sanchez  
**Production companies** International WOW Company, HBO Documentary Films  
**Distributors** HBO USA (TV)  
**Runtime** 1h 47'



### MAIN AWARDS

**Academy Awards (Oscars) (2011):** Best Documentary, Feature (nominee)  
**Primetime Emmy Awards (2011):** Outstanding Directing for Nonfiction Programming (winner); HBO, Outstanding Writing for Nonfiction Programming (nominee); Outstanding Cinematography for Nonfiction Programming (nominee); Exceptional Merit in Nonfiction Filmmaking (nominee)  
**International Documentary Association (2010):** Pare Lorentz Award (nominee)  
**Sundance Film Festival (2010):** Special Jury Prize US Documentary (winner); Grand Jury Prize Documentary (nominee)

### OTHER NOTABLE DOCUMENTARY FILMS BY THE DIRECTOR

*Gasland Part II* (2013), *DIVEST! The Climate Movement on Tour* (2016), *How to Let Go of the World and Love All the Things Climate Can't Change* (2016), *Awake, a Dream from Standing Rock* (2017, with Myron Dew and James Spione)

### REASONS TO SEE *GasLand*

- The film exposes the questionable practices of oil and gas companies that support fracking and sell natural gas as the new revolutionary clean fuel.
- Fox presents real American people as victims of the gas companies. The documentary is based on the testimonials of non-activist rural people who have been blindsided by the industry and Government.

- Its impact on the incredible growth of anti-fracking mobilizations that have in turn influenced policymakers to take action to ban the practice.

### CONNECTED WITH...

- *FrackNation* (2013), directed by Phelim McAleer, Ann McElhinney and Magdalena Segieda. The documentary follows Phelim McAleer as he investigates the impact of the controversial technique of hydraulic fracking. The feature offers a pro-fracking view and counterargues the allegedly distorted information provided by the documentary *Gasland*. McAleer contends that media and activists have suppressed key facts regarding the issue and provides his own evidence.
- *Gasland Part II* (2013), directed by Josh Fox. In this sequel of his very successful documentary, Fox revisits the dangers of fracking since his last journey. He discusses the major environmental impact of the practice and its contribution to global warming. He also highlights the lack of response from the higher powers, who politically and financially benefit from the dubious practice.
- *Frackman* (2015), directed by Richard Todd. This film focuses on Australian activist Dayne Patzky as he resists the expansion of gas companies taking over the rural farming areas in which he lives. The documentary shows Patzky's campaign against the coal seam gas industry alongside other farmers, proclaimed activists and unexpected political conservatives, amongst others.

### RE/PRESENTING AMERICA IN *GasLand*

*GasLand* tells the story of director Josh Fox as he narrates his journey after receiving a letter from a natural gas company. Back in 2008, the company offered the director a 100,000\$ as payment for leasing his land for gas drilling. As it turns out, Fox, whose house is in the woods of Milanville, Pennsylvania, is unknowingly living over the Marcellus Shale Formation, which was discovered to have a very large reserve of natural gas. The documentary follows Josh Fox as he uncovers the consequences and the underestimated risks of hydraulic fracturing, the decidedly controversial technique that allows the extraction of gas from the ground to a previously drilled well.

The process of hydraulic fracturing, commonly known as fracking, consists of introducing a mix of water, sand and chemicals about 25,000 meters under the ground. As a result, the pressure breaks up the deep-rock formations and the gas is freed. The technique is criticized due to its high environmental impact, which includes major water consumption and air and water pollution. In the feature, once the director and the viewer are familiarized with the process, Fox sets off to the nearest town whose inhabitants have already leased their land, to observe the effect of the practice on the community. The outcome does not fail to make an impact on viewers: animals are getting sick and tap water has started fizzing, turning out black and, most shockingly, can be set on fire just by setting a match to it. In short, it has been contaminated with natural gas, although the extraction companies deny this has any relation to fracking and leaking wells. As a consequence, Fox takes a longer trip to observe the long-term effects of fracking in the West of the USA, where the gas

extraction technique has been implemented for more than ten years. Poisoned soil and water wells, as well as high levels of ozone and other emissions, are the regular finds. In Garfield County, with over 5,000 wells, people are experimenting health problems that even lead to irreversible brain damage, caused by the more than 500 chemicals found in the air. Up to the end, we are introduced to the ongoing campaign to drill for gas within the New York and Delaware watersheds, which provide water on average to 15 million people. Fox's camera is finally pointed at the discussion of a subcommittee in Congress about hydraulic fracturing. An issued raised is the introduction of Maurice Hinchey's FRAC act, which would annul the oil and gas companies' exemption from the Safe Water Drinking Act. In the end, we are left with a delayed subcommittee and a feeling of uncertainty and alarm.

*GasLand* tells, as noted, the personal story of Josh Fox. The road trip diary-style documentary, along with some unforgettable footage and an almost-whispered voiceover, makes the viewer feel like he is inside Fox's shoes. Reviewer Rob Nelson explains that "No mere collection of talking heads, the doc expertly juxtaposes instances of natural beauty with those of mechanized incursion, practically making us feel the toxic chemicals spilling off the screen and into our laps" (2010). As mentioned before, the feature film manages to introduce you in the mind of the documentarian. Once this is done, the care he has for the land in which he has grown up crosses the digital borders. Thus, in complete agreement with the reviewer's statement, every time we are shown Fox's beautiful, still untouched backyard alongside land destroyed by well drilling and fracking, we are transmitted a genuine fear for its destruction.

On his side, reviewer Donald Gilliland writes that "*GasLand* presents a carefully crafted point of view. Not everything in the film's narration is precisely accurate. Not all of its subjects are completely credible. Some major components of the story are missing" (2010). This is not entirely true, as the facts exposed are mainly accurate. However, some information, though minor, is omitted. There is a considerable amount of data provided to the viewer about fracking, but the great number of processes involved in oil and gas extraction can get mixed and the lines between concepts like fracking and drilling can get blurred. Finally, *GasLand* shows statements by both professionals in the field and concerned regular people. Although the latter run the risk of not being entirely credible, the film showcases actual people on the receiving end of the conflict, and there is a feeling of empathy for those who suffer the consequences.

The unsigned *Time Out's* review notes that "Having shown us unfortunate citizens on the receiving end, and environmental agencies sitting on their hands, Fox builds up a surge of outrage, yet leaves us longing for a few more retaliatory punches launched at the higher-ups. Still, setting the context for individual involvement may be no bad thing" (2011). I partially agree with this. Josh Fox does not intend just to expose corporate industries. Instead, his approach is to highlight and bring to light issues that are harming the planet and physical health but are not being addressed properly. Not only this, agencies and citizens are being prevented from acting. As the review states, the environmental agencies either have a conflict of interests or are completely helpless against oil and gas companies because the latter have the support of the law. The documentary is a protest against silencing disclosure agreements and loopholes in the law created for corporate agencies, like their exemption from the Clean Water Act, the Clean Air Act, the Safe Drinking Water Act and more. *GasLand* sheds light to all

these issues and the consequent anger towards the ignorance of the issue is what will supply the audience's urgent need to act.

One last underlying theme is the voracious American appetite for energy. One of the main arguments for fracking is the vision of a future energetically independent America, with gas under its land to supply about 100 years of power consumption. This added to the large creation of employment for the country is enough for the Government to overlook any secondary consequences. The American citizens featured in the documentary complain that they have been called 'anti-American' for voicing concerns largely left with no further investigation. The truth is, American corporation are acting in their habitual way, exploiting the resources of other Americans, no matter the cost. *GasLand* shows a greedy corporate America that will not let anyone stand in their way to wealth, hiding behind a promise of energy independence and ready to spread lies about the safety of the citizens and the environment. Fracking, Fox says, is not going anywhere soon, and so Americans should get ready to protect their land from greedy hands.

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Sofía Lázaro Jongman

## Project Nim (2011): Drawing Ethical Lines

### CREDITS

**Directed by** James Marsh

**Written by** James Marsh (Elizabeth Hess's book, *Nim Chimpsky: The Chim Who Would Be Human*)

**Produced by** George Chignell, Simon Chin, Maureen A. Ryan

**Music by** Dickon Hinchliffe

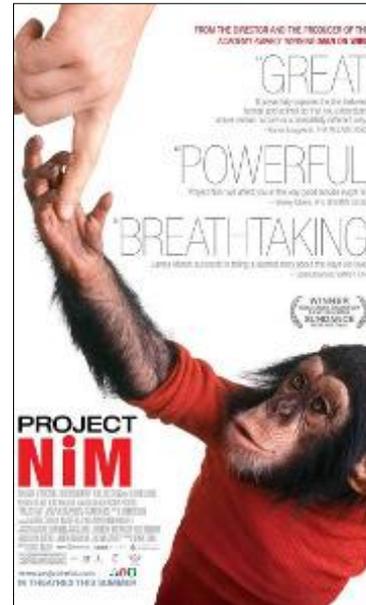
**Cinematography by** Michael Simmonds

**Film editing by** Jinx Godfrey

**Production companies** BBC Films, Passion Pictures, Red Box Films

**Distributors** Icon Film Distribution (UK), Roadside Attractions (US), Mongrel Media (Canada)

**Runtime** 1h 55'



### MAIN AWARDS

**BAFTA AWARDS (2012):** Best Documentary Film (nominee)

**Directors Guild of America, USA, (2012):** Outstanding Directorial Achievement in Documentary (winner)

**Online Film & Television Association (2012):** Best Documentary Feature Film (winner)

**Sundance Film Festival (2011):** Directing Award World Cinema – Documentary (winner), Directing Award World Cinema – Documentary Grand Jury Prize (nominee)

### OTHER NOTABLE DOCUMENTARY FILMS BY THE DIRECTOR

*The Animator of Prague* (1990), *The Burger & The King: The Life & Cuisine of Elvis Presley* (1996), *Joh Cale* (1998), *The Team* (2005), *Man on Wire* (2008 Oscar Award winner)

### REASONS TO SEE *Project Nim*

- It gives a clear idea of how similar chimpanzees and humans are but at the same time it draws a clear difference between them and us.
- How the use of animals in scientific or linguistic research can affect them; also because treating them as humans and separating them from their animal and natural habitat is wrong.
- It reflects how human curiosity crosses ethical lines in the contact with other species.

## CONNECTED WITH...

- *Koko: A Talking Gorilla* (1978), Barbet Schroeder. The main focus of Schroeder's film falls on Francine 'Penny' Patterson's pioneering work with female gorilla Koko (1971-2018), whom Patterson, an animal psychologist, taught to communicate with humans using the American sign language. According to Patterson, Koko acquired a vocabulary of more than 1,000 signs 'Gorilla Sign Language' and understood about 2,000 words of spoken English. However, the results of the experiment remain controversial.
- *Rise of the Warrior Apes* (2017) directed by James Reed. This film focuses on the twenty-year-long research led by anthropologists David Watts and John Mitani on a chimpanzee clan in Uganda's Kibale National Park. Reed documents their new insights into their hierarchy, their power relations and their alliances. The grim conclusion of this documentary is that apes, such as chimpanzees, are not better than humans regarding innate aggression and patriarchal ways.
- *Jane* (2017) directed by Brett Morgen. Winner of two Emmys, one for Outstanding Directing for a documentary, and another for Outstanding Photography for a Nonfiction Program. This notable documentary follows the life and research of English primatologist Jane Goodall, focusing especially in her research on gorillas in to Gombe Stream National Park in Tanzania since 1960. Goodall herself discusses her activities, originally documented on film by wildlife photographer Hugo van Lawick, and the present of ape-related research.

## RE/PRESENTING AMERICA IN *Project Nim*

*Project Nim* focuses on a research project of the 70s to determine whether language is also innate in primates. A number of volunteers taught chimpanzee Nim Chimpsky, the subject of the research, American Sign Language (as Penny Patterson was also doing with the gorilla Koko). However, the director of the project, psychologist Herbert S. Terrace of Columbia University, eventually published a book *Why Chimpanzees Can't Learn Language and Only Humans Can* (2019), explaining why the project failed. Marsh's documentary, in any case, does not really discuss the scientific background of the project. It shows instead the different aspects of Nim's sad life since he is separated from his mother as a baby until he dies, still in captivity.

Nim was adopted by an Upper East Side family, the La Farges, composed by a mother who already had three children and a father with four children and their newborn baby. Stephanie La Farge was a former student of Prof. Terrace, with no training to deal with a chimpanzee. She treated Nim as a human baby and even breastfed him at the beginning. Her bringing the chimpanzee into the family brought on unforeseen problems, such as Nim's jealousy of Mr. La Farge. As regards scientific procedures, the La Farges were not the adequate family, either, for they did not keep track of Nim's progress and none of them spoke fluent sign language. For this reason, Terrace decided to take Nim away, ignoring that this represented a second separation from a mother, since Stephanie had become a mother figure for him.

Nim was next placed in a university residence with a series of volunteer babysitters and teachers, plus other researchers. The problems start when Nim grows

into a nimble five-year-old chimpanzee unaware of his strength, and he viciously attacks one of the female researchers. Prof. Terrace decides then to stop the project and take Nim back to the reservation he hired him from. The main problem is that Nim has never had contact with others of his species as he has been treated as a human. Although they manage to have Nim connect with another chimpanzee, and Bob, one of the researchers, keeps contact with him things soon go wrong for him. Nim stays on until the reservation, which has serious money problems sells him and other chimpanzees to a vaccine lab. Bob starts then a campaign to free Nim and eventually the poor chimp ends up in an animal refuge, where he lives to the end of his days, still enclosed in a cage, no matter how big.

Scott writes in his review that “It is hard not to be charmed by the affection that passes between these humans and the chimp, or to appreciate what seems to be a reciprocated effort at communication. But at the same time it is difficult to avoid a certain queasiness at the sight of a wild creature forcibly and irrevocably alienated from his nature—dressed in clothes, tethered and caged, smoking a joint out in the woods with his pals. You laugh, sometimes, to force the lump out of your throat” (2011). It is true that Nim is charming throughout the whole movie and so are the relationships most of his human caregivers have with the chimpanzee. Yet, as Scott argues, seeing this animal treated as a human being creates an unsettling feeling throughout the whole movie. It gets harder to appreciate the interspecies relationships and it becomes rather uncomfortable to see how easily the uncaring Terrace stops the project and abandons Nim. Director James Marsh creates the perfect combination of feelings to help you understand the beautiful parts of the story but at the same time the trauma and the discomfort that the faulty ethics of the story elicits.

Nicolas Rapold points in his review that “The astonishing gaps in preparation under Dr. Terrace’s stewardship push science to the background of a story of hubris and crosscurrents of desire, altruism and power. (...) Dr. Terrace emerges as a fickle project leader who is compared to an ‘absentee landlord’”(2011). In my opinion Terrace’s lack of preparation for this type of research became a most serious problem for the project. Amazingly, he did not think that taking Nim to a family with no knowledge about chimps or sign language would be a problem. Terrace’s project could have led to great discoveries if only he had planned better his research taking into account how his collaborators would act when Nim became stronger and aggressive, and how they would take care of him. Terrace in fact did not act as a project leader at all; as Rapold states, he is mostly absent and maintains little contact with Nim. Terrace is only there to collect the data and this is the main reason why the project failed.

Ella Taylor underlines how the editing of the documentary is enough to transmit the director’s opinion without Marsh saying anything: “Marsh remains admirably unsentimental about the chimp, who could be manipulative and at times vicious toward those he loved most. But the director, a skilled formalist of the Errol Morris school, is not built for *verité* impartiality” (2011). Marsh shows, Taylor adds, how “in trying to make Nim more human, his teachers made themselves less so”. Marsh certainly cares about the chimp and he truly wants to bring to light the trauma of taking an animal from his natural habitat, exposing the unethicity of research which does not respect animals’ rights. Also, he shows the viewers the consequences that the project had on the humans, who might not want to hurt the chimp, but did so.

Nim was dressed and treated as a human being, though he was an ape, something that sometimes his teachers and caregivers forgot.

Marsh's documentary shows that entitlement plays a fundamental part in scientific research. Prof. Terrace simply believes he has the right to impose to another species the human way of living and speaking, because he believes that is the right way. He uses Nim for his research and once he has finished (once he has failed), he decides to get rid of him without taking into account the problems that his abandonment might suppose for the animal. This exposes not only American scientific malpractice but that of science in most Western societies. Nim's story is also a story about patriarchal society. Most of Nim's caregivers are Terrace's female colleagues; he even had some sexual relationships with some of them. Towards Nim, Terrace acts as an absent father, taking little part in his education or upbringing. Finally, the documentary is an example of how money and power can give you the right to bend the ethical lines. The ambition of the researchers and of powerful Columbia University to make a great linguistic discovery became more important than the rest of factors the project involved, disregarding the obvious animal abuse. Protected by the university's endorsement and Terrace's prestige, nobody questioned the absurd project. James Marsh does, but it is too late for Nim.

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Anna Guiteras Pérez

## **Blackfish (2013): The Ugly Truth about Aquatic Parks**

### **CREDITS**

**Directed by** Gabriela Cowperthwaite  
**Written by** Gabriela Cowperthwaite, Eli Despres, and Tim Zimmermann  
**Produced by** Gabriela Cowperthwaite, Manuel V. Oteyza  
**Music by** Jeff Beal  
**Cinematography by** Jonathan Ingalls, Christopher Towey  
**Film editing by** Eli Despres  
**Production companies** CNN Films, Manny O. Productions  
**Distributors** Magnolia Pictures (theatrical)  
**Runtime** 1h 23'



### **MAIN AWARDS**

**BAFTA (2014):** Best Documentary (nominee)  
**International Documentary Association (2013):** Best Feature (nominee)  
**Satellite Awards (2013):** Best Motion Picture, Documentary (winner)  
**Sundance Film Festival (2013):** Documentary (nominee)

### **OTHER NOTABLE DOCUMENTARY FILMS BY THE DIRECTOR**

*City Lax: An Urban Lacrosse Story* (2010)

### **REASONS TO SEE *Blackfish***

- It will probably change the way you see sea parks, and the way this industry uses sea mammals for the spectacles, SeaWorld in particular.
- To learn how the trainers felt in relation to the complex situation caused by killer whale Tilikum. You learn that it was a really difficult situation for everyone involved but still feel much empathy for the animal.
- For its didactic values. The documentary is not graphic, despite the gory events it describes, which is a good way for the documentary to reach many people.

### **CONNECTED WITH...**

- *The Cove* (2009), directed by Louie Psihoyos. This Oscar Award winning controversial documentary analyzes and questions dolphin hunting practices in

Japan. It shows how these practices are really aggressive and how hundreds of dolphins are killed because of these unethical techniques. Working with dolphin trainer Ric O'Barry, Psihoyos's crew and a group of activists infiltrate a cove near Taijii in Japan to document expose brutal animal abuse and how we humans do not really know what we eat.

- *Keiko: The Untold Story of the Star of Free Willy* (2013), directed by Theresa Demarest. *Free Willy* (1990) was a very popular movie, followed by a sequel and an animated TV series, about a captive orca liberated by the efforts of the boy Jesse when he realizes that its owners want to kill the ill-treated animal. In this documentary we learn the truth about what really happened when the killer whale star Keiko, became the first captive orca to be liberated in real life.
- *Long Gone Wild* (2019), directed by Bill Neal. This documentary deals with the exploitation of orcas, hunted in Russia, and used in the theme park industry of China. This documentary focuses specifically on the work by undercover activists to expose their ill-treatment. Through the documentary they try to stop the mass extinction of the killer whales and their commercial exploitation for entertainment.

### **RE/PRESENTING AMERICA IN *Blackfish***

*Blackfish* exposes the truth about the SeaWorld parks by telling the life of Tilikum, a male orca who is the main protagonist of the documentary. This film, released in 2013, was inspired by the death of Dawn Brancheau, a trainer at SeaWorld Orlando who was killed by Tilikum. Gabriela Cowperthwaite started investigating this incident and found out many secrets about the park where Brancheau died and how SeaWorld ill-treated orcas. The documentary uses interviews with some trainers who worked with Brancheau and Tilikum at the time, witnesses of the diverse horrific events also exposed by the film, one of the fishermen who capture orcas and dolphins, and other persons involved in the shows. Cowperthwaite also used footage of Tilikum's capture and captivity, which made the documentary more powerful by showing us what he actually went through.

The documentary starts by showing how orcas are captured. The fisherman's testimonial is really powerful. He explains how hard it was to separate the mothers from their calves and that he regrets capturing orcas in that cruel way. After being captured Tilikum was transferred to SeaLand, where he was placed in a small pool; he shared the space with two female orcas who attacked him because orcas are matriarchal animals. After a while, a girl who was cleaning, tripped and fell into the pool where the orcas lived. The official report claimed she drowned accidentally. However, some witnesses and later investigations revealed that she had probably been killed by Tilikum.

After this incident, Tilikum was transferred to SeaWorld. The trainers were not aware nor informed of what had happened in SeaLand, they found out much later. As time went by Tilikum became more aggressive and depressed. The documentary shows footage of how he would keep still for hours in the pool, which is really weird for an orca because they are in constant movement. The second victim of Tilikum was a drunk man who broke into the park one night. Supposedly, he jumped into the orcas'

pool. The official report claimed that the man fell in and drowned, and that after that Tilikum played with his body. The next morning trainers discovered part of his body in Tilikum's stomach. After a while it was discovered that Tilikum probably killed him and then he played with the body. Finally, the last and most important victim was Dawn Brancheau, a popular, really good trainer. Her brutal death was the most important one, because it happened in front of a huge crowd. *Blackfish* also deals with how the trainers felt about Tilikum. They claim that he was not aggressive but really kind; however, they had no idea of Tilikum's backstory or behavior. All the trainers agree on the fact that Tilikum's aggressiveness came from his captivity. Finally, the trainers complain that the company hid all this information from them. The documentary also deals with other orcas in captivity who were also aggressive, but this was not reported or ignored. For example, they talk about Loro Parque, a theme park in Tenerife. SeaWorld transferred some of their orcas there, but the place and the people were not prepared for them. The consequence was the death of the best trainer there employed.

Reviewer Tirdad Derakhshani wrote that "while Cowperthwaite's film opens with a simple question about the behavior of a single killer whale, it ends up mounting a persuasive ethical argument against keeping orcas in captivity" (2013). I completely agree with this statement because it is true that although the film deals with Tilikum's attacks in a straightforward way, Cowperthwaite mostly blames SeaWorld and the conditions in which Tilikum lives. There are really very few cases of orcas attacking humans when they are in the open sea, despite what films such as *Orca* (1977) and other suggest. Almost all cases happen when orcas are in captivity because they don't have space to move or live as they live in the sea, among other problems.

Moira MacDonald writes in *The Seattle Times* that "Its ultimate message is clear: killer whales belong with their families in their natural habitat, not performing for audiences. After listening to this film's many impassioned voices, it's hard to argue" (2013). Clearly, this is one of the most important messages Cowperthwaite wants to send to the viewer. In the documentary this basic truth is expressed several times, namely, that the main reason orcas attack and hurt people is their cruel captivity. The separation from their families is another major problem because they feel logically sad and depressed, as in the case of Tilikum.

Jeannette Catsoulis wrote in *The New York Times* that "Through the rueful voices of former trainers and whale experts, a narrative driven by disillusion and regret unfolds as the trainers point to a gap between SeaWorld's public image and behind-the-scenes reality" (2013). It is true that the documentary makes it clear that the image SeaWorld wants to project and what the spectacles really consist of is completely different. Also, lethal. As I have noted, most trainers were not aware of the dangerous situation, this is one of the main reasons why Brancheau died. If she and the other trainers had been informed about Tilikum's dangerous behavior, they would have been more careful or would have taken matters into their own hands. The fact that the trainers were not informed by their employers put them in mortal danger.

The main connection of *Blackfish* with American culture is capitalism. SeaWorld, founded in Orlando (Florida) in 1964, is a big corporation which does not really care much about the lives of the animals nor about the trainers or other employees. Even today, and despite the worldwide impact of *Blackfish*, they are still creating shows with orcas and other mammals which belong in the sea. The reason

why SeaWorld survives as business is that American people still pay to see the shows, even after knowing what happened to Dawn Brancheau. Capitalism is really powerful, and the way SeaWorld advertises their parks apparently overcomes audiences' prejudice. Finally, the only thing we can do is hope that someday people will realize what really happens in those parks and stop going for good. Until then SeaWorld will still exist and will still harm innocent animals like Tilikum.

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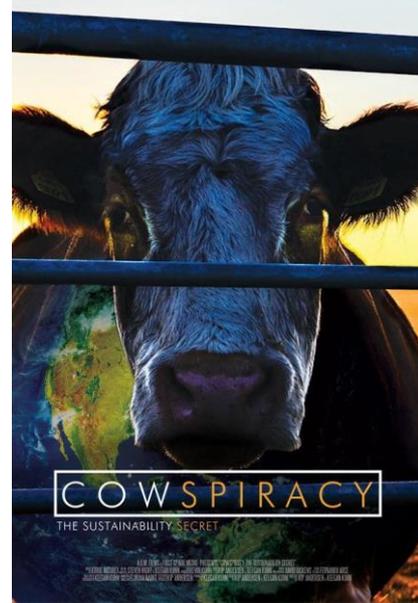
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Ana Gómez Gasol

# **Cowspiracy: The Sustainability Secret (2014): How To Save The Planet**

## **CREDITS**

**Directed by** Kip Andersen, Keegan Kuhn  
**Written by** Kip Andersen, Keegan Kuhn  
**Produced by** Kip Andersen, Keegan Kuhn  
**Music by** Jolanta Galka and xTrue Naturex  
**Cinematography by** Keegan Kuhn  
**Film editing by** Kip Andersen, Keegan Kuhn  
**Production companies** Appian Way, A.U.M Films, First Spark Media  
**Distributors** Netflix, Polyband  
**Runtime** 1h 30'



## **MAIN AWARDS**

**Cinema Politica:** Audience Choice Award (nominee)  
**Festival de Films Pour l'Environnement (2015):** Best Foreign Film Award (winner)  
**South African Eco Film Festival (2015):** Audience Choice Award (winner)

## **OTHER NOTABLE DOCUMENTARY FILMS BY THE DIRECTORS**

**By Kip Andersen and Keegan Kuhn** *What the Health* (2017)  
**By Keegan Kuhn** *Turlock: the documentary* (2013), *Running For Good: The Fiona Oakes Documentary* (2018)

## **REASONS TO SEE Cowspiracy: The Sustainability Secret**

- It is an eye-opening documentary not only about the main factor that is causing climate change, but also in relation to the corporation-like behavior of environmentalist organizations.
- It sparks a passionate response from viewers, as it presents the problem of CO2 pollution and its solution with clear evidence of its benefits.
- *Cowspiracy* goes beyond many animal agriculture documentaries and gives an overview of the whole meat industry's unsustainability in terms of pollution, space and water consumption and population.

## CONNECTED WITH...

- *Earthlings* (2005), directed by Shaun Monson. Narrated by Joaquin Phoenix, this documentary deals with humanity's misuse and mistreatment of the animal kingdom by having animals as pets, entertainment or using them for food, clothes and scientific research. With images obtained through hidden cameras, the film shows the controversial practices of some of the largest animal-relying industries and links the issue with ongoing social problems such as racism and sexism.
- *Forks Over Knives* (2011), directed by Lee Fulkerson. This film claims that suppressing meat, dairy products and processed foods from our diet can help to prevent or reverse chronic diseases such as obesity, cancer and also cardiovascular diseases. In order to provide evidence for this argument, it examines the careers and research of two specialists: American physician Caldwell Esselstyn and the professor of nutritional biochemistry T. Colin Campbell.
- *Meat the Truth* (2007), directed by Karen Soeters and Gertjan Zwanikken. Just as *Cowspiracy* (2014), this high-profile documentary sheds light on an issue that is often ignored by environmental organizations: livestock production's impact on our environment and ecosystem. It demonstrates that animal agriculture generates more greenhouse emissions worldwide than the whole transportation sector and, yet, no major organization seems to be willing to address the issue.

## RE/PRESENTING AMERICA IN *Cowspiracy*

*Cowspiracy* follows the journey of co-director Kip Andersen as he learns about the impact which animal agriculture has on the environment. As a result of his investigation, he also discovers that the most important environmental organizations on the planet have a suspicious lack of policies on this issue, so he tries to uncover the reasons behind it. With the help of several scientific studies and an exhaustive field research by Andersen himself, the film exposes animal agriculture as the main source of environmental destruction and denounces the US Government's and the main US environmental organizations' reluctance to talk about its dangers.

After watching Al Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006), Kip Andersen became what he himself describes as an OCE (obsessive-compulsive environmentalist). He radically changed his way of living to help as much as he could to minimize his impact on the planet by recycling, taking short showers and replacing his van by a bicycle among other decisions. After having made these changes, he was quite happy with his life. However, his way of thinking changed enormously after reading a UN report he discovered via Facebook. This report stated that cattle is responsible for 18% of the total greenhouse emissions, while the whole transportation sector only contributes 13%. After reading about the issue, Andersen wanted to know what environmental organizations had to say about it, but he was astonished to find that the topic was hardly addressed on the websites and published works of organizations such as Greenpeace, Surfrider Foundation and Oceana.

Nevertheless, the evidence was there, available from multiple scientific studies: animal agriculture is the main reason for global warming, deforestation, excessive water and land usage, and the appearance of dead zones in our oceans. Therefore, why was no one talking about it? To answer this question, Andersen arranged meetings with different environmental organizations throughout the shooting of the documentary, but received little or even no answers at all (much surprisingly, in the case of Greenpeace). To make matter worse, even cattle owners from extensive and intensive production did not know (or pretended not to know) to what extent the industry polluted our environment. All in all, the documentary explores different possibilities to reconcile the current worldwide meat consumption and meat production in terms of sustainability, but the answer will not please meat lovers: there is no way of making meat consumption ecologically sustainable with our current population numbers. With this in mind, the film ends on the note that no one can call themselves environmentalists while still consuming meat or dairy products.

Environmentalist Orietta Estrada writes that “whether you’re a vegan, vegetarian, Meatless Monday supporter, pescetarian, or an organic-loving meat eater, after watching this film you’ll be left thinking, a lot, about your everyday food choices and how those choices impact the sustainability of our planet” (2014). That is absolutely correct. If there is something that *Cowspiracy* (2014) does, that is making the viewer reflect. The narration is so cleverly organized that it makes you a part of the story. The viewer and Andersen learn hand-in-hand not only about animal agriculture, but also about its unsustainability and its inevitable obsolescence. Because of that, the viewer is encouraged to think of solutions and alternatives at the same time as the director and narrator.

Susan, an IMDB reviewer, agrees that the film’s message is not one “most meat eaters and dairy users want to hear, as it’s not easy to eat vegan in a culture so oriented to meat consumption” (2019). That is true. At the beginning of the film, Andersen explained he had adopted new, small habits such as walking or riding a bike instead of driving, or taking shorter showers. Those are changes that we can all apply to our daily lives relatively easily. However, to ask for people to completely remove meat and dairy products from their diet would be quite a challenge for most of them, especially in a country such as the USA, where fast food culture is sadly such a pillar of American diet and it is highly based on animal-related products. “The answer to so many environmental problems”, this reviewer adds, “is right in front of us. It costs nothing, can be implemented today and simply requires people to switch to a plant-based diet, which could amply feed several times our current population with the same production as today” (2019). I partially agree with this second part of the review. It is true that the solution seems simple theoretically: to erase meat from our diets and go vegan. However, we have to take into account that dairy products and meat are much cheaper than some of their vegan alternatives, and not everybody can afford such a change. Furthermore, there still exists a certain prejudice regarding vegan diets and health issues that might prevent people from becoming vegan. In this aspect, however, *Cowspiracy* helps to eliminate part of this stigma too, as it reveals that many health problems can actually be reversed by adopting a plant-based diet.

Journalist George Wuerthner states that *Cowspiracy* “goes far beyond the obvious impacts of livestock production such as overgrazing of rangelands, and talks about everything from water pollution to energy use in the production of meat to the

mistreatment of meat-producing animals by humans. Overall, it makes a very cogent and articulate argument against meat/dairy consumption” (2014). That is absolutely true. *Cowspiracy* (2014) works because it approaches the topic by offering a well-structured overview on matters such as cattle raising, its destructive impact on rainforests and oceans, water and land use and, in addition, human health. After having watched the film, viewers will have not one reason to question the sustainability of meat production, but dozens of them.

On the whole, *Cowspiracy* presents a solution to fight climate change whose ecological benefits are only surpassed by the use of electric vehicles. Nevertheless, the documentary also evinces a tendency to discredit and cover up this issue by local American authorities and also environmental organizations. As it is reflected on the documentary, the food industry moves thousands of millions of dollars every year in the USA, and there is no doubt that attacking directly meat production also means attacking directly these powerful companies. Furthermore, fast food companies and their cheap products cannot be left out of the equation. Scientists have proven over and over the benefits of adopting a plant-based diet for human and also for our world’s health. However, as long as the profit generated by meat and dairy products remains high, it is very unlikely that a capitalist system such as that of the United States promotes the abandonment of animal agriculture. The change, therefore, has to come from the people, as it does not seem likely to come from corporations.

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Naiara López Alcázar

## **Before The Flood (2016): Point of No Return**

### **CREDITS**

**Directed by** Fisher Stevens  
**Written by** Mark Monroe  
**Produced by** Fisher Stevens, Leonardo DiCaprio, Jennifer Davisson, JamesPacker, Brett Ratner, Trevor Davidoski  
**Music by** Gustavo Santaolalla, Trent Reznor, Atticus Ross, Mogwai, Vladi Slav  
**Cinematography by** Antonio Rossi  
**Film editing by** Brett Banks, Geoffrey Rickman, Abhay Sofsky, Ben Sozanski  
**Production companies** Appian Way, RatPac Documentary Films, InsurgentDocs, Mandarin Film Productions  
**Distributors** National Geographic Documentary Films (theatrical)  
**Runtime** 1h 36'



### **AWARDS**

**Critics' Choice Documentary Awards (2016):** Best Documentary Feature (TV/Streaming) (nominee)  
**Environmental Media Awards, USA (2017):** Documentary Film (nominee)  
**Hollywood Film Awards (2016):** Documentary of the Year (winner)  
**Toronto International Film Festival (2016):** Best Documentary (nominee)

### **OTHER NOTABLE DOCUMENTARY FILMS BY THE DIRECTOR**

*Mission Blue* (2014) (co-directed with Robert Nixon), *Another World* (2014, with Rebecca Chaiklin), *Bright Lights: Starring Carrie Fisher and Debbie Reynolds* (2016), *The Confidence Man* (2018), *And We Go Green* (2019)

### **REASONS TO SEE *Before the Flood***

- It offers a detailed analysis of the exponential increase of CO2 emissions.
- Exploring many areas of the planet, it shows the most critical pollution cases and the political inadequacy in this regard, despite the Paris Agreements of 2016 in which about 180 nations participated.
- By making the gravity of the situation evident to all human beings, despite the complexity of the problem, it shows what small changes can be made daily to safeguard the Earth.

## CONNECTED WITH...

- *A Plastic Ocean* (2016), directed by Craig Leeson. It investigates the devastating impacts that plastic has caused to our environment, especially our marine life. The film presents beautiful shots of the marine ambient. These contrast with footage of heavily polluted cities and dumps full of plastic rubbish. The juxtaposition between these images sends the message that our actions and choices can severely impact the planet. Throughout the film, experts are interviewed to provide further insight into some of the problems derived from plastic.
- *Ice On Fire* (2019), directed by Leila Conners. Twelve years ago, Leonardo DiCaprio teamed up with Leila Conners to send an environmental wake-up call to the world with *The 11th Hour*, warning of the dire consequences of unchecked climate change. More than a decade later, the political leaders most able to do something continue to ignore the issue, but while the cataclysmic effects of global warming become ever clearer, the scientists and significant swathes of the public are trying to make the difference. That's the focus of this documentary, a deeply conventional though attractive documentary designed to reinforce just how bad things are getting, while offering hope by concentrating on realistic proposals that can reign in climate change and even reverse its effects.
- *And We Go Green* (2019), directed by Fisher Stevens and Malcolm Venville. The documentary is a behind-the-scenes look at the ABB FIA Formula E Championship and how since 2014, it has become the world's fastest-growing motorsport. Viewers are taken on the ride as the documentary follows the drivers such as champion Jean-Eric Vergne and former Formula E driver Nelson Piquet Jr. on the international Formula E circuit as the professionals cross cities in the 2017-18 season.

## RE/PRESENTING AMERICA IN *Before The Flood*

*Before The Flood* is mildly critical report on the United States of America, especially from the point of view of the misuse of energy sources. In fact, once it is established that most of the US economy, and more generally most of the states' economies, are based on fossil fuels, the story illustrates the damage to the environment that this is causing. Leonardo DiCaprio's interest in this theme stems from his memory of the panel by Hieronymus Bosch, called "The Garden of Earthly Delight" (1490-1510). In this work we are told a story: in the first panel we can observe Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, birds flying freely in the sky, elephants and giraffes in unspoilt nature. The second panel begins to become more interesting because scenes of overpopulation and death appear on it. Finally, the third panel, which is the most distressing one as it is full of death, shows a now degraded and destroyed paradise. This artistic composition best represents the current state of our planet and this is what is openly expressed in the documentary.

The United Nations appointed in 2014 Leo DiCaprio as United Nations Messenger of Peace on Climate Change; in Stevens's film he learns about the conditions of our planet, even though he's quite pessimistic about our future.

Watching the film, we learn that most of our economy world-wide is based on fossil fuels: oil, coal and natural gas. Now, in order to sustain our dependence on fossil fuels, we are already exploring very risky and extreme new sources using dangerous techniques, for example fracking for natural gas or drilling platforms of perforation and the overexploitation of tar sands. In addition, we have started cutting down the Boreal forest; today about 350000 of barrels a day of crude oil are produced by the EXXON and SHELL companies there. Everything we do, releases CO<sub>2</sub> (Carbon Dioxide) and this is why environmental disasters and sudden weather changes happen.

The documentary bears witness to the experiences of Leonardo DiCaprio around some of the places in the world most deeply affected by this sad phenomenon. For example we find ourselves projected onto Baffin Island in the Canadian Arctic Sea where the ice is suddenly changing color because it is melting very quickly; if it melts for good, this could be the most dramatic transformation of the large environment ever. In fact, the North Pole is the air conditioner of the northern Hemisphere. The melting of the Arctic Ice, which is not a natural event, is connected with the raising of the sea water that endangers beautiful cities like Miami; on beautiful sunny days, the water floods many streets. The Mayor of Miami has started to install some electric pumps to raise the level of the roads for which he had to raise the taxes. Unfortunately Florida's Governor denies the importance of the issue because politicians, especially in the Congress, are connected with lobbies like EXXON, Shell, Koch Brothers, etc. who only want to divide the public. In fact, scientists have to constantly fight the massive disinformation campaign run by the politicians and aimed at confusing the public.

After considering the measures taken by China on climate change, DiCaprio visits India, noting that, because of the enormous waste of resources by the Americans, many families do not even have electricity at home. Next, we are transported, together with the actor, to two islands in the Polynesia, about to disappear in the Ocean because they act as a big sponge that absorbs CO<sub>2</sub> and their ecosystem is going to be destroyed. Subsequently, the film moves to Indonesia, to witness the deforestation caused by the oil palms. Finally, the documentary illustrates the results of the 2016 Paris Agreements, not without leaving many doubts as to their true efficiency.

Reviewer Jeffrey M. Anderson from *Common Sense Media* writes that "*Before The Flood* is one of many documentaries about climate change; many aren't much fun, but with DiCaprio at its center, this one offers crucial, current information, as well as a measure of hope" (2016). The general public needs to be aware of the irremediable, and accept that we live with a strong sense of anxiety and fear that can only increase. We all know how irresponsible we have been and continue to be. By choosing a Hollywood star rather than an expert as its main voice, Stevens' film puts us all at the same level to learn the mistakes so far made and try to improve all together. There may be many documentaries on the same subject but the message needs to be repeated again and again. Alyssa Rasmus writes in her review on the website *PopMatters* that "Regardless of what perspective you have going into the film, there's something to learn from DiCaprio's three-year journey in making it" (2016). I agree with this statement because watching *Before The Flood* we can understand better what are the effects of the increase in CO<sub>2</sub> emissions and how to manage them. Probably, these were matters that not everyone knew, or matters so far everyone has pretended to know nothing about; thanks to this documentary each of us will really

understand the weight and the disastrous impact on the environment of each of our trivial actions, even the most skeptical deniers.

Nick Allen, writing on the website *Rogerebert.com*, notes that *Before The Flood* is “Another global warming warning sign, more honorable in its intentions than in having a distinct voice to ultimately make a difference” (2016). In this statement, in my humble opinion, lies human nature, always a little too mistrustful and always ready to judge a person’s actions, judging them only on their earnings or their lifestyle. Well, it would be too simplistic to watch the documentary and immediately project one’s frustration against privileged Leonardo DiCaprio. Actually, we should just be grateful to him for his work and for having offered his opinions trying to stir things a little bit, regardless of his or our bank account, because the future of the planet belongs to everyone, rich and poor.

*Before The Flood* has the quality of being one of those documentaries in which the catastrophic effects caused by human beings are narrated with a quite compelling plotline (like its ultimate predecessor *An Inconvenient Truth*, 2006). As noted, DiCaprio’s presence helps Stevens stress the didactic tone of his narrative. There is, however, quite an uncomfortable moment in which Indian activist Sunita Narain asks DiCaprio directly what he and his privileged fellow Americans are doing for the rest of the planet. DiCaprio visibly squirms on his seat but quickly regains his composure. The documentary does not hide the fact that these and other similar films are a form of atonement by the American people, but if the *mea culpa* tactics work, this can only be for the best. The sooner younger audiences connect with Stevens and DiCaprio’s message, then, the better.

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Andrea Laurino

## GENDER AND SEXUALITY

Both American documentary films and the representation of America in documentaries are strongly dominated by (heterosexual) men and masculinity. Even though many more women directors make documentaries than fiction films, their voices and concerns are still far from receiving the same attention as men's. On the other hand, the massive presence of American men in documentaries remains underanalyzed because few of these documentaries deal with men as men. A refreshing exception is Jennifer Siebel Newsom's *The Mask You Live In* (2015), which offers an excellent diagnosis of how what is now called toxic masculinity but is in fact patriarchy under another name affects the lives of American men. Newsom is the author of the also excellent *Miss Representation* (2011), a film which exposes with extreme lucidity how American women's lives are conditioned by the distorted portrait which the media offers of them.

Women's lives are also the focus of three other documentaries in this section. *She's Beautiful When She's Angry* (2014) narrates the evolution of the Second Feminist Wave in the USA between 1966 and 1971, providing audiences with a magnificent history lesson which should be compulsory viewing in all institutions of secondary and higher education. The other two films also teach a valuable lesson, though in this case about the vulnerability of girls and women to sexual abuse. *The Invisible War* (2012) narrates how the feminist advances that allowed American women to enter the US military could not protect them from constant harassment and multiple cases of rape. These go beyond the personal motivations of the perpetrators, for the whole institution is guilty of endorsing a specially vicious type of sexism. *At the Heart of Gold: Inside the US Gymnastic Scandal* (2019) also tells a sad story of institutional neglect, in this case affecting the hundreds of young athletes abused by the predator appointed to be their team doctor.

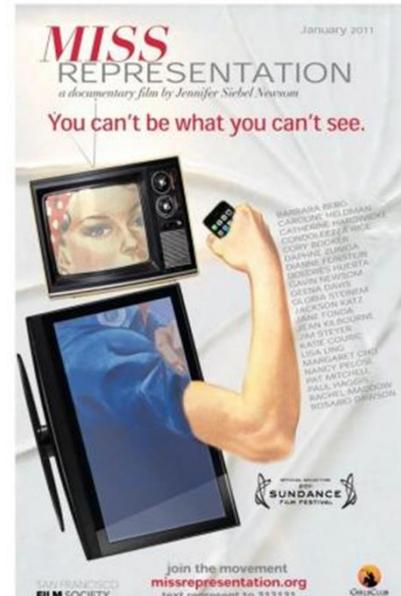
In a very different vein, *How to Survive a Plague* (2012) deals with the onset of the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s, and the efforts of activist groups ACT UP and TAG to counteract the terrible effects not only of the HIV virus but also of the homophobic Reagan administration on the sufferers.

One important note must be added. These days there is much talk of gender issues concerning LGTBQ+ activism and the growing number of young persons who identify as non-binary or gender fluid. Their lack of representation here only reflects the lack so far of major documentaries focused on these issues (see the Preface for the criteria followed to select the films) but by no means the lack of interest of editors and authors on gender.

# Miss Representation (2011): A Convenient Misrepresentation

## CREDITS

**Directed by** Jennifer Siebel Newsom  
**Written by** Jacoba Atlas (consulting writer), Jessica Congdon, Claire Dietrich, Jenny Raskin, (story consultant), Jennifer Siebel Newsom  
**Produced by** Jennifer Siebel Newsom, Taylor Allbright, Jacoba Atlas, Julie Costanzo, Claire Dietrich  
**Music by** Eric Holland  
**Cinematography by** Svetlana Cvetko, John Behrens, Ben Wolf, Norman Bonney, Nathan Levine-Heaney, Brad Seals, Boryana Alexandrova, Nicole Hirsch-Whitaker  
**Film editing by** Jessica Congdon  
**Production companies:** Girls' Club Entertainment  
**Distributors:** Virgil Films and Entertainment  
**Runtime:** 1h 25'



## MAIN AWARDS

**Sundance Film Festival (2011):** Grand Jury Prize (nominee)  
**Women Film Critics Circle Awards (2011):** Best Theatrically Unreleased Movie by or About Women (winner)

## OTHER NOTABLE DOCUMENTARIES BY THE FILM DIRECTOR(S)

*The Mask You Live In* (2015), *The Great American Lie* (2019)

## REASONS TO SEE Miss Representation

- It goes deep into the world of mainstream media and the way it contributes to the under-representation of American women, by spreading disparaging portrayals of female figures.
- It demonstrates to the viewer that changing the way in which women are represented is an important first step in the fight for equality.
- It includes a social action campaign to address change in policy, education and call for socially responsible business. Newsom's film inspired the foundation of *The Representation Project* ([www.therepresentationproject.org](http://www.therepresentationproject.org)), a non-profit organization which aims to defeat inequality in the workplace.

## CONNECTED WITH...

- *Ukraine is not a Brothel* (2013), directed by Kitty Green. This documentary film offers a sympathetic portrait of the Ukrainian feminist group Femen, famous for its members' topless protests on the streets. Thanks to a mix of interviews, original videos and footage taken during the bare-breasted protests and much more, the film explores the motives behind these protests, which here aim at overthrowing the international stereotypes about Ukrainian women in relation to sex-trafficking and prostitution in Europe.
- *The Women's List* (2015), directed by Timothy Greenfield-Sanders. This documentary film shows a compressed history of 50 years of women's fight for equality, by interviewing 15 women who, besides having their gender in common, also have had the ability to overcome adversity during their life. The aim of the director was to represent 150 million women in America, by choosing women with different professions and offering different perspectives on the role of the women today and different generational views.
- *Embrace* (2016), directed by Taryn Brumfitt. It deals with the struggles connected with body image and weight, whilst also challenging the ways in which popular media depict bodies. It presents the obsession with obtaining a 'perfect' post-pregnancy body, as well as the concept of a 'perfect body' that today's society constantly imposes. The struggle with self-image with a special insight into the world of social media and of fashion, and the way it is perceived and judged by the society, are the central themes.

## RE/PRESENTING AMERICA IN *Miss Representation*

*Miss Representation* (2011) is a documentary film that exposes the limiting representations of women in American media, investigating how these affect the women's sense of self-worth and emotional health, while contributing to the general devaluation of women in contemporary culture. Written, directed and produced by Jennifer Siebel Newsom, the film starts on a personal level, with Newsom describing the path taken by her life, from her childhood until the recent birth of her daughter. She asks what kind of future her daughter can look forward to before the film quickly shifts onto highly political issues. Newsom offers an analysis of the portrayals of women in the media, which are too often underestimated, distortedly represented, but especially objectified, reinforcing the slogan that appears throughout the film: "you can't be what you can't see".

Politics is a major theme of the film. Two interviewees, Republican Condoleezza Rice and Democrat Nancy Pelosi, make the audience reflect on the common barriers they face as women working in the political field though in opposite parties. Hilary Rodham Clinton and Sarah Palin, also on opposite sides, contribute interesting insights into the way the media treats women politicians and the underrepresentation they suffer at all levels of Government. Women and gender in journalism, television and film also receive attention: other interviewees, such as Geena Davis, Lisa Ling, Katie

Couric, Rosario Dawson, Jim Steyer, Dr. Jackson Katz, and Gloria Steinem comment on the harmful ways women are portrayed and objectified in the media, but also on how advertising shifted from a sexist but still 'naïve' style to direct exploitation in order to get greater visibility. Advertising is a business overwhelmingly dominated by men, particularly at the writing and directing level; women's voices are filtered by men in almost every mainstream media. Hence the persistence of the sexist bias.

Furthermore, Newsom shows how the use of photoshopping and digitally altering tools in pictures, images and representations of women is largely spread. This misrepresentation of models and iconic female figures contributes to giving a wrong representation of real bodies which affects especially teenagers and older girls with eating disorders. Misrepresentation can lead women to underestimate their own body measuring it against the proposed model of 'perfection', but also to suffer different kinds of discrimination for bodily reasons, which can lead to anorexia, isolation or in the worst case, suicide, as the cases of different high school students demonstrate throughout the film.

Reviewer Michelle Orange from *SBS Film* states that "This is the first time in human history, we are told, that a 256-billion-dollar advertising industry has dictated human values and culture" (2009). Certainly, one of the aims of the documentary is to highlight that this misrepresentation of the female body in the media goes hand in hand with the global earnings of the advertising industries and that, to date, one could not exist without the other. At the same time, Newsom might be criticized for supposing that female consumers passively accept everything the media and advertising dictate (now together with the social media). There is now a noticeable amount of resistance to shaming women for their bodies and behavior, and, among other recent event, the difficulties of lingerie brand Victoria's Secret to face a wave of damning criticism for its sexism might be an indicator that something is changing at consumer level.

Another review written by Brandi Sperry for *The MacGuffin* notes that "To be honest, as someone who pays attention and talks about this stuff all the time, this film didn't have a lot 'new' to tell me", besides "I notice every single time someone calls Hillary Clinton Mrs. Clinton rather than Secretary Clinton, as she damn well should be addressed" (2012). It is partially correct to say that *Miss Representation* does not break new ground or unveil anything that was not known before. However, it is good to give meaning to the issues we hear repeatedly every day, but never without considering them as a real problem at the basis of the capitalist society. Newsom's film still sends a powerful message which can be mainly useful to teenagers who are perhaps unaware of the media bias and its potential danger. Therefore, this documentary can give the right tools to understand concretely the problems caused by gender inequality in different fields of everyday life.

Lastly, Miranda Nelson from *The Georgia Straight* states that "Beginning with the idea that there is a severe lack of positive female role models in our culture, Newsom covers everything from eating disorders and cosmetic surgery to the oversexualization and degradation of women in general" (2012). Indeed, it is true that the emphasis is mainly placed on women in public relations circles, but the particularly appreciable aspect of the documentary is that it includes every sphere that is part of the average, typical American woman's life, from the school environment to that of cinema and music, from the working environment to family life. The misrepresentation

is not then limited to the media but even to the gap between who women really are and who they must appear to be in daily life.

In conclusion, *Miss Representation's* goal is to inform audiences about the rampant sexism in television, advertising, society, politics, and films. *Miss Representation* can be interpreted as the expression of the necessity of a more pro-feminist, conscious media representation of women in the USA, as well as all over the world. It exposes the stereotypes and the misogyny in the industry and examines in depth the media machine that controls the female masses. It shows not only women's oppression, but also how the media has become a controlling, dominating power over the general public and even the Government. The strength of *Miss Representation* is that it does not ask its audience to agree with everything that is presented, but rather to take a step back and reflect on the intentions of the media and the potential negative effects of women's misrepresentation on mental and psychological health and on social values. This documentary is not only about analyzing critically the status of women in American media, but it is especially a call to action. Jennifer Siebel Newsom persuades viewers that changing the way that women are represented is an important step in the fight for gender equality.

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Francesca Panico

## ***How to Survive a Plague* (2012): The Scream of the Silenced**

### **CREDITS**

**Directed by** David France

**Written by** David France, T. Woody Richman, Tyler H. Walk

**Produced by** David France, Dan Cogan, Howard Gertler

**Music by** Stuart Bogie, Luke O'Malley, Arthur Russell

**Cinematography by** Derek Wieseahn

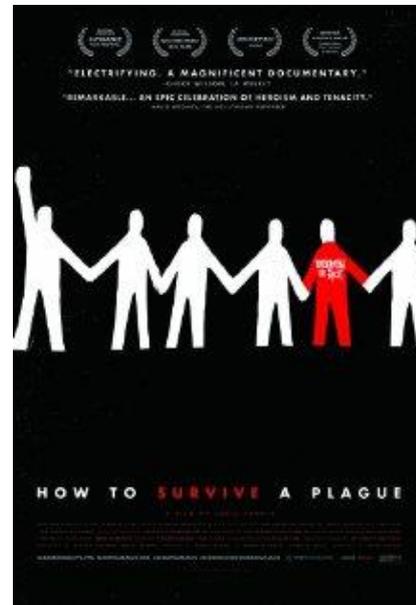
**Film editing by** Todd Woody Richman, Tyler H. Walk

**Production companies** Public Square Films,

Ninety Thousand Words, Ted Snowdon Foundation

**Distributors** GathrFilms (theatrical), Sundance Selects (theatrical)

**Runtime** 1h 50'



### **MAIN AWARDS**

**Academy Awards (Oscars) (2013):** Best Documentary, Feature (nominee)

**GLAAD Media Award (2013):** Outstanding Documentary (winner)

**Gotham Independent Film Awards (2012):** Best Documentary (winner)

**News and Documentary Emmy Awards (2013):** Best Documentary (nominee), Outstanding Individual Achievement in a Craft: Editing – Documentary and Long Form (nominee)

### **OTHER NOTABLE DOCUMENTARY FILM BY THE DIRECTOR**

*The Death and Life of Marsha P. Johnson* (2017), *Welcome to Chechnya* (2020)

### **REASONS TO SEE *How to Survive a Plague***

- The raw, real feeling we get from the persons portrayed here since the film is made up almost entirely of personal recordings, along with archived media and a few present-day interviews.
- It narrates the founding of the platform ACT UP for the defence of the rights of American homosexuals, as well as the rise of an underground prescription drug market in opposition to America's inefficient solution to the AIDS crisis
- It also describes the many strategies which the male gay community neglected by the US Government devised in order to survive.

## CONNECTED WITH...

- *We Were Here* (2011), directed by David Weissman with editor and co-director Bill Weber. It covers the AIDS crisis in San Francisco by revisiting the city and its gay community as it was hit with the crisis. The documentary follows what was later known as ‘the gay plague’ in the early 1980s and shows the slow response within the community as the issues raised by AIDS became impossible to deny. This is done following the recollections of five San Franciscans whose lives were transformed by this illness.
- *United in Anger: A History of ACT UP* (2012), directed by Jim Hubbard. A film about the beginning and progress of the AIDS activist movement from the perspective of the people fighting the epidemic. The documentary is a mix of archival footage and oral histories of members of Act Up. Hubbard depicts how civil disobedience turned into a movement against the corporations, the social silence and the negligence that peppered the crisis at its highest peaks. One of the main scoops of the documentary is, precisely, how big pharma produced solely drugs that were quite expensive to acquire with very little research and no promise of really helping HIV patients.
- *5B* (2018), directed by Dan Krauss and Paul Haggis. It deals with the efforts of a group of nurses and caregivers who opened the first AIDS ward in the world at San Francisco General Hospital. The documentary shows the dichotomy between the general public –cold and afraid of this apparent plague with many of them judging those who suffered it– and the caretakers that saw those who were sick as human persons in need of a place to be. The humanization of the medical body is the main point of this documentary.

## RE/PRESENTING AMERICA IN *How to Survive a Plague*

*How to Survive a Plague* follows the story of the American AIDS activists and their struggle regarding the inadequate response of the US Government to the virus when this impacted severely the American population in the early 1980s, especially the male gay community. The film consists of a mix of clips from the late 1980s and 1990s as well as some closer-to-our-time conversations with the persons who lived during the terrible massacre that happened during the cruelest part of the pandemic.

Back in 1982 *The New York Times* published an article reporting that the number of persons suffering from AIDS were, at the time, 335; in fact, there had been already 136 deaths mostly unreported by the national media. Since the disease appeared to affect mostly homosexual men US health officials initially called it gay-related immune deficiency, or GRID. This term originated a series of negative responses by which members of the gay community found themselves more ostracized than before, as they were wrongly understood to be carriers of the virus. Five years after the onset of the crisis the first anti-retroviral medication became available to the public. However, its limited administration made the clash among the upper and lower class yet another jagged border swallowing the sick face-first. Due to this breach, a

large percentage of the American population who ended up getting the disease felt, at large, forgotten by their Government. This back and forth between Government and those who suffered from AIDS, was what originated the ACT UP coalition: a movement caused by the civil unrest of the persons seeing members of their chosen family die in front of them while knowing well they could be next in line. Although focused on the American gay community France's documentary could be seen too as an intersectional text narrating how people from many different backgrounds united in one single cause.

The documentary by David France, released simultaneously with his eponymous book, focuses precisely on the activists who fought for recognition as well as for a cure. France has declared in some interviews regarding the film that ACT UP members knew that many would die. It is precisely that hopeless clarity, the realization that death is a risk but that this does not really matter, what France leans into. The activists took it upon themselves to convince the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) to approve drugs which could slow or halt the virus and that were not too toxic; this was the case of the AZT. DDI might have been a better alternative, but there was little time for safety trials and a great urge for an effective drug. This, alongside with the protests regarding immigration policies banning HIV positive people from entering the USA, became two main focus of ACT UP's struggles.

*How to Survive a Plague* approaches the fight showcasing the efforts of those who were dubious at first of whether there was ever a silver-lining on why they should be fighting. France's film "offers an enlightening portrait of community action in the face of appalling Government negligence and barely concealed anti-gay prejudice", Mark Kermode writes (2013). Indeed, homophobia was, plainly, the main reason why Ronald Reagan's administration (1980-1988) did so little to help find out the causes of AIDS, absurdly branding it as a gay-related disease when actually HIV can be transmitted through blood in sex (also heterosexual), transfusion and even medicines derived from plasma (this was the via of contagion for hemophiliacs). France's film targets Reagan's Government, its silence when the epidemic appeared, and the struggles it caused by allowing AZT to be finally sold in time-windows too limited for the ones who were ill to truly have a chance against AIDS.

France's eponymous book expands on the events and persons covered in the film; it was acclaimed precisely because of the rawness it shares with the documentary. France's intention, as he explained multiple times, was to give a platform to those who were shunned and banned from leading a normal life. The reported amounts of deaths in the USA from 1981 through 1990 were 100,777 (see the CDC report 2020). Despite evidence that the virus affected both heterosexual and homosexual persons its initial ill-fated name caused misinformation and much homophobic hatred for those who, to begin with, did not enjoy public visibility on a fair basis. The class structure also affected the initial perception of the public as AIDS was, at first, considered to be a disease connected only with low-income individuals which did not affect wealthy persons. Hence the high impact of the death of public figures such as Queen's lead singer Freddie Mercury or actor Rock Hudson.

*How to Survive a Plague* can be read as a recipe for how a society must always remember to work together even in the face of laws that are unjust and discriminatory. Inaction should never be the answer, nor discrimination by reason of creed or gender and sexual identity. AIDS hit first a population group that is, still today,

considered to be a minority and suffering from an 'otherness', a bigoted view that many still use as a tool for making them, us, be perceived as inhuman. The title, then, is a reflection of this fight alongside with the need for calling the pandemic what it was: a plague that is still active today and, despite the availability of medication that makes it a chronic condition, the cause of multiple deaths per year. It is important to recall that no vaccine has been found so far and that only two persons have been cured (thanks to stem cell therapy).

The documentary informs about the reality of the situation, lending a voice and a platform to those sufferers who were given none, even though, for many, it is too late. "I expected to be angry" reviewer Frank Bruni writes. "Here, too, I wasn't disappointed. What I didn't expect is how much hope I would feel. How much comfort" (2013). Likewise, Stephen Holden stresses how "The currents of rage, fear, fiery determination and finally triumph that crackle through David France's inspiring documentary lend this history of the AIDS coalition to Unleash Power a scorching electrical charge" (2013). These are the same powerful impressions audiences may feel at the end of the documentary, because of its raw wrath at the lack of response of Government and the true pain felt by the patients who tried to be seen and felt. The film teaches a valuable lesson about the many steps taken by activists, of whom only some survive today, to undermine the obvious homophobic response AIDS got from those who were not infected and believed themselves immune to the tragedy, those who labelled gays unfairly.

Homophobia is still rampant but with the legalization of gay marriage in 2015 (in all fifty states) a turning point was reached that has made gays and lesbians first class citizens like the rest of their fellow Americans. It is only too easy to forget that matters were completely different in the early 1980s, when most gays were closeted and only cities such as San Francisco and New York showed tolerance (though not necessarily full respect) for the community. In this sense, France's focus on the establishment of ACT UP as a milestone in the recent history of the LGBTIQ+ community in an important history lesson for all Americans.

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Lucía Merino Areitio

## ***The Invisible War* (2012): Serving the Betrayers**

### **CREDITS**

**Directed by** Kirby Dick

**Written by** Kirby Dick

**Produced by** Amy Ziering, Tanner King Barklow, Kimball Stroud

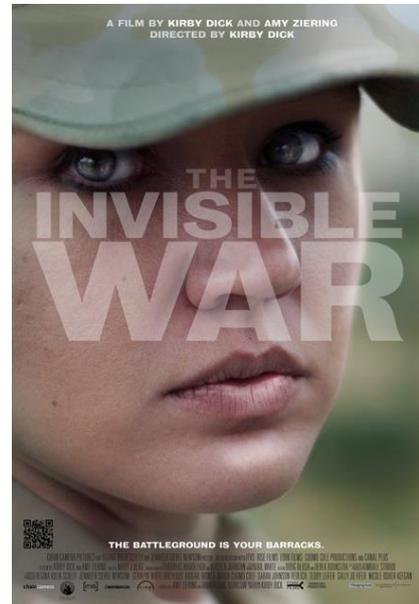
**Cinematography by** Thaddeus Wadleigh, Kirsten Johnson

**Film editing by** Douglas Blush, Derek Boonstra

**Production companies** Chain Camera Pictures, Rise Films, ITVS, Fork Films, Cuomo Cole Productions, Canal +

**Distributors** Cinedigm Entertainment Group (theatrical)

**Runtime:** 1h 37'



### **MAIN AWARDS**

**Academy Award (Oscars) (2013):** Best Documentary Feature (nominee)

**Film Independent Spirit Award (2013):** Best Documentary (winner)

**International Documentary Association (2013):** Best Documentary (nominee)

**Sundance Film Festival (2012):** Audience Award, Documentary (winner)

### **OTHER NOTABLE DOCUMENTARY FILMS BY THE DIRECTOR**

*Sick: The Life and Death of Bob Flanagan, Supermasochist* (1997), *Twist of Faith* (2004, Oscar Award nominee), *Outrage* (2009), *The Hunting Ground* (2015), *The Bleeding Edge* (2018)

### **REASONS TO SEE *The Invisible War***

- It is both a moving and heart-breaking story about women's sexual abuse in the US military, which engages your empathy from the very beginning.
- The women survivors would never have had the opportunity to see these crimes condemned if it were not for this documentary.
- It tells a story about patriarchal power, and it makes the audience question how both the American military and society work.

## CONNECTED WITH...

- *Twist of Faith* (2004) directed by Kirby Dick. The film deals with how Tony Comes copes with the trauma of having been sexually abused by a priest when he was a fourteen-year-old student at a Catholic high school. Because of the shame he felt, Tony, a firefighter, had kept his nightmare as a secret for nearly twenty years. However, after discovering that Dennis Gray, the priest who had abused him, was living next to him and his family he had no option but to confront the harsh reality and bring the case to court. Many of the scenes of this documentary are provided by the camcorders Comes and his family were given.
- *Outrage* (2009), directed by Kirby Dick. This documentary is based on the work of Michael Rogers and his site blogactive.com. Dick depicts the hypocrisy of homosexual political figures who lead campaigns against the LGTBI+ community while living closeted gay lives. He also exposes how the hypocrisy of the mass media blocks the discussion of issues related with these closeted gay politicians. *Outrage* condemns this behavior and claims that an institutionalized homophobia has resulted in a constant (self-)censorship of the media.
- *Served Like a Girl* (2017) directed by Lisa Heslov. This documentary provides the audience with an insight into the transition back into civilian life which several American women went through after serving in Iraq and Afghanistan. These women come back home to face a hard reality, however this is hardly ever discussed as if there were only male veterans. The aftermath of the horrors that they lived on active duty and after it (such as PTSD, homelessness, broken families or coping with having been sexually abused) does not stop them from adapting to their new reality while trying to overcome trauma.

## RE/PRESENTING AMERICA IN *The Invisible War*

The armed forces are an emblematic, powerful feature of American society. Portrayed as saviors and heroes, US soldiers are worshipped by millions of Americans. However, all that glitters is not gold. Known to have killed civilians in Islamic countries including children, these 'heroes' have now another stain to deal with: the rape of American women also in the military. Kirby Dick interviews in this film female veterans from the United States Armed Forces who give their testimony about suffering sexual assault while on active duty. *The Invisible War* reveals the malpractices of the US Army's higher echelons such as the reprimanding of the victims instead of the perpetrators (including even dishonorable discharge) and the lack of psychological and physical care for the rape survivors. This is not a problem caused by a few bad apples but systematic sexism.

Kirby's film mainly narrates how the victims and their families deal with the aftermath of the abuse episodes endured while serving their country. The first-person testimonials alternate with interviews, not only with diverse professionals (such as lawyers, journalists, mental health professionals) but also with active and off duty military officers and members of the military justice system. Footage shot by the veterans themselves documenting their lives and how they cope in the aftermath of

their assaults is also included. Kirby's film goes beyond reporting the specific incidents and the men involved. In fact, other past sexual abuse incidents are recounted in the film, involving diverse branches of the military. The director uses these scandalous events to argue that the military never dealt seriously with the reports of the victims of assault, thus failing to serve its people. He aims at criticizing those in the higher positions in the Army who simply looked away when these women reported the incidents, in some cases actively protecting the perpetrators. Not only had these women to overcome psychological trauma, but they also had to fight the system to denounce these episodes to get justice (as soldiers, they could not report the crimes to the civilian authorities). Dick depicts a corrupt system in which men guard each other's backs while women struggle to be granted protection.

The women survivors had all idealized images of the armed forces and Dick successfully manages to portray the damage done by their broken idealism. Reviewer Kenneth Turan writes that "It is not just the detailing of the horrors of assault that makes *The Invisible War* so upsetting, it is its exploration of the before and after—an examination of what led these people to the military in the first place and what happened to them once they filed rape charges—that gives the film much of its power" (2012). Full of innocence and joy, these actual heroines enrolled in the Army looking to serve their homeland only to find that their dream became a complete nightmare because of their brothers-in-arms. These women already had a tough job, risking their lives to serve their country. However, they ended up realizing their true enemies were not in faraway lands but at home. The trust they had put on their male companions was total and when it broke this was even more damaging than the assault itself.

A.O. Scott claimed, "A culture of impunity has flourished, and the film suggests that the military has mostly responded with pathetic attempts at prevention (through posters and public service announcements) and bureaucratic rituals of self-protection" (2012). As noted, a major problem concerning the assaults is that the military has its own system of justice and so the survivors could not ask for the protection that the law gives civilian rape victims. Blogger Alex Withrow wrote that "The movie isn't easy to stomach, and its complete lack of resolution (because how can I person who has been raped ever fully live a 'resolved' life?) will undoubtedly leave many as frustrated as I was, but at its core, *The Invisible War* seeks to expose" (2012). Yet, in fact Dick's film did have immediate consequences because following the suit filed by eight of the survivors against key military figures for fostering rape culture, this was questioned at US Government level. Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta made it mandatory, after seeing the film, that only officers ranked Colonel or higher could handle sexual assault cases (and not commanders that tended to protect the men in their units or be themselves the abusers). Also following the film's release, the Marine Corps was the first military body to announce plans to fight sexual abuse, plans now common to most branches of the armed forces. A law signed by President Obama in 2013 introduced important changes in the way military justice operates in cases of sexual assault.

Beyond the difficulties of the victims to recover from rape and live happily, Dick's film presents rape as a systematic tool of aggression. The US Army started accepting women under pressure from feminist demands but this does not mean that women are really welcome by all men in the military. Sexual assault is a way of expressing this rejection and of putting the women who dare enter previously

exclusive male territories in a position of subordination, no doubt with the expectation that they will give in and abandon (as did happen in most cases). What Dick's film shows is that, unlike what is habitually supposed, women are not raped by strangers but by men close to them; the closer the perpetrator is, the deeper the trauma because the feeling of betrayal must be added to the pain of abuse. The ugly reality of the idealized male American soldier, a fundamental figure of American society, is thus here unveiled and the brave knight is portrayed as a rapist and betrayer. After Dick's film, women who still want to enlist in the US military will at least be aware that the enemy can be found inside as much as outside.

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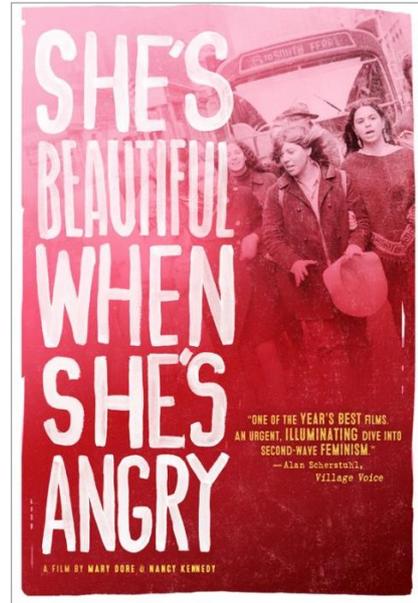
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Ada Montón

# ***She's Beautiful When She's Angry* (2014): The Feminist Wave that Changed America**

## **CREDITS**

**Directed by** Mary Dore  
**Produced by** Abigail Disney, Mary Dore, GERALYN White Dreyfous, Nancy Kennedy, Gini Reticker  
**Music by** Mark De Gli Antoni  
**Cinematography by** Svetlana Cvetko  
**Film editing by** Nancy Kennedy, Kate Taverna  
**Production companies** Funded by participants, foundations, and Kickstarter crowdfunding  
**Distributors** International Film Circuit (theatrical)  
**Runtime** 1h 32'



## **MAIN AWARDS**

**Hamburg International Queer Film Festival (2015):** Best Documentary (winner)  
**Melbourne International Film Festival (2015):** People's Choice – Best Documentary (nominee)  
**Women Film Critics Circle Awards (2014):** Best Documentary by or About Women (nominee)  
**Zonta Film Festival (2015):** Best of Festival (winner)

## **OTHER NOTABLE DOCUMENTARY FILMS BY THE DIRECTOR**

*The Good Fight: The Abraham Lincoln Brigade in the Spanish Civil War* (1984)

## **REASONS TO SEE *She's Beautiful When She's Angry***

- It is important to know the names and stories of these feminist women because they made a huge change in America happen and, sadly, most of them have been forgotten and not recognized.
- The amount of research the filmmakers did in order to find all the historically relevant footage.
- It represents different types of women and different types of feminist struggles by not focusing exclusively on upper/middle-class, white, straight women.

## CONNECTED WITH...

- *Seeing Allred* (2011), directed by Roberta Grossman and Sophie Sartain. This documentary follows the life of Gloria Allred, an attorney who has dedicated her career to the fight for women's rights. The film centers around Allred's work with the women accusing powerful figures like Bill Cosby or Donald Trump of sexual assault. Furthermore, it depicts Allred's life both through her point of view and through the point of view of people close to her (i.e. her daughter Lisa Bloom, also an attorney, and Gloria Steinem, a well-known women's rights activists).
- *Reversing Roe* (2018), directed by Ricki Stern and Anne Sundberg. This film breaks down the state of abortion politics in America through interviews with different politicians, activists and experts. Starting with the Roe v Wade case from 1973, the documentary analyzes the social and political effects this case had over the fifty years that followed. It discusses the fight for and against abortion from all different sides of the religious spectrum and across all fifty states in order to provide a chronological view.
- *Feminists: What Were They Thinking?* (2018), directed by Johanna Demetrakas. This documentary is inspired by the 1977 portrait book *Emergence* about women's awakening. It features interviews with women coming from different backgrounds and with different ages about their experience with feminism. The film touches on topics such as abortion, race, motherhood, sexuality and identity while also discussing the impact several works that were deemed feminists had in popular culture. Finally, they discuss the state of women's rights nowadays and call for more change to be made.

## RE/PRESENTING AMERICA IN *She's Beautiful When She's Angry*

*She's Beautiful When She's Angry* (2014) tells the story of the women who rose up during the late 1960s, early 1970s to fight for their rights. Through a series of interviews with the women who fought during Second Wave Feminism, Mary Dore manages to tell the story of the victories and losses of the Women's Liberation movement from its birth inside the Anti-Vietnam War movement to the end of the 1970s. Additionally, Dore aims to inspire the younger generations of women to also rise like their predecessors did and to remind them that the fight for the women's rights is far from over.

This documentary narrates, as noted, the experiences of many different American women in the Women's Liberation movement. It presents the movement as a child of other big movements of the time, not only the Anti-Vietnam War Movement but also the Civil Rights Movement, because women who participated in those protests realized that they were not being taken seriously and had to fight harder than their male peers just to be heard. Dore captures many different events like the protests against the Miss America pageant (when a group of women sneaked in and unfurled a huge banner asking for Women's Liberation); the creation of the *Our Bodies, Ourselves* book, the first educational book about women's health and sexuality written by the Boston Women's Health Book Collective; the work by the Lavender

Menace for the inclusion of lesbians in the movement; the fight for birth control, abortion and daycare; and the creation of the Black Sisters Unite as a method to raise awareness on the struggles of black women inside the feminist movement and the Civil Rights movement. It is also important to note that it is because of these American women that we now recognize domestic abuse as what it is, since before them it was normalized and not talked about anywhere in the world.

The purpose of *She's Beautiful When She's Angry* is, clearly, to pay homage to all the feminist women who fought the Second Wave fights and who might have been already forgotten by history though most are still alive. As some of these women say in the documentary, people do not realize how much things changed thanks to the Women's Liberation movement. These women spent years fighting for women's right and for liberation, but once it happened and American society had irrevocably been changed forever, they felt empty. The world had moved on from their fight and they had no other option than to go back to their lives (or continue fighting at another level). So, this documentary serves both as a long-deserved homage to them and as a fundamental lesson on the history of American feminism.

Sheri Linden writes that "*She's Beautiful When She's Angry* is an exceptional chronicle, its mix of archival material and new interviews bristling with the energy and insight of one of the most important social movements of the 20th century. (...) [Dore] examines infighting factions within the movement and the issues of race, sexual orientation and class that challenged and transformed it" (2014). Certainly, this film does a great job of representing issues of class, sexuality and race and how it intersects with womanhood. It treats women of color, lesbians and lower-class women with the same respect, attention and importance as the more privileged women and without taking away any merits from their respective fights. In this sense, it is a truly intersectional text.

Barbara VanDenburgh claims that "Civil-rights movements are never really over because they're never really won. *She's Beautiful When She's Angry* doesn't overtly make that case until its closing minutes, but when it does, it's made all the more powerful by the footage that preceded it" (2015). That is not completely correct. The documentary starts with footage from a protest in Texas against the abortion ban during the late 2000s-early 2010s. Right at beginning it states that the fight for women's right is far from over, not just at the end. However, it is true that the final statement manages to end the documentary in an extremely powerful manner, showing that the feminist movement is still alive and that there are a lot of women ready to keep their legacy and their fight alive.

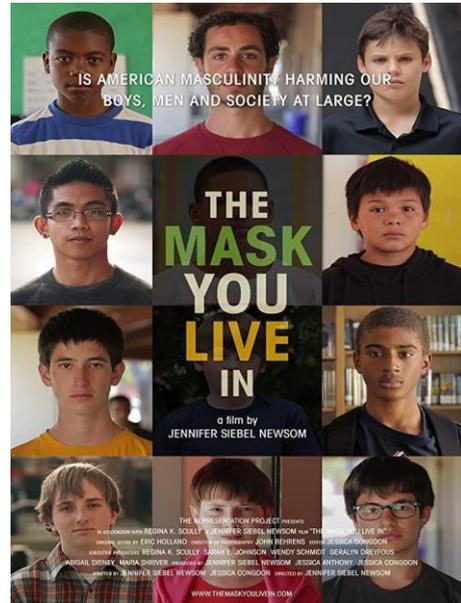
Ann Hornaday states that "with its awkward reenactments and other stylistic clunkers, *She's Beautiful When She's Angry* doesn't break much formal ground. But it serves as a moving reminder of how crucial citizen action is in fomenting social change" (2015) Again, this statement is not completely true. This documentary film "does not break much formal ground" because the aim of this film is to resurrect the stories of these women while also reminding the audience that the feminist fight is not over yet. It would be incorrect to believe that the stories told in *She's Beautiful When She's Angry* are not valuable only because they are not new or not told in a sophisticated way. It is very important to acknowledge the struggles that made women's liberation happen, or else it might be taken for granted. Dismissing their



## **The Mask You Live In (2015): Toxic Masculinity in America**

### **CREDITS**

**Directed by** Jennifer Siebel Newsom  
**Written by** Jessica Anthony, Jessica Congdon, Jennifer Siebel Newsom  
**Produced by** Jessica Congdon, Jennifer Siebel Newsom  
**Music by** Eric Holland  
**Cinematography by** John Behrens  
**Film editing by** Jessica Congdon  
**Production companies:** The Representation Project, The Annenberg Foundation, The Brin Wojcicki Foundation, Novo Foundation, Pacific Gas and Electric, Peery Foundation  
**Distributors:** Uncredited original distributor, Netflix  
**Runtime:** 1h 32'



### **MAIN AWARDS**

**Las Vegas International Film Festival (2015):** Best Achievement in Female Filmmaking (winner)

### **OTHER NOTABLE DOCUMENTARY FILMS BY THE DIRECTOR**

*Miss Representation* (2011), *The Great American Lie* (2019)

### **REASONS TO SEE *The Mask You Live In***

- You get different stories about men and boys from different perspectives, such as race, age, social income, etc., showing how toxic masculinity has affected their lives.
- It shows how men are affected by a system that is supposed to help them. Hypermasculinity is another result of patriarchy, which is supposedly a system made to help men though it actually does not. It helps to see how a world where men are women seen as equal could also benefit men in terms of how 'effeminate' traits like vulnerability could also be expressed by them.
- It covers a lot of ground when it comes to the factors that help create this toxic idea of masculinity: movies, tv, music, porn, video games, sports, college life, relationships with parents, drug and drink use, etc.

## CONNECTED WITH...

- *Fight Club* (1999, fiction film), directed by David Fincher. This controversial cult film is based on the novel of the same title by Chuck Palahniuk. It shows how American consumerist society emasculates men to the point that they forget what it means to be a 'real man', similarly to how the men in Newsom's documentary had to relearn what it means to be a man. The elusive Tyler Durden is, however, an extremely problematic example of masculinity.
- *Tough Guise: Violence, Media & the Crisis in Masculinity* (1999), directed by Sut Jhally. This documentary analyses the connection between male representation in pop culture, mainly in Western media, and the social construction of masculinity at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Representation was believed to have little actual impact on men's lives until academic work started calling attention to this issue in the early 1990s, following studies of women's misrepresentation. Men, it turns out, are given the wrong role models to follow, too.
- *Minding The Gap* (2018), directed by Bing Liu. This documentary follows the lives and friendships of three men who bond over their love for skateboarding, exploring on their turbulent upbringing and their struggles with masculinity. American sports documentary and fiction films might be the texts which most clearly deal with men and masculinity, though few (if any) of the directors and writers are truly aware that this is the main issue they are dealing with.

## RE/PRESENTING AMERICA IN *The Mask You Live In*

*The Mask You Live In* tells the stories of several American men who have been negatively affected by the concept of manhood that their society endorses. Combined with their experiences, we see professionals in the field of psychology and education give more positive instruction on how masculinity can be changed. Other factors that influence the perception of masculinity such as US media, video games, porn or college life are examined as well as the data about mental health issues in men, and criminality amongst others factors, in support of the thesis of the documentary, namely, that men are victimized by the patriarchal view on what it means to be a man.

These professionals of education and psychology agree that American society pressures young boys to perform a hyper-masculine persona, a mask, because they cannot be vulnerable and have to reject everything deemed 'feminine' like girly interests or even platonic intimacy within their friendships. This containment affects their feelings as they grow up, always in contact with media that shows a physically strong image of men, violent video games that desensitize them about real violence, porn that objectifies women and normalizes their pain and abuse, and early-drinking and substance consuming (the average American boy starts drinking at 12). All these make that mask an even stronger façade and aggravates their issues, whether they are mental health issues (studies confirm men are most likely to commit suicide) or committing crimes like murder or rape.

Newsom's documentary gives a platform to men whose youth and later life was impacted by their macho-like behavior. We get stories about young men who didn't know how to deal with their mental issues because they had learned that they couldn't

open up about what they were feeling, which even led them to criminality. Others explain how they suffered bullying at school because of their 'effeminate' mannerisms and what that meant to their self-esteem. We also get a glimpse of the life of incarcerated men who explain how their toxic relationships with their families and other damaging conflicts, and the fact that they didn't know how to solve those issues, led them to participate in more dangerous activities like drug dealing or violence as a coping mechanism. Hearing about the damages that toxic masculinity can produce shows the issue not as an abstract idea based on cold data that can be interpreted subjectively but as real problems for real American young boys.

Ben Kenigsberg from *Variety* says that "while the movie notes that mass shooters tend to be male, even though American women grow up with easy access to guns, employing news clips of the Aurora movie-theater shooting (among other violent incidents) before the opening credits only suggests from the get-go that *The Mask You Live In* has little use for complexity. Reductive and sensationalistic correlations detract from the movie's salient points" (2015). The documentary can be seen as reductive and sensationalistic at times but the reason why that happens is that the issue is very straight-forward. It is clear that there is a difference in the way American men and women express their feelings or react to media that stereotypes them and it is not a biological issue. Men and women are far more similar than what society tries to make us believe, so it is easy to analyze those factors and reach a reductive conclusion but this might be because the problem is more transparent than what it seems.

Matt Goldberg from *Collider* argues that "the movie is best suited for parents and teachers, and should be required viewing in classrooms. As something that will show in a theater, it will only play to the converted, and that's a shame because perhaps there are people who won't find the film's points as obvious as I do. This is a film that has to be brought to people who can learn something rather than play those who already believe in its viewpoint" (2015). This documentary should definitely be viewed in classrooms because it can start a very important conversation and school is a crucial part in any boy's life when it comes to growing and deciding who they want to be. Being exposed to these ideas can help them ask themselves if they are really who they want to be or if they are projecting an image to be accepted, a mask as the title stresses. Besides, there are, among men very few 'converts' to the idea that patriarchy damages men.

Lastly, IMDB user Badoli says that: "At times it feels weirdly constructed, as with the vilification of porn segment. Even Philip Zimbardo only conjures the old outsider-stereotype and an extremely bold statement like 'violence against women is at epidemic proportions' is not supported by any historical figures. Questionable feminist terms like 'rape culture', 'entitlement' and 'privilege' are thrown around" (2017). Porn is not so much vilified as it is unmasked in a very necessary way. The documentary states that boys start being exposed to porn at 12 years old and if we take into account the ineffectiveness or, in some cases, the inexistence of sex education in the American education system, porn becomes the only source of information they have about sexual relationships; they learn this way to objectify women and neglect their role in (hetero)sexuality. Growing up with the unrealistic idea of sex that is portrayed in porn can harm the relationships they have with women. Porn is also part of rape culture, which is not a questionable feminist term, but a real

issue that proves that American society normalizes rape, whether is through porn itself, offensive jokes or not believing women when they report sexual abuse.

What Newsom's documentary tries to do is not so much solve a problem but rather bring it to light by trying to show audiences that American patriarchal society is harming boys and men, both in how they interact in their personal or professional circles and through the media they consume. Mass shootings and sexual abuse, two of the biggest issues in America are, as shown in the documentary, deeply connected with the damaging way in which men are raised, their relationship with the media and their mental health. This shows that toxic or patriarchal masculinity is not a trivial problem or women's feminist invention; on the contrary, it's something very serious negatively affecting all men and, indeed, all of America.

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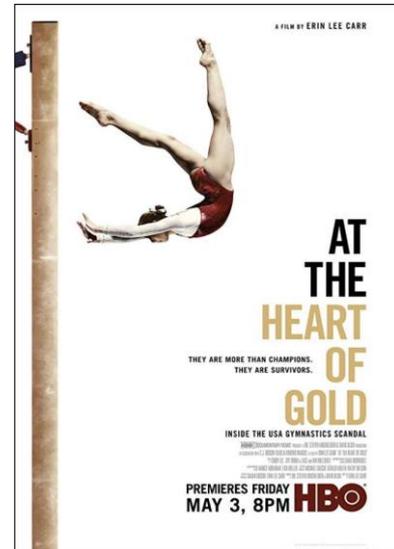
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Sonia Muñoz Gracia

## ***At the Heart of Gold: Inside the USA Gymnastics Scandal (2019): The Shadows Behind Success***

### **CREDITS**

**Directed by** Erin Lee Carr  
**Produced by** David Ulich, Steven Ungerleider  
**Music by** Drum & Lace and Ian Hultquist  
**Cinematography by** Bryan Sarkinen  
**Film editing by** Cindy Lee  
**Production companies** S. J Gibson Films, Sidewinder Films  
**Distributors** HBO  
**Runtime** 1h 28'



### **MAIN AWARDS**

**MTV Movie and TV Award (2019):** Best Documentary (nominee)

### **OTHER NOTABLE DOCUMENTARY FILMS BY THE DIRECTOR**

*Thought Crimes: The Case of the Cannibal Cop* (2015), *Mommy Dead and Dearest* (2017), *I Love You, Now Die: The Commonwealth vs. Michelle Carter* (2019)

### **REASONS TO WATCH *At the Heart of Gold***

- The gymnasts themselves explain all the sacrifices they make and the pressure they have to endure in order to follow their dream, which allows the spectator to realize that what from the outside seems fun or entertaining is not trivial at all.
- By getting to know the sexual predator Larry Nassar, we learn how manipulative someone can be, how this leads to the victims' feeling guilty, and how this betrayal from someone they trusted marks them forever.
- For you to see with your own eyes how powerful people, mostly men like those who protected Nassar, take advantage of their position and hide crimes in order to remain privileged no matter what this costs the victims.

## CONNECTED WITH...

- *Because We Are Girls* (2019), directed by Baljit Sangra. This film tells the story of three Indian sisters of the Canadian British Columbia community, Jeeti, Kira and Salakshana Pooni, who, as adults, claimed that their male cousin who often babysat them as children had sexually abused them. It took many years for them to mention those acts since they had been threatened by their abuser as children and because in their community women might be blamed for their own abuse.
- *The Conspiracy of Silence* (1995), directed by Neal Marshad and Donna Olson. Dealing with domestic abuse in the United States, this insightful documentary describes the 'unspoken pact' that the abuser and the abused sign by which the former expects the latter not to tell anyone about the harms he or she receives and the latter accepts it in order not to receive more violence (though this never works). Marshad and Olson's film described a pattern endemic to patriarchal violence, no matter where it is found.
- *An Open Secret* (2015) directed by Amy J. Berg. This documentary deals with the sexual abuse of child actors in the movie industry by a variety of Hollywood-related men. In the film, five former child actors are interviewed who claim that they were abused when they were underage. Amy J. Berg also mentions different names such as Marc Collins-Rector and Bryan Singer as possible sex-offenders.

## RE/PRESENTING AMERICA IN *At the Heart of Gold*

*At the Heart of Gold: Inside the USA Gymnastics Scandal* tells the story of how Dr Larry Nassar, a family man but also a sexual predator during twenty years, took advantage of hundreds of girls and young women athletes because of his position as official doctor in the USA Gymnastics team and the Michigan State University. The documentary interviews some of the gymnasts, such as Larissa Boyce among others, who had been his victims; they all describe him as a charming, manipulative man and give horrifying details of the abuses he committed. Nassar, hired as their official doctor and therapist, gained their confidence by acting very nicely, which made the girls trust him, seeing him as a friend and confidant in opposition to the demanding coaches who were utterly strict and often even mean.

Erin Lee Carr's harrowing documentary not only focuses on the terrible abuses Nassar is guilty of but also on the evil things the ones protecting him did. Men and women in positions of responsibility who knew about Nassar's acts did nothing about them, except force the girls to be silent even persuading them that this was not sexual abuse. Some of these collaborators were the coaches Bela and Marta Karolyi, Kathy Klages, John Geddert. The gymnasts also unmask in the documentary even more important individuals, mostly men but not only, that far from reporting him to the Police hid Nassar's abuses. For example, the USAG president Steve Penny (who resigned in 2017 after the scandal broke out) or Lou Anna Simon, former President of the Michigan State University. These people, as well as Nassar himself, told the Police once some of the girls decided to speak out that all the inappropriate actions the

doctor allegedly did were in fact proven medical techniques to take care of their health. The collaborator used their power to hide these crimes by lying to the Police and preventing the airing of official documents that would be evidence of Nassar's abuses.

The turning point came when Rachael Denhollander, a former gymnast (and now a lawyer), outed publicly Nassar as an abuser detailing everything he had done to her in the past. All the girls that had so far remained silent under threats by all these powerful people finally felt protected and started discussing their own cases. From that moment onwards, Nassar's name was really tainted yet he still kept defending his innocence. However, a neighbor of his, the daughter of one of his closest friends, told the Police about her having been abused by Nassar since she was a little girl. She had never been a gymnast so the excuse of the medical technique was ruined. The Police found child pornography in Nassar's house, which was enough to sustain the accusation that he was a sexual predator. The last part of the documentary shows his trial and how hundreds of women that had been his victims confront Nassar encouraged by Judge Aquilina. In tears, but no longer afraid, these survivors express a hope that he will pay by spending all his life in prison far from other unprotected girls. The disgusted Judge complies.

Bilge Ebiri writes in a review that Carr's film it's "a chilling reminder that real predators rarely look and act like movie monsters" (2019). Certainly, we cannot really know what everyone respectable citizen is really like inside and of course we cannot tell first sight if someone is a murderer or a pedophile. In the case of meek-looking Nassar, he was always described as the nicest human being with the biggest heart because he was always there as a friend for the girls. He was obviously manipulative and tricked the girls into thinking that this façade was real. He also tricked the parents who, appallingly, were in many cases in the same room while he abused their daughters under pretense of treating them medically. Indeed, many victims had a hard time understanding that they had been abused, which allowed Nassar to go on for a long time.

Reviewer Glenn Dunks claims that "Carr has built a testament to the tenacity of these women, telling a necessary story that proves you don't need flare and pomp when you have the faces and voices and a story that needs to be told" (2019). I agree with Dunks, in this case no filmic flourishes are necessary. The real victims use their own voices to denounce something that is horrible but also to make every woman feel empowered; this is proof that less is more. The segment capturing the trial is particularly affecting, not only because of the girls' tearful but relentless testimonials but also because of Judge Rosemarie Aquilina's surprisingly biased, adamant attitude against Nassar and in favor of justice. She is certainly an example to follow.

Reviewer Debbie Holloway notes that "The #MeToo movement will be a success if it leads to social and legal change. But it'll take a lot of heart-wrenching stories like this one to get us there" (2019). Unfortunately this is quite true. The #MeToo movement will be successful once everyone realizes there are millions of victims out there, in the USA and elsewhere. Once we get truly aware of the suffering many human beings have gone through as victims of sexual abuse, that is when we will do something to truly fight against child mistreatment of all kinds. Sadly, this will require many victims to speak out, to shed victimhood to become survivors which, as

Carr's film shows takes immense courage and is always easier to do in the company of others equally victimized.

As the title claims this documentary questions what lies "at the heart of gold", interviewing victims who are, most importantly first-rank women gymnasts (top Olympian Simone Biles has also accused Nassar). They unmask a man whom we would call a monster but who, because he did not look like one, was protected by the American sports system until the scandal burst. As the girls say themselves, this system values the medals more than their integrity and protection when in fact they are the ones worth more than gold. Yet, in Carr's film we see that a winning gymnast's smile may be concealing deep fear. The United States was not known as a top nation for gymnastics but the many medals won in recent decades are now tainted by the abuse these girls suffered, not just sexual from Nassar but personal from the whole system. This scandal is much bigger than any other affecting sport in the USA and although it is true that the girls broke their silence and found justice, they should never have been abused and much less for the sake of passing glory and a few medals.

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Laura Menor Pérez

## ICONS OF AMERICA

Every life is interesting one way or another and, potentially, good documentary material. Some, however, stand above others and in this section there appear a number of films which are both outstanding and deal with outstanding personalities (others which can also be called a character study can be found in the section on Social Issues and Personal Stories, and Sports and E-Sports).

Following the criteria described in the introduction, the section Icons of America does not intend to cover all aspects of American life but the other way round: to consider which American personalities have been the object of major (or at least relevant) documentaries. This was, however, the section which could have accommodated more films if the count had been raised to 100 films. The reader might miss here *The Kid Stays in the Picture* (2012) about Hollywood producer Robert Evans, *Life Itself* (2014) on film critic Roger Ebert, or *Would You Be my Neighbor?* (2018) on children's TV personality Fred Rogers. I must note that *Gonzo: The Life and Work of Dr. Hunter S. Thompson* (2008) was a last-minute addition to fill in a gap: there were no writers represented in the section and, besides, director Alex Gibney is, arguably, the most interesting American documentarian at work today.

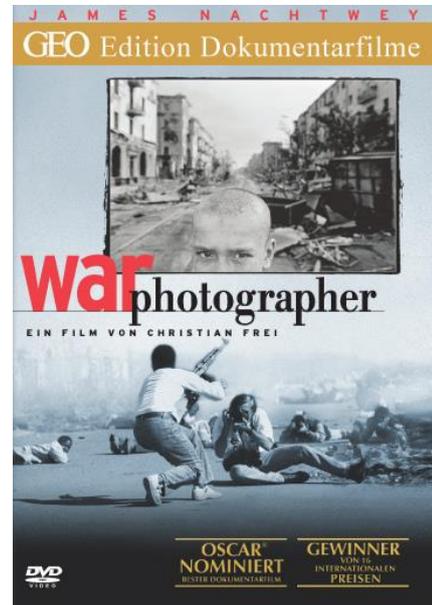
Photography is here represented by three very different iconic personalities. James Nachtway is the object of *War Photographer* (2001) by Swiss director Christian Frei. The other two films bear the name of their subject in their titles: *Bill Cunningham's New York* (2010) and *Finding Vivian Maier* (2014) deal each with an eccentric loner who was also a marvelous witness of New York City's street life from very different perspectives. American architecture is represented by *My Architect* (2003), a film by Nathaniel Kahn which is both a portrait of his father, top architect Louis Kahn, and a heart-felt consideration of the bond between (workaholic) father and son. Music is necessarily represented in this section by the higher number of films, about four more or less popular icons, two men and two women: *The Devil and Daniel Johnston* (2005), *Cobain: Montage of Heck* (2015), *Janis: Little Girl Blue* (2015) and *What Happened, Miss Simone?* (2015).

The other three films represent here cinema, justice and health issues. *Bright Lights: Starring Carrie Fisher and Debbie Reynolds* (2017), is a moving, beautiful portrait of two women who were famous actors but also, fundamentally, a unique mother-daughter pair. *RBG* (2018) tells the story of another formidable career woman, Supreme Court of the United States Associate Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg. *Gleason* (2016) deals with how former NFL player Steve Gleason has transformed his struggle against Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (ALS) into a fight for the rights of all patients like him. His story could have appeared in the Social Issues section or the Sports Section but it is here because both Gleason and his fight are presented as iconic, and so they are.

## War Photographer (2001): Striking Images

### CREDITS

**Directed by** Christian Frei  
**Produced by** Christian Frei, Madeleine Hirsiger, Paul Riniker  
**Music by** David Darling, Elena Karaindrou, Arvo Pärt  
**Cinematography by** Peter Indergand, James Nachtwey  
**Film editing by** Christian Frei  
**Production companies** Christian Frei Filmproductions, Schweizer Fernsehen, Suissimage, Swiss National Television  
**Distributors** Look Now! (Switzerland, theatrical)  
**Runtime** 1h 36'



### MAIN AWARDS

**Academy Awards (Oscars) (2002):** Best Documentary Feature (nominee)  
**Adolf Grimme Awards, Germany (2003):** Special Prize of the Ministry for Development, Culture and Sports (winner)  
**Encounters South African International Documentary Festival (2002):** Best Film (winner)  
**Gent Viewpoint Documentary Film Festival (2002):** Canvas Prize (winner)

### OTHER NOTABLE DOCUMENTARY FILMS BY THE DIRECTOR

*Ricardo, Miriam y Fidel* (1997), *The Giant Buddhas* (2005), *Space Tourists* (2009), *Sleepless in New York* (2014), *Genesis 2.0* (2018)

### REASONS TO SEE War Photographer

- The film shows a very interesting perspective on what happens to ordinary people in the course of historic wars. What James Nachtwey does, in a very accurate way, is exhibit how one's own life is turned upside down fighting a war which is not theirs to fight.
- The film helps the viewer realize the cruelty and the horrors of war. It makes us understand that by taking these photographs Nachtwey gives a voice to those affected by the war and gets the outside world to know what is happening to them.
- The documentary not only focuses on war, but also on other important issues such as famine or poverty, and how they should be documented by photographers.

## CONNECTED WITH...

- *War Photographer* (2019), directed by Boris Bertram. This is a biographical documentary film about award-winning Danish war photographer Jan Grarup (b. 1968) and how he struggles to balance his work and taking care of his children after finding out his ex-wife had cancer. The camera follows him in both parts of his life: the risky photographing in the war fronts and his fatherhood in the home front.
- *Hondros* (2017), directed by Gerg Campbell. This is an American documentary film about American war photographer Chris Hondros, who was killed in a mortar attack by Government forces in Misrata while covering the 2011 Libyan Civil War. Hondros, born in 1970, was one of the first photographers in the new generation that became professional in the late 1990s. The film also shows how he tried to maintain an ordinary personal life and discloses some of the difficult decisions he had to make.
- *McCullin* (2012), directed by David and Jacqui Morris. This is a documentary film about British photojournalist Don McCullin (b. 1935), who is considered to be the greatest war photographer of all times by many people. He reveals tricks of the trade, speaks about his career and discusses his personal life, and what effect images that define historic moments can have on the photographer's own life. It is a revealing documentary about history, humanity and photography.

## RE/PRESENTING AMERICA IN *War Photographer*

*War Photographer* revolves around the professional life of James Nachtwey (b. 1948), a major American war photographer who has spent most of his life fully committed to his job. The film presents, on the one hand, Nachtwey himself describing the need for intimacy in his photography. He wants the audience to understand that what he does is personal and that without empathy it would be impossible to express such powerful feelings in his photographs. On the other hand, the documentary shows the point of view of Nachtwey's camera by using a 'microcam' placed on top of his own camera, which thus follows him to every conflict he photographs. We get to see families grieving the consequences of war in Kosovo and Palestine, others families struggling with poverty in Jakarta and the horror of famine in Somalia, among other places in the world.

James Nachtwey has sacrificed leading an ordinary life to entirely devote himself to his profession. The documentary presents a man that wants to show the cruelty and the horrors of war by photographing what is happening in those places. In fact, one of the main points of the documentary is how even in the face of the evidence provided by the photos, in which one can see how the usual codes of civilization are totally suspended, people still doubt war has such a deep impact on its victims. Nachtwey talks about how his objective when taking his pictures is to build complicity between the photographer and the photographed, because his work lends a voice to tell about their suffering. The protagonists of Nachtwey's photographs seem to be content that he is capturing what they are going through. They are not bothered

by Nachtwey's presence but rather conscious that his work is an opportunity to let the world know the difficult situations they have to endure. *War Photographer* is a film that displays what being a war photographer really involves.

An important question is also raised: to what extent can Nachtwey feel fully proud and fulfilled with the work he does? Frei hints that he cannot be proud of his work because he has experienced the kind of horrors we usually try to avoid. Nachtwey, however, explains that he feels just as a means to transmit the truth, though of course much more than photos is needed to stop wars, poverty and famine. Nachtwey's photographs tell about his involvement. He is not just passing by and taking a picture for the media, but really trying to convey a message and convince people with his pictures. In order to do that, his involvement has to be personal. Certainly, Nachtwey's job is very hard and demanding. Nevertheless, he has committed to delivering what he sees and experiences through his pictures and he has ultimately had a very strong impact in people's lives.

Reviewer Edward Guthman writes that "War correspondents, at least the ones that appear in movies, are rancid, crusty creatures—emotionally numb, frequently drunk. James Nachtwey, the subject of the extraordinary *War Photographer*, not only belies that image but also stands so far apart from it that his idealism and moonlike commitment are inspiring" (2002). Certainly, Nachtwey appears so committed to his work that he cannot make space in his life for anything else, not even having a relationship. Of course his job requires this kind of commitment, but he assumes it in an impressively serene way. Nachtwey's lifestyle must be hard to follow. At the same time, however, his effort is formidable. Although he feels the emotional toil, his work shows everything he has done is admirable and valuable. The powerful images that are shown in the documentary are difficult to forget. Not just the pictures, but also the videos recorded with the microcam attached to his camera. The destruction of a little village in Kosovo, how families have to live next to the train track in Jakarta or the consequences of famine in Somalia are just a few of the many horrors that Nachtwey has documented and that we mustn't ignore.

Kim Williamson says about the documentary that "Although commentary on Nachtwey is provided, it's the image that really tells the story" (2020). This is not entirely correct. Nachtwey's explanations about how he started his career and most importantly why he did are crucial to the essence of the documentary. Frei's film also includes interviews with people who know Nachtwey as a friend or have worked with him and all speak of him with manifest admiration. Crucially, most of them are not American. There is a great deal of Americans that do not feel identified with their pro-war Government but I believe that the statements would have been different were they made by American citizens. Nevertheless, Nachtwey is very admired in America as well. The fact that these interviews are made by Europeans shows that he is internationally applauded.

Reviewer Marc Savlov writes that "The film is a vague indictment of the war correspondent's vulture-like hovering over the bleak, black battlefield. Everyone is weeping, all the time. Nachtwey, working for the German magazine *Stern*, is portrayed as the lone link between the doomed and the rest of us" (2002). Nachtwey, in my opinion, has always tried to do the opposite of being "vulture-like" when photographing war. As noted, Nachtwey's photographs are personal, so he, indeed, represents "a link between the doomed and the rest of us". Without the kind of link

that Nachtwey is, citing Savlov, we might not know what happens around us. What's more, the fact that he, at the moment the documentary is being filmed, is working with a German magazine makes the film have this unusual non-American, international feeling. It is important to highlight, again, the idea that Nachtwey's work is appreciated internationally but that the documentary gives somehow a European air to his work.

Given the fact that *War Photographer* is a Swiss production and that the US Government is one of the biggest perpetrators of war, Frei's film can be read as anti-American critique. Nachtwey says in the documentary that "those that are the true originators of war don't like photographers around" and though he refers specifically to the local warlords and corrupt politicians behind most wars, this can be extrapolated to his homeland. He is, after all, an American documenting war outside American borders and as such he, like many others in his profession, can be seen as both a representative of the USA and a political opponent. His humanitarian positioning as, mainly, a witness arguably betrays his discomfort with this duplicity, or, alternatively, the American split between the minority of warmongers in power and the peaceful majority.

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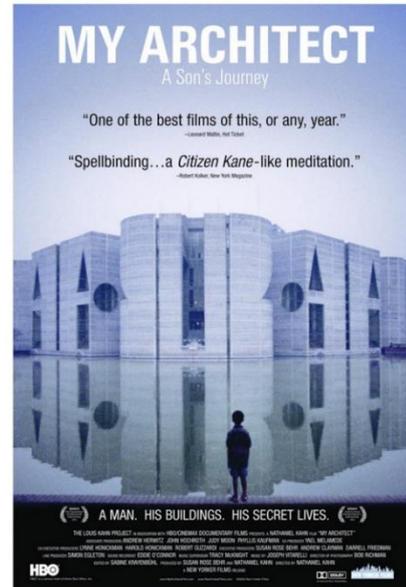
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Irene Vizcaíno Soria

## **My Architect (2003): The Journey of a Free Man**

### **CREDITS**

**Directed by** Nathaniel Kahn  
**Written by** Nathaniel Kahn  
**Produced by** Nathaniel Kahn, Susan Rose Behr, Yael Melamede  
**Music by** Joseph Vitarelli  
**Cinematography by** Robert Richman  
**Film editing by** Sabine Krayenbühl  
**Production companies** Louis Kahn Project Inc., Mediaworks  
**Distributors** New Yorker Films (theatrical)  
**Runtime** 1h 56'



### **MAIN AWARDS**

**Academy Awards (Oscars) (2003):** Best Documentary Feature (nominee)  
**American Cinema Editors (2005):** Best Edited Documentary Film (nominee)  
**Chicago International Film Festival (2003):** Gold Hugo- Best Documentary (winner), Audience Choice Award -Silver Plaque (winner)  
**Directors Guild of America (2004):** Outstanding Directorial Achievement in Documentary (winner)

### **OTHER NOTABLE DOCUMENTARY FILMS BY THE DIRECTOR**

*The Price of Everything* (2018), *Telescope* (2016), *The Buried Secret of M. Night Shyamalan* (2004)

### **REASONS TO SEE *My Architect***

- It is both the story of a son seeking answers to understand his family roots and of a man, his father, who prioritized his job over his family.
- The documentary, implicitly, raises a debate on the socially constructed idea of the family and of the male genius: can both co-exist?
- The combination of Kahn's architecture with the music soundtrack makes the documentary worth watching even if you are not very keen on architecture.

## CONNECTED WITH...

- *My Father the Genius* (2002), directed by Lucia Small. Lucia's father asked her to write his biography; she answered instead with a documentary film about his career as an architect including part of his private life. Glen Small considers himself a genius and believes that the world does not appreciate his big ideas and this is what the documentary explores.
- *Eames: The Architect and The Painter* (2011), directed by Jason Cohn. The documentary narrates the life of Charles and Ray Eames, an architect and a painter respectively who were also a married couple. Through extensive interviews the film creates the frame for their story, moving through architecture, photography and design, fields in which the Eames left their important imprint.
- *Sketches of Frank Gehry* (2006), directed by Sydney Pollack. Acclaimed director Sydney Pollack, a very good friend of Frank Gehry, pays tribute to his genius architect friend. Gehry loved making sketches for his works and Pollack took Gehry's sketches to show the creative process which the architect followed in each of his buildings. This was for the TV documentary series *American Masters* (1985-)

## RE/PRESENTING AMERICA IN *My Architect*

*My Architect* narrates the story of the renowned American architect Louis Kahn (1901-1974). The director Nathaniel Kahn, Louis' son, seeks to understand his father who died bankrupt and alone in 1974 in Pennsylvania Station, Philadelphia, of an apparent heart attack. Nathaniel does not provide a chronological order of Louis' life. Instead, the documentary is divided into several parts: *Beginning*, *Looking in Philadelphia*, *Heading West*, *The Immigrant*, *Dreams of a Better City*, *Going to Sea*, *The Truth about the Bastard*, *The Nomad*, *Family Matters*, *His Colleagues*, and *The End of the Journey*. In interviews with colleagues, critics, Louis' other children, his three wives and other relatives, *My Architect* explores Louis Kahn's legacy and the intriguing private life of a man who was absorbed by his work and had little time for any of his families.

More than two decades after Louis Kahn's death, Nathaniel Kahn, one of his illegitimate children, starts searching for the truth about his father. When Louis died Nathaniel was eleven and he had only seen his father a few times; although Louis came to see him occasionally, he never left his first wife Esther (with whom he had a daughter), as she refused to grant him a divorce. When Nathaniel met some of his father's relatives he discovered his own Jewish roots. Louis' family escaped from the Jewish ghetto in Estonia and moved to the United States, where he found his place in architecture despite a childhood spent in poverty, and married Esther Glassman (in 1930). However, Louis did not receive good reviews for his buildings, and he only won money with one of his works, the Salk Institute in California. Louis struggled to find himself and his way in art; eventually, he decided to visit Europe where he was awed by its ancient ruins.

Back in Philadelphia, Louis became absorbed in his work; he lived in his office and in the meantime, he became romantically involved with one of his employee collaborators, Anne Tyng. After the daughter Kahn had with Esther, he had a second daughter with Anne, whom Louis almost never saw because Anne decided to move to Rome to mitigate the scandal. As time went on, Louis had another affair with another architect, Harriet Pattinson, and had one more child: Nathaniel. His third child did not change at all Louis' obsession with his work. Harriet always hoped that Louis would leave Esther and move in with them, and Nathaniel seems to have held the same hope. The three families met for the first time at Louis' funeral, among great strain; however, later on, the three siblings met again to talk about their father. In that encounter, there arose the question of whether they were a family and what family really is about for they do consider themselves part of the same family despite having different mothers.

Kahn's frenetic lifestyle as an architect made everybody realize that he was a man who never prioritized his family. Although the documentary is narrated from the point of view of Nathaniel, and it portrays the story of a son seeking answers about his life and the relationship his father had with him, the film actually portrays the life of a nomadic Khan—the American genius who prioritized his art above all. Nevertheless, *My Architect* is a journey that has helped Nathaniel to heal himself and get closer to his late father as he states at the end of the documentary: “my father became real to me, not a myth” and this what he shares with his audience.

Peter Bradshaw writes in his review that “despite the movie's title, Louis wasn't his boy's 'architect'. He didn't design and conceive Nathaniel with the international love that he lavished on his buildings. Nathaniel was part of the messiness of life that had to be kept away from the purity of the drawing board. This is a tremendous American documentary, toughly cerebral, unbearably emotional” (2004). I totally agree with Bradshaw. Louis Kahn may have been one of the greatest architects of his time but he failed to play the role of father for Nathaniel, or his two step-sisters. Louis, already in his sixties when Nathaniel was born, only visited his son a few times and when he did so, he just stayed the afternoon and left at night. Looking for material for the documentary, Nathaniel hears his workaholic father state that “you cannot depend on human relations”.

Robert Ebert notes that “The movie begins as the story of a son searching for his father, and ends as the story of the father searching for himself” (2004). I would say that Louis Kahn suffered from a strong emotional deprivation in his life. Behind that shallow person portrayed in the film, Kahn must have had some kind of uneasiness. That is why instead of a son's critique, by the end the documentary has transformed into the story of a man “searching for himself” as Ebert notes in his review, who had lost himself. That process of Louis losing himself also affected the lives of his three 'wives'. Louis' frenetic lifestyle makes us wonder how these women could love him—his second 'wife' was his architectural partner for years but she always came second to Louis' work, and knew it. Harriet, Louis' third wife, was always expecting Louis to come back and told Nathaniel that on the day Louis died, he had decided to leave his wife Esther and come back with them. It seems that she was trying to convince herself of something she already knew would never happen.

Arthur Lazere views “Nathaniel as a director [who] doesn't seem to know what to leave out—such as a pointless interview with a man (a stranger) who saw his father

when he died in Pennsylvania Station, an unedifying interview with a rabbi cousin, a self-indulgently long take of Nathaniel in-line skating in the courtyard of the Salk Institute” (2006). I do agree with Lazere. There are some scenes in the documentary which might seem relevant for the plot but are provided with little depth. There are, as well, some irrelevant parts such as that the railway station interview which Lazere mentions. In my opinion, for Nathaniel everything seems to be on the same level of importance due to the fact that he and his father are the protagonists of the story but it is true that there are certain scenes that make no emotional impact on the audience.

Although Nathaniel tries to find an answer to the question of why his father was so shadowy in his life, *My Architect* is more than just a simple narration of Louis Kahn’s personal life and career. Everything around Louis’ life is connected to some fixed ideas about America. Louis’ family migrated to the United States, the land of opportunities, and he did seek his own American Dream. In Philadelphia, Louis found his place and started a family. Nevertheless, Louis’ obsession with his work made him stay away from this family almost his entire life, following a very American idea of success for men, while he started other equally neglected families. It seems ironic that even though he was so focused on his work as an architect, he did not earn much money and died bankrupt. Louis Kahn was thus a man who did not totally fit into the kind of rushed society America is. Despite being the embodiment of male genius in a very American way, he eventually sought success further and further away. The materialistic society of consumption that employed him deprived him of his feelings and emotions as a human being so that, in the end, even his son ended up seeing him as ‘my architect’ rather than ‘my father’.

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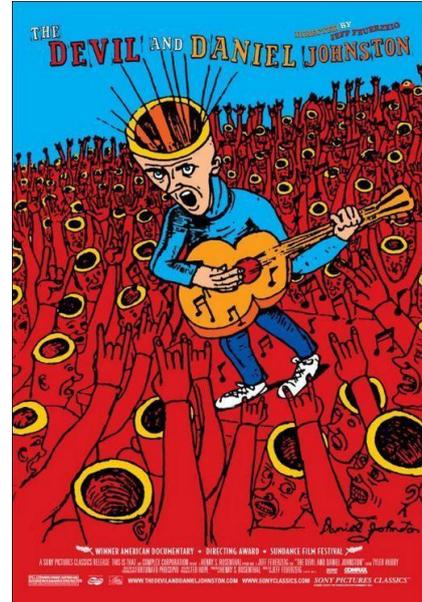
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Paula Pérez Martín

## ***The Devil and Daniel Johnston (2005): Passion as Medicine***

### **CREDITS**

**Directed by** Jeff Feuerzeig  
**Written by** Jeff Feuerzeig  
**Produced by** Henry S. Rosenthal  
**Music by** Daniel Johnston  
**Cinematography by** Fortunato Procopio  
**Film editing by** Tyler Hubby  
**Production companies** Complex Corporation, This is That Productions  
**Distributors** Sony Pictures Classics USA (theatrical)  
**Runtime** 1h 45'



### **MAIN AWARDS**

**Indiewire Critics' Poll (2006):** Best Documentary (nominee)  
**NatFilm Festival (2005):** Critics Award (winner)  
**Sundance Film Festival (2005):** Directing Award (winner), Grand Jury Prize (nominee)  
**Warsaw International Film Festival (2006):** Bests Documentary (nominee)

### **OTHER NOTABLE DOCUMENTARY FILMS BY THE DIRECTOR**

*Half Japanese: The Band That Would Be King* (1993), *The Real Rocky* (2011), *Author: The JT LeRoy Story* (2016)

### **REASONS TO SEE *The Devil and Daniel Johnston***

- To discover part of the world of mental illness. This is a very vast territory not even experts know well. To the eyes of society everything related to mental health is highly invisible, unknown and discriminated against... The documentary shows that Johnston's mental illness does not define him, though it is important: his passion for music does.
- This is a story of success, of overcoming the difficulties that life puts you through and achieving your dreams. A story in which passion can fight it all. A story that also teaches you that sometimes you cannot do it all on your own and it is all right to get help, to need someone to help you make it. Daniel Johnston had everything against him but he ended up becoming someone relevant.

- Lastly, if you are one of his fans, it is interesting to see this film because it will help you understand Johnston as a person and probably to connect with his music at another level.

### **CONNECTED WITH...**

- *You're Gonna Miss Me* (2005), directed by Keven McAlester. This film narrates Roky Erickson's life from stardom to madness. Famous as a rock star, but also famous for his drug addictions, eventually he got arrested and sent to a mental facility. His escape attempts lead him to a series of electro-shock treatments, which damaged him. After a period away from the stage, he still managed to return to fame after this documentary was made.
- *Beware of Mr. Baker* (2012), directed by Jay Bulger. A portrait of the drummer and 'rock n roll monster' Ginger Baker. He tells his own story while going through his violent and dyspeptic mood swings aggravated by his heroin addiction. It is said that he was 'the best drummer' but his self-destructive behavior made him lose his fortune. Baker seeks for redemption by telling his own truth.
- *Burn the Place you Hide* (2016), directed by Richard Knights. A British documentary about the Norwegian alternative country musician Saint Thomas. His music mirrored his life, chaotic and dominated by a childish sense of wonder. His mental illness haunted him and gave him a reputation for being violent and unpredictable, which he documented in intimate recordings. Despite being devoted to the people close to him, his lack of distinction between life, art, reality and imagination increased in time. Here he attempts to tell his story hoping to be understood.

### **RE/PRESENTING AMERICA IN *The Devil and Daniel Johnston***

*The Devil and Daniel Johnston* tells the life story of the eponymous American musician and artist. The narration follows Johnston (1961-2019) from his childhood to stardom while he faces the adversities of his maniac-depressive psychosis disorder. Despite showing the raw reality about his mental illness, the documentary's aim is far from being an attempt at raising awareness regarding this type of issues; the message conveyed in the film concerning this matter is that "a mental illness does not define who you are". In order to make Daniel Johnston a better understood personage, the director reveals Daniel's true self, even though he had never tried to hide himself. Prejudice against mental illness pushed him out of the public space. Throughout *The Devil and Daniel Johnston*, the protagonist's life is told from a third person perspective by his parents and his ex-manager among other members of his family, friends and circle of acquaintances. However, the documentary also uses a large number of Johnston's tapes, in which he recorded his thoughts and feelings. This allows audiences to take an inside look into his mind, as well as into his music.

Daniel Johnston started to show his creativity from an early age but had no interest in school, in spite of his great intellectual capacity. His illness started to show when he entered high school and lost all confidence in himself. Soon, however, he started to create his own art: he directed and acted in homemade movies with his

brother and drew on every surface he found. He occupied his time making tapes of his music and drawing, for which he had a natural talent, but also working at places like McDonald's. During his youth Johnston started to act erratically, which included disappearing a couple of times; his disconnection from reality became increasingly visible and he was finally diagnosed with manic-depressive psychosis. Johnston lived in a state of happiness and euphoria but that feeling would suddenly turn into irritability and anger. He acted in bouts because of his hyperactivity and could not focus on a thought for long; among other quirks, he talked in rhyme, and suffered from delusions of greatness; he also entertained suicidal thoughts.

Around the time he was diagnosed Johnston had started spreading his music with remarkable persistence, even appearing on a special MTV televised concert. People loved his music because it was genuinely raw and real. Sadly, due to a serious mental break down probably aggravated by his drug abuse, he turned unusually violent and even his caring family feared him and for him. No one knew what to do with Daniel. He was hospitalized several times and despite still being obsessed with religion and hallucinating with the devil (hence the title of the film), he finally managed to stay in control living in peace with his elderly parents, focused on his drawings and his music.

Dave Calhoun writes in his review that "Johnston himself supplies many of the tools of Feuerzeig's biography" (2006) due to the fact that the documentary film, as it has been noted, uses profusely his drawings, Super-8 movies and an abundant number of cassette recordings both with songs and with his self-reflective thoughts; this was helpful during the process of assembling the film because it made it much more real and intimate. Nothing was staged, all of Johnston's personal belongings given to Feuerzeig were used under guidance of the people who had been important in the protagonist's life and who are interviewed. Furthermore, Calhoun also states that "to share Feuerzeig's loving investigation is to share an insightful study of the destructive and creative capabilities of the mind" for viewers are allowed to see a pretty raw image of who this artist is. Curiously, Johnston's personality is quite similar to his music: raw and real, and this was probably the director's goal. He shows what Johnston's mind was capable of, to create and destroy in equal parts; fortunately, his desire to create is more powerful and in the end, it wins the battle.

Josh Goller notes that *The Devil and Daniel Johnston* "adds an extra layer of tragedy to Johnston's situation, as even those presumably close to him seemed to have a difficult time understanding him" (2019). This sad truth is mainly one of the documentary's purposes, making people understand Johnston as those near him could not. When he lost control, people around him grew afraid because they did not know what to do and this worsened the situation; pure fear might make some reject people with mental illnesses missing how they suffer. Later on, Goller also mentions what an irony is that "after years of working to break free from the restraints of an art-stifling, conservative West Virginia upbringing, his illness would manifest in such a way that biblical figures would obsessively play a central role in his delusions", as if he could never really get rid of his parents' fundamentalist brand of religion. When viewers are walked through his childhood, we can see that Johnston does not fit his family and home town much and that his goal is to leave that behind. Nevertheless, he is always somehow pulled back to the same place and persons. Perhaps his obsessions take this precise form, of something he tries to escape from but that never fully disappears.

Maybe his demons have been shaped as a metaphor during his upbringing. Still, the human mind is highly complex and there will never be a clear answer to this matter. The important thing is that his parents have always wanted the best for him and in the end they turn out to be his greatest supporters and caregivers, alongside his creativity.

In contrast, Levi adopts a pretty different perspective when interpreting the film. He sees Johnston's story in a much more pessimistic way; thus, while other critics emphasize the optimistic ending, he states that "once the movie reaches the present, there's a pileup of information, and it's excessively cheerful—too many images of Johnston smiling, though all he seems to be doing now is deteriorating" (2006). Moreover, instead of considering his songs "raw and real" as mentioned before, Levi describes them as haunting. This contrasting review questions whether Johnston's ending truly gave him peace or if he was just being eaten away by his demons on the inside, little by little, until the day he passed away.

America has a place in the film in terms of religion and the American dream. Firstly, the South of the United States (Johnston was born in California lived mainly in Texas) is widely known for being conservative and religious, and the Johnston family perfectly fits this profile. Despite all his attempts to escape this world during his youth, Daniel Johnston could never run away; physically because something always pulled him back (to his parents, essentially) and mentally because his demons were a part of him until the day he died. We can only hope that he managed to find a balance, to find peace. Lastly, here the American Dream is expressed by means of Johnston's desire for fame and recognition. His goal in life was to be remembered and despite the adversities he faced, he made it happen. The question whether he was a genius because of his demons or despite of them will always hang in the air. From my personal standpoint, I believe that he was this type of genius because of these demons; however, something tells me that even without his illness, he would have managed to find a way to become someone relevant.

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Clara Sánchez Artero

## **Gonzo: The Life and Work of Dr. Hunter S. Thompson (2008): American Genius**

### **CREDITS**

**Directed by** Alex Gibney

**Written by** Alex Gibney (based on Hunter S. Thompson's writings and the book by Jann S. Wenner and Corey Seymour (uncredited))

**Produced by** Graydon Carter, Lisa Cohen, Alison Ellwood, Don Fleming, Jannat Gargi, Alex Gibney, Jason Kliot, Eva Orner, Joana Vicente, Stephen Vittoria

**Music by** David Schwartz

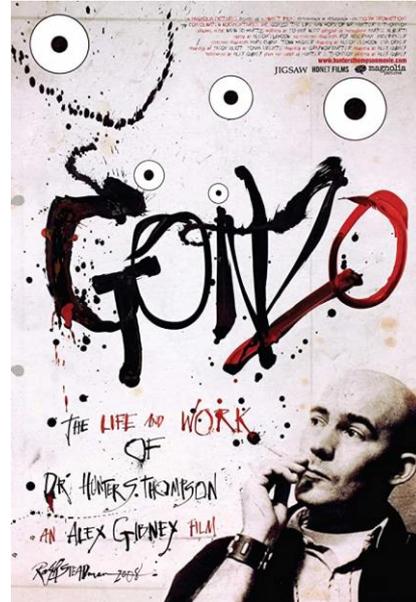
**Cinematography by** Maryse Alberti

**Film editing by** Alison Ellwood

**Production companies** BBC Storyville, Diverse Productions, HDNet Films, Jigsaw Productions, Phantom Films

**Distributors** Magnolia Picture (theatrical)

**Runtime** 2h



### **MAIN AWARDS**

**Cinema Eye Honors Awards, US (2009):** Audience Choice Prize (nominee)

**Houston Film Critics Society Awards (2008):** Best Documentary Feature (nominee)

**Sundance Film Festival (2008):** Grand Jury Prize – Documentary (nominee)

**Writers Guild of America, USA (2009):** Best Documentary Screenplay (nominee)

### **OTHER NOTABLE DOCUMENTARY FILMS BY THE DIRECTOR**

*Taxi to the Dark Side* (2007, Academy Award winner), *Enron: The Smartest Guys in the Room* (2015), *Mea Maxima Culpa: Silence in the House of God* (2012), *We Steal Secrets: The Story of Wikileaks* (2013), *Going Clear: Scientology and the Prison of Belief* (2015)

### **REASONS TO SEE *Gonzo: The Life and Work of Dr. Hunter S. Thompson***

- To get a glimpse into one of the most charismatic and most obnoxious American writers ever: journalist and novelist Hunter S. Thompson, initiator of gonzo journalism
- To get acquainted with the turbulent 1960s and 1970s in the USA, both as regards the Counterculture and politics
- To consider the myth of the American male genius as a writer, which combines an appreciation of the writing with admiration for a patriarchal manliness associated to heavy drinking and drug consumption, reckless individualistic behavior and womanizing.

## CONNECTED WITH...

- *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (1998, fiction film), directed by Terry Gilliam. Though not a straightforward biopic, but an adaptation of Hunter S. Thompson's classic, Gilliam's film about Raoul Duke's road trip to Las Vegas is implicitly biographical. Played by Johnny Depp, gonzo journalist Duke embarks on a trip with his big Samoan lawyer which is also a trip in the sense of being caused by massive psychedelic drug consumption. Their golden grail is the elusive American Dream.
- *Joan Didion: The Centre Will not Hold* (2017), directed by Griffin Dune. In this film Dune, Didion's nephew, offers a candid, intimate look at his famous aunt, one of America's major writing icons. As it is to be expected, Dune pays homage to the writer, whose work extends to journalism, essay writing, novels and screenplays and who is perhaps best known for her beautiful memoir of loss and mourning *The Year of Magical Thinking*. Of interest both to those who already know Didion and to those in search of great personalities to discover.
- *Maya Angelou And Still I Rise* (2016), directed by Bob Hercules and Rita Coburn Whack. The first feature-length documentary on Maya Angelou (1928-2014), writer, poet, actor and Civil Rights activist, takes its title from one of her best known poems. It is an elegy to this amazing African-American icon who seems to have lived several lives in one and who is mostly remembered for her 1969 autobiography *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*.

### RE/PRESENTING AMERICA IN *Gonzo: The Life and Work of Dr. Hunter S. Thompson*

The image of the male American genius as a writer can never be that of a man simply tied to his keyboard. It needs to contain as well a high dose of manliness for, somehow, there is a lingering suspicion that writing is a too passive, too domestic, too feminine activity that requires a measure of recklessness to counterbalance it. Ernest Hemingway (1899-1961) embodied this ideal of the manly American writer in its more literary version whereas Hunter S. Thompson (1937-2005) played a similar role for the Counterculture generation. His life and career is the object of Alex Gibney's accomplished though partly limited documentary, to which actor Johnny Depp (who played Thompson's alter ego Raoul Duke in Terry Gilliam's adaptation of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*), contributes his reading of key texts by this writer.

Gibney elaborates very little on Thompson's early life, which even included a stint in the Army, to focus in essence on how he became successful and on the negative consequences of his celebrity. It is always said that the journalist should never be in the story but Thompson popularized the reverse: a type of journalism in which the writer is not only part of the story but even its protagonist above the subject portrayed. Since in his case this protagonism often involved diverse mishaps connected with his heavy drinking and experimental drug consumption, fellow journalist Bill Cardoso described Thompson's work as 'gonzo' journalism.

Thompson himself popularized the concept, though his bizarre antics need not be mistaken for a shallow response to American life. Ironically, his constant search of

the American Dream missed how he himself had become its incarnation for the 1960s. "People talk about his courage to live life on his terms and ignore social norms", his only son Juan declared in 2016, when he published his memoirs of his 'basket case' father, as he called him. "I think that's something that people really react to, that sense of freedom that he so symbolized" (in Dean 2016). That was, in any case, an illusion: Thompson still depended on the generosity of his editors and the dedication of his wife Sandy to lead his carefree lifestyle. And, by all accounts, his sense of freedom emerged from a very patriarchal sense of entitlement to doing as he pleased, which means that he was charming when he wanted to achieve something and mean when he failed, or just to show his dominance over others.

Gibney's film starts properly going with the presentation of Thompson's first journalistic hit, *Hell's Angels: The Strange and Terrible Saga of the Outlaw Motorcycle Gangs* (1967), which he wrote after spending about a year embedded in the gang. Typically, Thompson showed admiration for the Angels' outlaw image until their manifest criminality clashed with his own moral rules, for he was no doubt a moralist though not of a traditional kind (Thompson even ran for Sheriff of Aspen in 1971 on a freak power base). Thompson always worked for a variety of publications but his fame is connected with his long-lasting relationship with *Rolling Stone* (founded in 1967) to which it contributed many of its best pieces. This was the case of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (1971), his masterpiece and a book that came out of articles serialized in the magazine. Its editor, Jann Wenner, had the occurrence of sending Thompson to Washington DC as a political correspondent, where he trailed key politicians such as Democrat George McGovern and learned to loathe others like Richard Nixon (he admired Jimmy Carter). However, Thompson seriously undermined his relationship with Wenner after failing to file an article on the famous Rumble in the Jungle combat, of 1974, pitting his hero Muhammad Ali against George Foreman. From then until his often announced death by suicide in 2005, Thompson was gradually devoured by the celebrity of the gonzo character he had created for himself.

Gibney's film presents Thompson as a man who could manage prodigious quantities of alcohol and of psychedelic drugs while maintaining a notable written production (he missed deadlines constantly but this was attributed to his quirkiness). Amazed by this feat, reviewer Roger Ebert praises the film ("It is all you could wish for in a doc about the man") but wonders "how was it that so many people liked this man who does not seem to have liked himself? And what about the hangovers?" (2008). Gibney, in fact, suggests the opposite: the man liked himself so much that he felt totally in control of his life, including his substance abuse. His extreme love of guns was another facet of Thompson's immense ego, which even extended to his suicide. As noted in the film, Thompson had constantly announced that he would kill himself using a gun, and so he did when, aged 67, his deteriorating health started running out of control. He shot himself when his second wife was on the phone talking to him and his son Juan (with his family) in the house. Gibney, however, chooses to focus instead on the ugly monument Thompson himself commissioned and his whacky funeral arrangements, another proof of his boundless selfishness.

Fernando F. Croce states that *Gonzo* "for the most part steers clear of fanboy adulation: There's never any doubt that the boundary-pushing approach that revolutionized the press also made him a prick of a husband and father and, later on, encased him in the shell of his own cultish persona" (2008). This is only partly true.

Thompson's two wives, Sandy and Anita, and his son Juan appear in the film to offer mostly lenient testimonials. Sandy alludes to wild mood swings but Gibney does not consider in depth how Thompson's marriage of twenty years to her worked, nor how Juan felt toward his father. A photo showing Thompson at the typewriter while Sandy serves him coffee looking at him adoringly and her later comments about his many affairs feel insufficient. Gibney simply falls silent about how Thompson's personal stability and professional success depended on a calm, rural domestic life that clashed badly with his Gonzo persona. Sandy's decision to file for divorce left Thompson in a truly scary rage, for that was a part on his life on which he really relied. Actually, the onset of his decline as a writer pretty much overlapped with the last years of his married life with her.

Gibney, the anonymous *Time Out* staff reviewer writes, "is good on the Nixon era (Pat Buchanan, George McGovern and Jimmy Carter pitch in) but the film's plea that we need Thompson now more than ever is a little misty-eyed: Thompson's day was long gone by the time he put a gun to his head" (2008). The whole purpose of Gibney's film seems, indeed, to call for a renewal of the type of irreverent journalism which Thompson practiced. At one point Thompson himself explains that unlike other political journalists he did not mind burning his bridges because he was only in Washington for a while, and though his impetuosity allowed him to voice his contempt for the darker side of American politics this is hardly a path others may follow. Politician Gary Hart notes that there was always "an infantile aspect" to Thompson that was part of his attractive but that also limited his effectiveness. For those interested in etymology, it appears that the word 'gonzo' is most likely a borrowing from Spanish 'ganso' (goose), a language in which the idiom 'hacer el ganso' means 'to play the fool'. This is what Thompson often did.

America's love affair with her macho writers probably has a last incarnation in Hunter S. Thompson. As it has been noted, films about the life of writers are notoriously boring since there is nothing more dull than representing on screen the process of writing. This is why the most successful biopics and documentaries on authors usually focus on those who have led an active life beyond the four walls of their studios. Thompson's hectic professional life is, in this sense, an ideal subject. The problem is that since Thompson's suicide in 2005 the USA has moved on very fast and he is no longer the kind of writer that might attract most admirers. Actually, Gibney's film may elicit a certain puzzlement from viewers, who may be grateful for his portrayal of 1960s and 1970s troubled America but may wonder how and why Thompson ever became a major American icon. He would not be one today.

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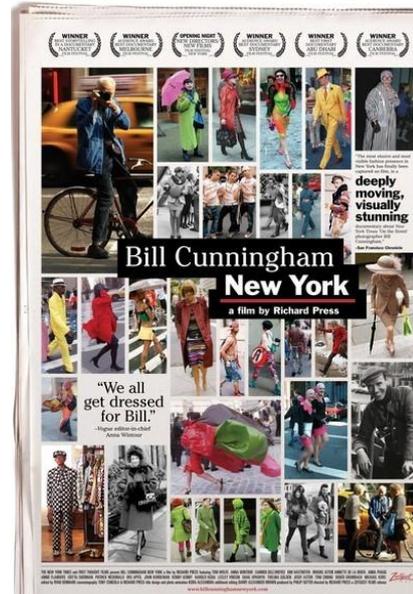
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Sara Martín Alegre

## **Bill Cunningham: New York (2010): An Anonymous Icon**

### **CREDITS**

**Directed by** Richard Press  
**Produced by** Jannat Gargi, Philip Gefter  
**Music by** Skooby Laposky  
**Cinematography by** Tony Cencicola, Richard Press  
**Film editing by** Ryan Denmark  
**Production companies** First Thought Films  
**Distributors** Zeitgeist Films  
**Runtime** 1h 24'



### **MAIN AWARDS**

**Chlotrudis Awards (2012):** Best Documentary (winner)  
**Directors Guild of America, USA (2012):** Outstanding Directorial Achievement in Documentary (nominee)  
**Film Independent Spirit Awards (2012):** Best Documentary (nominee)  
**GALECA: The Society of LGBTQ Entertainment Critics (2012):** LGBT-Themed Documentary of the Year (nominee)

### **OTHER NOTABLE DOCUMENTARY FILMS BY THE DIRECTOR**

*2÷3* (2000, short documentary), episodes *Paula Scher: Graphic Design* (2017) and *Platon: Photography* (2017) for *Abstract: The Art of Design* (2017-, series)

### **REASONS TO SEE Bill Cunningham: New York**

- This is a 'feel good' documentary that you will most likely enjoy. Even if you are not that interested in fashion, you will find yourself smiling at Bill Cunningham's quirkiness and understanding why so many of the interviewees in the film claim to have grown fondly of him. Because you most likely will too by the end of it.
- This documentary shows the other side of the coin of the fashion world. Casting aside the sense of superiority, inaccessibility and elite exclusiveness that this world can project at times to the eyes of ordinary people, Bill Cunningham is a passionate, genuine fashion enthusiast who is really in it for the clothes. He does not care about *who* is wearing the clothes. He will photograph with as much

enthusiasm Anna Wintour as he would an accountant casually walking down the streets of New York if they both are wearing something interesting.

- This is a great homage to the late photographer and iconic figure. Not many people recognized Cunningham on the streets because not many knew that the man in the blue coat riding an old bicycle was the genius behind the *New York Times* columns that contributed to defining the fashion and trends of his long career.

### CONNECTED WITH...

- *The Times of Bill Cunningham* (2018), directed by Mark Bozek. Narrated by Sarah Jessica Parker, this second documentary of the legendary *New York Times* photographer features some of his never before seen photos. It is built around an extended interview he gave in 1994 to the director himself in which Cunningham chronicles his life in his own words. From his relationship with the First Lady Jackie Kennedy, to his many years at *The New York Times*, this film allows for a quick glimpse at his version of the events.
- *Richard Avedon: Darkness and Light* (1996), directed by Helen Whitney. This is an episode of TV series *American Masters*. Whitney tells Avedon's story with a mixture of biographical information and critical analysis of his work, accompanied by Avedon's commentary throughout. Among other anecdotes, Avedon gives his account of how he persuaded teen Natassja Kinski to pose naked with a large python across her body and his memory of the night Marilyn Monroe danced for hours while he photographed her.
- *Annie Leibovitz: Life Through a Lens* (2008), directed by Barbara Leibovitz. The director offers an intimate biography of her sister, photographer Annie Leibovitz. The film presents a study of the acclaimed celebrity photographer, as well as her career. Moreover, it also provides a behind-the-scenes look and a discussion of many of her most well-known photos, apart from interviews with some of her well-known subjects.

### RE/PRESENTING AMERICA IN *Bill Cunningham: New York*

Richard Press's documentary is an assemblage of footage of Bill Cunningham in his everyday-life, most of which he spent doing what he loved: his job as a photographer. This film is one of the first intimate looks at the life of the famous photographer, in which we get to know who Bill Cunningham was and where he came from. Through the testimony of many who knew him, an intimate portrait is created of the man who had been riding his bike around New York for forty years, capturing and anticipating the trends that have defined many decades.

The film starts with Cunningham leaving his modest apartment, in the renowned Carnegie Hall building, with his bike to go take some photos of New York's street fashions. As Harold Koda (an American fashion scholar, curator, and the former curator-in-chief of the Anna Wintour Costume Center at the Metropolitan Museum of Art) informs us Cunningham "has two columns [in *The New York Times*]: one of them is a documentation of New York life in terms of the drivers of its social and philanthropic

world, political world. And this other one, which is an attempt to tease out trends in terms of the reality of how people dress". From the beginning you see that Cunningham is very passionate about his work and is involved in every part of the process. In the film you can see him sitting at the desk of John Kurdewan, the Art Director of the *Times*, while Kurdewan designs the page for the next publication of Cunningham's column, for "His fingerprints are on everything he does".

The film presents us with some background story about Cunningham's origins in life and in the industry, though never in much depth. He mentions that he comes from a working-class, Catholic family. When asked about his family's opinion on his profession, Cunningham reveals that he never really asked them. However he believes they thought at the time, the late 1940s, that fashion wasn't a very manly pursuit nor an adequate profession for him. We learn that in the beginning he used to make ladies' hats under the name 'William J', however he was drafted to fight in WWII. After returning to New York he started writing for *Women's Wear Daily* (a fashion-industry trade journal), encouraged by his friends and clients. Years later he published a collection of impromptu pictures of fashion in the streets of New York at *The New York Times*, and from then on he became a regular there.

Every interviewee praises Cunningham's pioneering contribution to the fashion industry since the 1960s, when he started photographing ordinary people going about their business. Also, it was thanks to him that members of the LGBTIQ+ New York community started being represented in fashion magazines. He would photograph anyone that caught his eye. If that happened to be a man wearing a skirt or heels he would photograph them, but Cunningham had to be very persistent for the magazines to let him publish the pictures. He gave thus more diversity to the front lines of fashion. Cunningham always had a keen eye for fashion and trends. As Anna Wintour notes, he would see something on the street or on the runway that everyone else missed and in six months' time it would become a trend. Cunningham liked what was different and praised creativity. His photographs, rather than just paparazzi shots were really about new fashions. His archive though not only encapsulates fashion but all of New York life.

The praise Cunningham received never went to his head. He never considered himself a big shot, and he constantly downplayed his importance in the *Times*. His iconic look included the cheap workingman's blue jacket that he always wore and that was actually the uniform of the Paris street sweepers. Apart from the color, he liked it so much because it had a lot of pockets for him to carry his film. Cunningham was likewise modest in his lifestyle. We also get a glimpse of his tiny apartment, in the Carnegie Hall, an old residence for artists. With the bathroom outside on the hallway, the little space inside the apartment was taken by filing cabinets with all the photos he had ever taken. He had managed to fit a small bed in a corner but there was not even a kitchen. Cunningham did not value money, was not interested in purchasing objects, and liked to live in a simple and basic manner. He only started accepting money for his work when he was hired by *The Times* though not immediately. His personal philosophy was that "if you don't get money they can't tell you what to do, kid".

The most surprising aspect of the film is that Cunningham's co-workers and friends claim they do not really know anything about his personal life. Only one of them had ever seen the inside of his apartment once. No one really knew him in spite of his importance in the fashion world. He managed to maintain his face as anonymous

as he could, despite moving among fashion celebrities. Yet, despite not knowing much about him, everyone seemed to be fond of him and his kindness. There is, however, a constant sense of solitude in his life. Cunningham admitted to never having had a romantic relationship, and he had not let anyone into his life at all.

As Carina Chocano notes: “The film goes about its business just as its subject does—quietly, modestly, almost invisibly. Mr. Press, along with Philip Gefter, the producer, and the cinematographer Tony Cenicola (a staff photographer for *The Times*) followed Mr. Cunningham around New York for two years, with no crew, tagging along to charity events and runway shows. (...) Mr. Press has created an intimate portrait that feels more found or captured than it does constructed” (2011). And that is exactly the feeling you get while watching it. As Chocano perfectly captures, the film does not feel thoroughly structured and following a specific timeline or order. Regardless of this, it does not feel messy or disorganized, but rather as if you had a chance to silently follow Bill around as he goes about his every-day business, or as if you were watching a collection of home-made videos of Cunningham’s working days.

On the other hand, Mark Holcomb comments that “Press also slyly raises the question of whether Cunningham’s self-deprivation and single-minded focus on surface aesthetics (‘If it isn’t something a woman can wear, I’m not interested’) have taken an unacknowledged toll” (2011). I do not fully agree with Holcomb. Although Cunningham’s focus was indeed on fashion, something seemingly superficial, what attracted him about fashion was self-expression and individuality. This went beyond just clothes. However, it is true that Press captures the effect that his constant desire to work had on his personal life. Cunningham was so invested in that aspect of his life that the rest seemed to be left unattended, though he seems quite content. Philip French points out that “He’s a figure of probity in a corrupt, ruthless world of poseurs, mildly camp but essentially unaffected. Genuinely in love with clothes, Cunningham makes you think of fashion in a more positive and enlightened way” (2012). French manages to capture the essence of the portrayal of the photographer in a few words. What you get from the film above everything else, is to get to know a man that, to me, seems to be one of the most genuine figures in the fashion world, if not the only one.

Although he was amazingly successful, Bill Cunningham could be considered the antithesis of American society, especially when it comes to fashion. He was not driven by consumerism nor by getting or spending money. He was all for individualism and self-expression, and valued the everyday person’s uniqueness. The only thing I think that really connected Bill with America was his love for New Yorkers’ fashion styles, though he was always an observer, perhaps a mixture of *flâneur* and voyeur. This is, then, a unique case of a man who knew how to find a niche for himself among a constantly changing world and that gave meaning to the passing trends, while he himself remained unchanged. There is an implicit story here about the homophobia that pushed Cunningham away from his family and into a world where few rightly imagine where he comes from (a socialite expresses her conviction that he must be upper class) but this remains untold.

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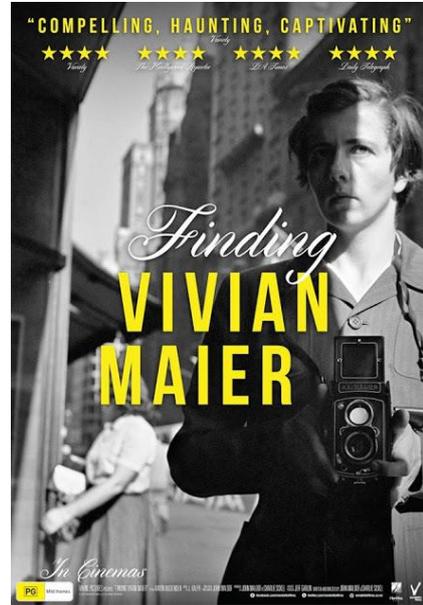
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Carlota Villoro Castillo

## ***Finding Vivian Maier (2013): A Life Lost and Found***

### **CREDITS**

**Directed by** John Maloof, Charlie Siskel  
**Written by** John Maloof, Charlie Siskel  
**Produced by** John Maloof, Charlie Siskel  
**Music by** J. Ralph  
**Cinematography by** John Maloof  
**Film editing by** Aaron Wickenden  
**Production companies** Ravine Pictures  
**Distributors** Sundance Selects (theatrical)  
**Runtime** 1h 23'



### **MAIN AWARDS**

**Academy Awards (Oscars) (2015):** Best Documentary Feature (nominee)  
**BAFTA (2015):** Best Documentary (nominee)  
**Cinema Eye Honors Awards, USA (2015):** Outstanding Achievement in a Debut Feature Film  
**International Documentary Association (2014):** Best Writing: Creation Recognition Award (winner), Best Feature (nominee)

### **OTHER NOTABLE DOCUMENTARY FILMS BY THE DIRECTOR(S)**

**By Charlie Siskel** *American Anarchist* (2016)

### **REASONS TO SEE *Finding Vivian Maier***

- This documentary focuses on Vivian Maier's hidden talent in photography. It is very interesting and absorbing to see how her life and gift are unveiled by Maloof, though not everything he discovers was positive. Maier had a very strong and peculiar personality; both her story and character are captivating.
- Everyone in Maier's circle knew she took pictures because she was always carrying her camera with her, but nobody was aware of her outstanding skills. Vivian Maier was an excellent photographer and many of her pictures are shown in the documentary. It is worth watching them.

- Throughout the documentary we follow Maloof on his path to discover the unknown photographer, whose photos he found by accident. What would have happened without his intervention...?

### **CONNECTED WITH...**

- *Garry Winogrand: All Things are Photographable* (2018), directed by Sasha Waters Freyer. This documentary focuses on the life and career of Garry Winogrand, a photographer who captured New York City in the decades of the 1960s and 1970s, and afterwards Los Angeles and the West in Texas. It is believed his street photography influenced the TV show *Mad Men*. Winogrand is depicted as a poet and an athlete of photography, and a chronicler of culture. The film also presents a selection from his rolls of film which were still undeveloped upon his death in 1984.
- *Mapplethorpe: Look at the Picture* (2016), directed by Fenton Bailey and Randy Barbato. This documentary is about the controversial photographer Robert Mapplethorpe. The film centers on his life and examines his most polemical works in the late 1960s and early 1970s. He was labelled as a controversial artist since he portrayed in his pictures homosexual sex scenes. Mapplethorpe was born in Queens in 1946, and died in 1989 in Boston because of AIDS, aged 42 years old.
- *In No Great Hurry: 13 Lessons in Life with Saul Leiter* (2013), directed by Thomas Leach. This documentary portrays Leiter (1929-2013) in his chaotic home in New York City as he rememorates his life and work. Leiter was in fact a pioneer of color street photography, but unfortunately most of his work was ignored till the last years of his life. He became world famous in his eighties.

### **RE/PRESENTING AMERICA IN *Finding Vivian Maier***

This documentary focuses on the life of Vivian Maier, an American street photographer whose work remained completely unknown throughout her lifetime. Maier was born in New York City in 1926, though she spent most of her childhood and youth in France. Vivian Maier worked almost her entire life as a nanny, housekeeper, and caretaker for upper-middle class families in the USA (mostly New York and Chicago). Nonetheless, her true passion was photography. She always carried her camera with her and took pictures whenever she could, but nobody knew photography was her secret talent.

The documentary starts with the story of John Maloof, one of the directors, and how he discovered the forgotten work of Vivian Maier. During the first part of the film, he narrates the process by which he found out about Maier and how he progressively collected pieces of information about her. In 2007, he purchased a box full of negatives in an auction and he was told they all belonged to someone named Vivian Maier. Maloof, unfamiliar with this name, looked her up in Google, but could not find no trace. Two years later he decided to post 200 photos of Maier on a blog and asked for advice about whether these pictures were valuable for an exhibition or not. The answer was positive, and he organized a show of Maier's work in the Cultural Centre of

Chicago, which was an immediate success. After this event, Maloof was determined to find more negatives and information about Vivian Maier.

Maloof eventually discovered that Maier was not a professional photographer but a nanny whose hobby was taking pictures. During the second part of the documentary, he interviews some of the grown children and parents in the families Vivian Maier worked for. They all describe her as a private and eccentric person. She was a loner with no family or children who usually wore heavy, large, old-fashioned suits which called everyone's attention. She was very tall and had short hair. The employer families also mention she did not like to talk about herself, she was a very private person. None of the families knew anything about Maier's past or her relatives. She was a very mysterious woman. However, she loved children and children loved her. She took pictures of them and recorded them in their daily life (some of these pictures and footage are shown in the documentary).

Despite being a good employee, all the parents and grown children agree that Maier had a "dark side". She sometimes got angry and was mean to the children, not being able to cope with their bad behavior. There were accidents involving her. One of the interviewees tells how once his brother was hit by a car and Maier instead of helping the child started taking pictures of the scene. She also mistreated several children. She was fired from various houses because of her strange behavior. Nevertheless, despite her odd personality, Vivian Maier was an excellent photographer. Several photography experts interviewed in the documentary praise the mysterious photographer's work. She had a human understanding of life. She also shows a sense of humor, tragedy, and light in her pictures. Maier took photos with a Rolleiflex camera, a discreet camera which could be used holding it low, without putting eye to visor. She took pictures of poor people, crying children and bizarre situations. Vivian Maier was a very watchful and observative woman. She had the ability to get close to strangers and take pictures of them, accommodating herself, without breaking the scene. She had an innate talent. Her art has gradually won over many admirers and is now exhibited in galleries in New York, Los Angeles, London, Germany, and Denmark.

Manohla Dargis writes in her review that Maloof and Siskel's film is "a breezy, perhaps overly tidy narrative ornamented with her work and packed with interviews with some of her old charges and their parents. Some of the darker reminiscences are in sharp contrast to the movies upbeat tone and relentlessly jaunty music. So, it is a solid if finally, thin introduction to Maier" (2014). This documentary is indeed a basic introduction to Vivian Maier as Maloof narrates her story rather superficially. He does not dig deeply into Maier's personal life. For example, he does not explore further the fact that Maier had probably a mental illness, or was on the autistic spectrum, and that this disease strongly influenced her personality and behavior. That is possibly why she was lonely and misunderstood. This would have helped her employer families understand her better. Furthermore, he does not mention much about her parents and family. Maloof explains that they both died when she was young but not what happened to them exactly. I also agree with Dargis's negative comment on the contrast between the light tone and music of the documentary and the serious matters the interviewees disclose when discussing Maier's dark side.

Geoffrey Macnab notes that *Finding Vivian Maier* "is a tantalizing and utterly fascinating film but one which can't ever quite explain the mystery of Maier. Despite

all the biographical details about her that it turns up, the photographer remains an inscrutable figure” (2014). That is quite correct. *Finding Vivian Maier* is a remarkably interesting and absorbing story. However, Maloof does not answer the main question viewers might ask. Why did she keep her art a secret? Why didn’t she share it with the world? Watching the documentary, we understand that Maier was a very private and mysterious figure and we can deduce that these characteristics made her want to keep her work to herself, although she was an excellent photographer. Nevertheless, the reasons for her being such a solitary and reserved person remain unexplained.

Howard Schumann states in his review that “though admittedly he has a commercial interest in its promotion, Maloof has done a public service by making the world aware of the work of this great artist and has been willing to spend enormous amount of time and money in the process. Though this has resulted in her work now being displayed in galleries all over the world, the question of why her photographs have not been accepted by the Museum of Modern Art is left unexplored” (2014). Schumann’s opinion is completely understandable. All the work Maloof does in order to find who Vivian Maier was is very laborious and complicated since Maier was a completely mysterious and unknown character. Besides, Maier is a fascinating person whose work is worth knowing and appreciating. Therefore, as the author writes, we could consider Maloof has done a “public service”. Schumann also comments on the fact that Maloof does not explain why Maier’s work has not been accepted by museums and institutions. The director gives a brief explanation saying this is probably because Maier’s reputation as a photographer came to light posthumously. However, it is true he could have expanded his interpretation a little bit more. Throughout the documentary, Maloof tends to monopolize attention on his process of research rather than on Maier’s personal life, especially at the beginning of the film. This could possibly explain why he leaves so many matters about the photographer’s existence unexplored. His continual appearance on the documentary also marks a great contrast with Charlie Siskel, the other director, who does not come into scene at any moment and whose name is not mentioned at all in the film. However, it is a lucky chance that Maloof came across these negatives because, otherwise, Maier’s work would still be probably unknown.

In relation with America, Vivian Maier managed to portray the American society from the 1950s to the 1970s in her photographs with a special sensitivity and peculiar understanding. She was not interested in the beauty and sweetness of society, on the contrary, she wanted to photograph reality, including the bizarre and the grotesque. That is why her pictures are outstanding. Maier manages to depict all members of the American community in New York City: the old, the young, the black, the white, the poor, the rich... She contemplated the whole picture of America without eliminating the less attractive characteristics of the country. That is why her representation of the United States is so complete, accurate, and powerful.

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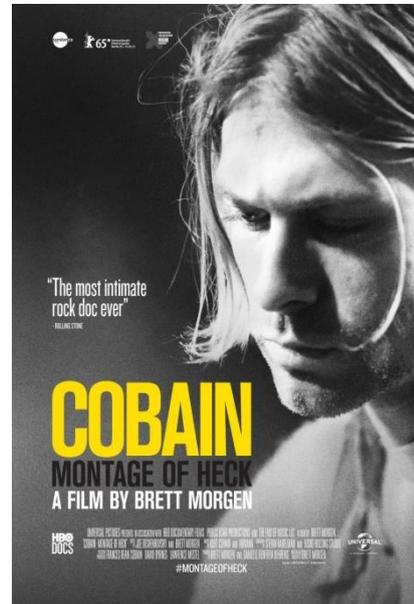
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Helena Zúñiga Centenero

## **Cobain : Montage of Heck (2005): Self-destructive Ways**

### **CREDITS**

**Directed by** Brett Morgen  
**Written by** Brett Morgen  
**Produced by** Danielle Renfrew Behrens, Brett Morgen  
**Music by** Nirvana  
**Cinematography by** Eric Alan Edwards, James Whitaker, Nicole Hirsch Whitaker  
**Film editing by** Joe Beshenkovsky, Brett Morgen  
**Production companies** HBO Documentary Films, Polder Animation, Primary Wave Entertainment, Public Road Productions  
**Distributors** HBO (theatrical)  
**Runtime** 2h 25'



### **MAIN AWARDS**

**Ashland Independent Film Festival (2015):** Best Editing: Feature Length Documentary (winner)  
**Cinema Eye Honors Awards, US (2016):** Outstanding Achievement in Graphic Design or Animation (winner)  
**International Documentary Association (2015):** Best Editing (winner)  
**Motion Picture Sound Editors, USA (2016):** Best Sound Editing - Documentary Feature Film (winner)

### **OTHER NOTABLE DOCUMENTARY FILMS BY THE DIRECTOR**

*The Kid Stays in the Picture* (2002), *June 17th, 1994* (2010), *Crossfire Hurricane* (2012)  
*Jane* (2017)

### **REASONS TO SEE Cobain: Montage of Heck**

- It focuses on the life of Kurt Cobain as an artist from another perspective maybe not seen before. This feels close to him perhaps because Morgen has him actually telling his story through personal material.
- The testimonies and material collected to make this documentary. Home video footage, angry handwritten notes, photos and music lyrics are essential in the documentary.

- The way it is edited, linking every piece of Kurt Cobain's own material (videos, voice recordings, notebook notes, photos, etc.) to his life.

### CONNECTED WITH...

- *Soaked in Bleach* (2015), directed by Benjamin Statler. This documentary reveals the events behind Kurt Cobain's death through Tom Grant's eyes, the investigator hired by Courtney Love in 1994 to find her husband after he escaped from a psychiatric clinic. Even though the Police reported Cobain's death as a suicide, doubts have been circulating for twenty years. The film is developed including interviews with key experts and witnesses and the examination of the official artefacts from the 1994 case.
- *Kurt Cobain: About a Son* (2006), directed by A.J. Schnack. A documentary film featuring audiotaped interviews with Cobain by music journalist Michael Azerrad for his book *Come as You Are: The Story of Nirvana*. The conversations heard in the film only became public when the documentary was released. In these conversations, more than twenty-five hours long, Kurt Cobain himself recounts his life, starting from his childhood to his dealings with explosive fame and his successful musical career.
- *Kurt & Courtney* (1998), directed by Nick Broomfield. Just after Cobain's suicide, the film crew travelled to Seattle to interview many persons associated with him including: Cobain's aunt, LA investigator Tom Grant, Courtney Love, the nanny of Kurt and Courtney's daughter, and friends of the couple, among others. In this documentary, apart from exploring their relationship, Kurt's death is investigated. Some people claim that Cobain didn't commit suicide and that his death was a murder, instigated by Love to end their marriage.

### RE/PRESENTING AMERICA IN *Cobain: Montage of Heck*

*Cobain: Montage of Heck* is not just about the sad end of the lead singer of Nirvana, Kurt Cobain (1967-1994), but also a look into his artistic mind. From my point of view, what makes this documentary special is not just the exploration of his short life but mainly the power of his shocking handwritten notes, his videos and photos, used to narrate his life story. At the very beginning of the documentary we see a video showing Cobain on stage, high on drugs, and how he falls down. This image gives us a hint about what his life must have been, but also raises many questions about why he acted that way. This documentary is divided into two main parts: the first part, which focuses on Kurt's happy childhood and unhappy teen years, and a second part, in which his complicated adulthood is analyzed, including all the problems that he was facing at the time of his untimely death.

The first part of the documentary, which narrates his childhood through videos and his parents' testimony, is essential to understand Cobain's way of acting. Just after his parents' divorce when he has just nine, his behavior started to change. After some time with his mother, he moves in with his dad, who soon remarries and has other children. Back with his mother Cobain feels again rejected. It is in his teenager years when he becomes unruly, a social misfit only interested in smoking pot with his

friends. Cobain's striking handwritten notes and audio recordings explain how he felt and are the key to understand his self-damaging conduct. At seventeen he met Krist Novoselic and they started a band eventually called Nirvana (with Dave Gröhl as drummer). It was just then when Cobain's artistic skills develop and he becomes the artist we all know nowadays. Voice recordings, videos and interviews of the band's first concerts and rehearsals show Kurt's implication and his obsession with perfectionism.

The second part of the documentary starts when the band becomes famous and Cobain starts dating Courtney Love, also a singer and a drug addict. After she got pregnant they married, and Cobain's consumption of heroin got out of control. As his addiction increased Cobain became famous and it was then when he composed the best Nirvana songs. This suggests that perhaps heroine helped him with his art but was a disaster for his life. A reporter exposed Courtney's heroin consumption while pregnant; indeed, baby Frances herself, born addicted, and her parents had to be detoxed before they obtained full custody. Heroin consumption by both parents during Frances's early years is explicitly shown in the documentary. A striking scene shows the family gathered together while Cobain struggles not to fall asleep holding Frances because he has just taken a heroine fix. His face and physical aspect is dreadful, with addiction soon leading to bronchitis and severe laryngitis. In Rome, following Courtney because he suspects adultery, Cobain attempted to take his life for the first time. One month later, back in the USA, he tried again and this time succeeded.

Cobain's image as a father could be highly questioned in the documentary. It is clear that he was addicted to drugs years before his daughter was born but fatherhood did not stop his appetite for drugs. Some reasons he acted that way might have been not only his distant relationship with his father, and the fact he did not know how to be a dad, but also the fear of failing his daughter. Such a responsibility made him panic but the solution he came up to was not the best one. Even though he was a very talented man, what seemed to help Cobain to be even more brilliant in this field was the consumption of these chemical substances. He himself did not know who he was without the drugs.

A review by David Fear for the *Rolling Stone Magazine* notes that "Anyone could have crafted a documentary about a band. Morgen's (...) approach does something that's much deeper: letting you feel as if you've pored through someone's scrapbook" (2105). Certainly, the film is unique thanks to its singular footage and its clever editing, both making this documentary very authentic. Furthermore, Hank Stuever, from *The Washington Post* states that "On the subject of the life and death of Kurt Cobain there is still some work to be done, but *Montage of Heck* may be as close as we'll get to moving on" (2015). It is true that the documentary gives a close image of Kurt's life but it does not answer any of the questions arising from his death. Maybe it is something that will never be solved. Another review, by A.A. Dowd, notes that "*Montage* understands Cobain as an icon, but also as the mixed-up kid who got too famous too fast, and it seems content revealing, rather than reconciling, his contradictions" (2015). He claimed several times that he despised fame and becoming a famous icon, which added a plus to self-destruction and his fatal ending.

To sum up, *Cobain, Montage of Heck* is a highly unconventional biography and this makes it special. The strange, striking and shocking original materials are part of a bigger picture that defines Cobain's chaotic and turbulent life. What this documentary also does is to portray a stark image of drug consumption in America, especially

heroine, which peaked during the decade of the 1980s and 1990s. Whereas many in the USA struggled to reach the American Dream, which consisted of becoming rich and being on the spotlight, Cobain rejected it. His musical success resulted in an overwhelming popularity which he did not want and that got him killed. He claimed that he played music only because it was the only thing he enjoyed and made him feel alive. It might seem then that Cobain himself was an embodiment of the American Dream, beautiful on the outside but destructive on the inside.

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Alba Ruiz Simón

## ***Janis: Little Girl Blue* (2015): Against the Tide**

### **CREDITS**

**Directed by** Amy Berg

**Produced by** Amy Berg, Alex Gibney, Jeff Jampol, Jayne Goldsmith, Katherine LeBlond, Katelyn Howes, Jonathan McHugh

**Music by** Joel Shearer

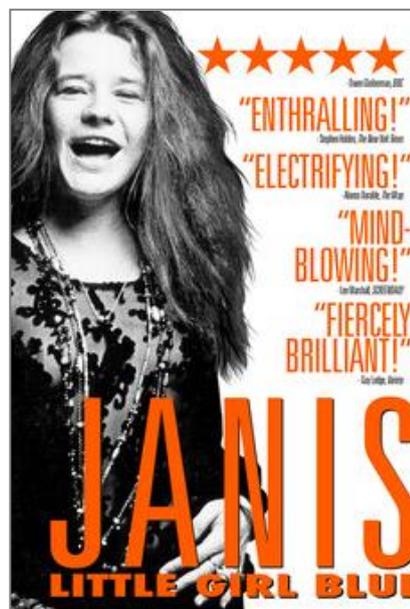
**Cinematography by** Francesco Carrozzini, Jenna Rosher

**Film editing by** Mark Harrison, Maya Hawke, Billy McMillin, Garret Price, Brendan Walsh

**Production companies** Disarming Films, Jigsaw Productions

**Distributors** FilmRise USA (all media)

**Runtime** 1h 43'



### **MAIN AWARDS**

**Calgary Underground Film Festival (2016):** Best Documentary Feature (winner)

**Guild of Music Supervisors Awards (2016):** Best Music Supervision for a Documentary (nominee)

**Key West Film Festival (2015):** Best Documentary (winner)

**Venice Film Festival (2015):** Queer Lion (nominee)

### **OTHER NOTABLE DOCUMENTARY FILMS BY THE DIRECTOR**

*Deliver Us From Evil* (2006, Oscar Award nominee), *West of Memphis* (2012), *An Open Secret* (2014), *Prophet's Prey* (2015), *This is Personal* (2019)

### **REASONS TO SEE *Janis: Little Girl Blue***

- To get acquainted with the life, work and legacy of American singer and songwriter Janis Joplin.
- To see the artist's personal and professional struggles, especially because she was one of the leading women in the 1960s rock'n'roll era.
- To take a glance at the 1960s music era and, the Civil Rights movement and the Counterculture movement.

## CONNECTED WITH...

- *Monterey Pop* (1968), directed by D.A. Pennebaker. The film is a recording of the Monterey Pop Festival held in Monterey, California in June of 1967, the 'Summer of Love'. The festival's main theme was California, the state where the Counterculture movement flourished. The main artists featured are: Jimi Hendrix, The Who, Ravi Shankar, Otis Redding, Jefferson Airplane, Grateful Dead, Eric Burdon and the Animals, The Mamas & the Papas and Janis Joplin's band Ball and Chain.
- *Woodstock* (1970), directed by Michael Wadleigh. The documentary records the Woodstock Festival of rock music, held in a farm of New York State in 1969. This was a key event of the Counterculture movement, possibly its peak. The featured artists include Richie Havens, Jimi Hendrix, Crosby, Stills & Nash, Canned Heat, Joan Baez, The Who, etc. It received an Academy Award for Best Documentary Feature and it was nominated for Best Film Editing and Best Sound.
- *Amy* (2015), directed by Asif Kapadia. This documentary is about the life and legacy of British singer and songwriter Amy Winehouse. The film is an elegy to the singer, who died like Joplin aged 27, through testimonials of the closest family members and friends. It is an intimate look at her life and specially her last years, though as it also happens in *Janis* it indirectly invites audiences to consider why successful artists can be so self-destructive.

## RE/PRESENTING AMERICA IN *Janis: Little Girl Blue*

*Janis: Little Girl Blue* is about the life and the career of major American singer Janis Joplin. Berg's film covers her beginnings in Texas (Joplin was born in Port Arthur, in 1943), then moves onto her adolescence, barely scratching the surface of her teenage years, to cover mostly her adulthood until her death aged 27 in 1970. The film is quite candid about Joplin's emotional side and her use of alcohol and drugs. It also offers an intimate look at her love affairs because her music and personal life were often intertwined. Berg shows, for the first time, evidence of Joplin's open bisexuality, presented as a trait of her Countercultural times.

Beginning with her teenage years, Janis Joplin is described as a rebel who went against all norms: she was kicked out of a choir, swore, wore narrow skirts with no tights, preferred short hair, had male friends, and got involved in fights. In the same line, she went against the Southern white majority in being an advocate for the Civil Rights Act of 1964. As a result, she became a target of mockery in high school and in college. She was constantly ridiculed as an ugly woman, which diminished her already low self-esteem. Eventually, she joined The Waller Creek Boys in 1962 which gave her a foothold in the music industry. A year later, she left Texas and moved to San Francisco, where she would find liberty for artistic creation without criticism. California was known for supporting the Civils Rights and the Counterculture movement and was a place where many young musicians bloomed.

Diverse African-American blues singers inspired Joplin to turn her music into an artistic expression of suffering. During this phase of her career, she started using alcohol and drugs, as a way to cope with her emotional wounds. In 1965, Joplin left her

group and joined the psychedelic band Big Brother and the Holding Company as a lead singer. The product of their music is considered the peak of her career. The moment she realized stardom was possible was at the Monterey Pop Festival of 1967. In 1968, Joplin quit Big Brother because she was already famous and felt that the band was not up to standard. Her decision was much criticized because in comparison the music she created after joining Cosmic Blue was not really better; still, their European tour was a great success. Despite this, Joplin did not know how to lead the band or direct her career. She started using heavier drugs more frequently and her depression increased, which frustrated her main romantic relationships. Unfortunately, she lost control of her heroin addiction and died of an overdose in a Los Angeles hotel in 1970. She was only 27, part of the sadly famous 27 Club.

Berg's film shows why Joplin was a great singer and a 1960s major American icon. The use of letters by the artist herself, her family and friends introduces a personal touch, also stressed by the narrative voice, performed by an actress simulating the singer's voice. There are interviews with Joplin throughout her career, accompanied by new interviews with her former associates, who narrate their favorite memories about her. Her past boyfriends and girlfriends also contribute their insights into what went wrong in their relationships, and how they connected with her music. One of the main issues in the documentary is Joplin's relentless addictions. This is the key battle she never overcame, and it affected all areas of her life.

According to Bradshaw, Joplin's addiction was a lifestyle: "What this movie introduces (...) is the possibility that self-destruction is a genre in art and in life, requiring two addictions: to applause (causing agonising cold-turkey after the show) as well as to drugs" (2016). Definitely, Joplin, similarly to many artists, was co-dependent on the public's approval. Her personal worth and value came from her career. Thus, Joplin suffered from a toxic self-image due to the fluctuations of the public's critique of her music. The many genres she practiced (psychedelic rock, soul, blues and blues rock) are particularly known for the expression of pain. Inevitably, her environment involved the use of drugs which further worsened her addiction.

Film critic Guy Lodge fills in a crucial musical gap in the documentary: "Rock geeks may wish for more in-depth appraisal and anatomy of the music itself (...) Joplin's own occasional songwriting, surprisingly, is never a point of focus" (2015). The film focuses on the life of the artist rather than on her musical exceptionality. There is footage about her past live performances and a peek at the composing of "Summertime". Yet, at no instance is there an analysis of her astonishing vocal range nor of her talent. Her songwriting is barely shown, mainly limited to the producing of "Me and Bobby McGee". There is a point in the documentary when she is praised for her range of musical genres, yet in fact she faced backlash as an outside-the-box artist. Lodge also points out that her death is given little attention, which somehow diminishes an understanding of her legacy. If the production had taken the time to say more about how her fans suffered after her great loss, we would understand why today we are still talking about Joplin.

Joplin's music legacy is still present today, even though she is not as well-known as she was in her time. The music industry's is, even today, mostly in the hands of men, but already in the 1960s revolutionary era Joplin demonstrated that great female stars also had a place in it and that they could control their own careers. Browne notes that women in her time were expected to be secretaries and mothers, but Janis wanted to

be something else even before First Wave feminism pointed out alternatives. Browne notes that “Everyone from Kim Gordon to Pink has given Joplin props for paving the way as a woman in a male-dominated rock climate, and the singer’s raw delivery continues to resonate” (2015). Amy Winehouse is arguably the prime example of somebody who looked up to Janis Joplin. She copied her repertoire of genres and, unfortunately, her drug and alcohol abuse, which ended her life as well too early.

Amy Berg’s film shows relevant aspects of American society in the 1960s. On the one hand, this was a key moment for ending segregation, especially in the Deep South. Texan Joplin, as noted, faced backlash for advocating integration and communal harmony. On the other hand, the Counterculture movement was constituted mainly by young individuals resisting the adults’ conservative impositions. Freedom fighters protested against the Vietnam War, the discrimination against women, and the mistreatment of racial minorities as second-class citizens. Joplin identified with all these fights. Many alternative artists like here were rejected by American conservative society, but they found each other in open-minded places like California to support common ideals. Janis Joplin was one of those great icons leading the changing times, though her self-destructiveness also shows the new times had a dark side.

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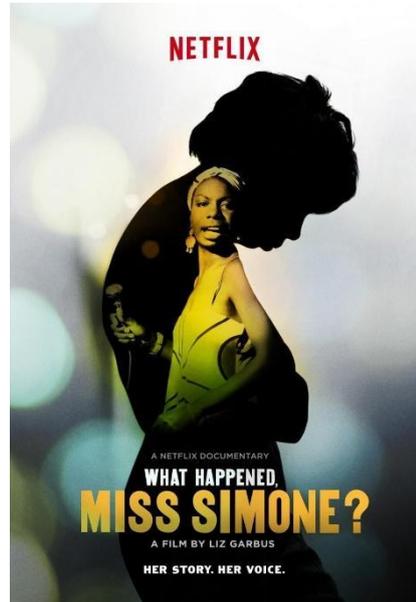
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Ayelén Valverde

## **What happened, Miss Simone? (2015): A Troubled Woman in a Troubled America**

### **CREDITS**

**Directed by** Liz Garbus  
**Produced by** Liz Garbus, Amy Hobby, Jayson Jackson, Justin Wilkes  
**Music by** Lisa Simone Kelly  
**Cinematography by** Igor Martinovic  
**Film editing by** Joshua L. Pearson  
**Production companies** Netflix, Radical Media, Moxie Firecracker Films  
**Distributors** Netflix  
**Runtime** 1h 51'



### **MAIN AWARDS**

**Academy Awards (Oscars) (2016):** Best documentary (nominee)  
**AFI Docs Festival (2015):** Audience Award – Feature Documentary (winner)  
**International Documentary Association (2015):** Best Feature (nominee), Video Source Award (nominee)  
**Primetime Emmy Awards (2016):** Outstanding Documentary or Nonfiction Special (winner), Outstanding Directing for Nonfiction Programming (nominee), Outstanding Cinematography for a Nonfiction Program (nominee), Outstanding Sound Mixing for Nonfiction Programming (nominee), Outstanding Sound Editing for Nonfiction Programming (nominee), Outstanding Picture Editing in Non-Fiction Program (nominee), Outstanding Sound Editing for Nonfiction Program (nominee).

### **OTHER NOTABLE DOCUMENTARY FILMS BY THE DIRECTOR**

*The Farm: Angola, USA* (1998, with Wilbert Rideau and Jonathan Stack, Oscar Award nominee), *The Execution of Wanda Jean* (2002), *Girlhood* (2003), *Love, Marilyn* (2012), *Who Killed Garrett Phillips?* (2019)

### **REASONS TO SEE *What happened, Miss Simone?***

- This documentary will definitely bring you closer to Nina Simone's life, both personal and professional.
- It explores the Civil Rights movement from the inside, following Simone's participation in it.
- It deals with abuse and mental illness and how these can cause chaos in the lives of the sufferers, even when they are as successful as Simone was.

### **CONNECTED WITH...**

- *The Two Killings of Sam Cooke* (2019), directed by Kelly Duane. This is the documentary that most resembles *What happened, Miss Simone?* Both Cooke (1931-1964) and Simone were artists and activists. Duane explores and tries to shed some light on the strange circumstances of Cooke's murder. There was great controversy about this death because of his involvement in the Civil Rights movement and his public image as a singer.
- *Who Shot the Sheriff?* (2018), directed by Kief Davidson. This film deals with Jamaican star Bob Marley (1945-1981). In the documentary we are shown his life with, again, personal testimonies and original footage. Bob Marley's life is another example of a courageous fight by an artist against the oppression of the white supremacy and of how activism can be expressed through music. Beyond this, Marley helped to popularize world-wide the music genre of reggae.
- *Quincy* (2018), directed by Alan Hicks and Rashida Jones. This documentary explores the life of Quincy Jones (b. 1933), a major African-American icon. Known as a songwriter, arranger, multi-instrumentalist, conductor, record producer and record executive Jones is the genius behind the success of many American artists, among them Michael Jackson. He is also one of the greatest jazz performers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### **RE/PRESENTING AMERICA IN *What happened, Miss Simone?***

*What happened, Miss Simone?* is a biographical documentary that follows the life struggles as well as the great accomplishments and political involvement of the American soul singer and pianist Nina Simone (1933-2003). From the start director Liz Garbus inserts testimonials by Simone's daughter, Lisa Simone Kelly, as well as friends and family. Combined with these, we are also shown unseen footage, interviews with Simone herself and fragments of her personal diary, which provide the audience with an intimate, close point of view which is also rich and diverse.

The first part of the documentary narrates the early stages of Simone's life. She started playing the piano when she was 4 years old and spent all her childhood and teenage years playing classical music with a view to following a career in this field. Even though Simone wanted to become the first black female classical pianist to play in Carnegie Hall, the circumstances in her life brought her to start singing and playing

jazz and soul music. She performed in bars and nightclubs in Atlantic City, not really as a matter of choice but rather a matter of great necessity, as she had to sustain herself and her family. During this period she started making connections and her name started to be known in the jazz and soul circuits. Next, the documentary moves on to her rise to stardom in the 1960s, which led Simone to tour all over the USA accompanied by Andy Stroud, her manager and husband. Even though Simone became successful and rich, her personal life broke apart both because of the physical and psychological abuse by her husband. Nina Simone herself narrates the most violent episodes and how, because of these, she entered a stage of deep emotional instability in the middle of all her success.

Between episodes of depression and mania, Simone started getting involved in the Civil Rights movement, to which she committed completely. Her songs took a revolutionary turn (like "Mississippi, Goddam") and became more violent. Berg's documentary illustrates all the course of the Civil Rights movement, connecting it with Simone's own involvement. In that period of her life she became aggressive to the point in which she would have "happily engaged in violent terrorist acts" (even though she never did because of her career). Her radicalization alongside with the loss of her reputation caused her mental illness to take hold and so she plunged into a downward spiral of self-destruction. Friends and family explain how she would have fits of anger and would lose control over her emotions.

At this low point, in the early 1970s, Simone left everything behind, even her career, in order to move to Liberia (the African country founded by former African American slaves and idealized by the Civil Rights movement). There, Simone felt that she had escaped her personal prison and enjoyed the best days of her life, having left behind an America that felt like a bad dream. However, her mood swings worsened and she started beating her daughter, who moved back to New York with her father. The abused had become the abuser. Of course, eventually Simone ran out of money and she next tried but failed to resurrect her career in Europe (mainly in Paris). On her return to America, Simone was finally diagnosed with bipolar personality disorder (in the 1980s). After her diagnosis, her life became stabilized and, with the help of medication, and was able to enjoy her "second coming". The use in a 1987 Channel ad of Simone's 1957 cover of jazz standard "My Baby Just Cares for Me" gave her an unexpected instant world-wide popularity, for which most remember her still today.

Moving on to the critics, Manohla Dargis from *The New York Times* states that "For Simone and the country she lived in and left, the country that made her famous when she played one role and rejected her when she played another, appearances were never just skin deep; they cut to the bone of her existence, much like her voice" (2015). When Nina Simone became famous she perfectly filled in the role of a stereotypical African-American soul and jazz musician but when she turned to activism, her own country rejected her. This shows that the white majority privileged certain African-American musical artists depending on the politics they defended, which also created tensions within the African-American community. Rather than sell out and abandon her convictions, then, Simone abandoned the USA. Kenneth Turan from the *LA Times* states that beyond the fact that "Simone's personal behavior was frequently erratic" because of her bipolar disorder "her quest for freedom remained a constant" (2015) both for herself and for the African-American community. We might speculate

whether without the abuse and the mental issues, she could have become a bigger leader but that is a part of her biography that cannot be altered.

On the musical front, Leslie Felperin from *The Hollywood Reporter* states that, even though this documentary is recommendable for those who know little about Nina Simone, “more hardcore fans will feel the absence here both of some of her finest songs and more and interesting biographical details” (2015). Felperin complains that “The film’s songbook encompasses a few rarer tunes, but oddly there’s no performance here of one her most signature songs, ‘Four Women’, which she actually composed herself”. This is probably true; however, I think it would be almost impossible to produce a documentary that could cover all the aspects of this great artist’s life (culturally, psychologically, and musically) in just under two hours. The problem of how to narrate the artist’s life and simultaneously analyze their art seems to be, in any case, common to most documentaries of this kind.

We could say that Nina Simone’s troubled life was, in part, a mirror of the American troubled society of the 20th century. As Janis Joplin did for white women, Nina Simone gave African-American female singers a figure to imitate, though so extreme that not even Simone herself could continue her own career for over a decade. Through Liz Garbus’s portrait we understand the chaos that the successful artist’s life often is and also how the chaotic political moments of 1960s America called for immense courage, which Simone did have. It is important, hence, to view Simone not only as a musical genius but also as a fierce activist. Above all, as a survivor.

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Nausica Vicens Salomon

## Gleason (2016): No White Flags

### CREDITS

**Directed by** J. Clay Tweel

**Written by** J. Clay Tweel

**Produced by** Kimi Culp, Scott Fujita, Seth Gordon, Kevin Lake, Mary Rohlich, Justin Bergeron, Tenny Priebe, Shannon E. Riggs

**Music by** Saul Simon, MacWilliams, Dan Romer

**Cinematography by** David Lee, Ty Minton-Small

**Film editing by** Brian Palmer, J. Clay Tweel

**Production companies** Exhibit A, IMG Original Content

**Distributors** Amazon Studios

**Runtime** 1h 50'



### MAIN AWARDS

**Cinema Eye Honors Awards, Us (2017):** Cinema Eye Audience Choice Prize (winner), Cinema Eye Honors Award – The Unforgettables (winner)

**Critics' Choice Documentary Awards (2016):** Most Compelling Living Subject of a Documentary (winner), Best Director (nominee), Best Song in a Documentary (nominee)

**Seattle International Film Festival (2016):** Best Documentary (winner)

**Sundance Film Festival (2016):** Best Director (nominee)

### OTHER NOTABLE DOCUMENTARY FILMS BY THE DIRECTOR

*Print the Legend* (2014), *Finders Keepers* (2015), *Innocent Man* (2018), *Out of Omaha* (2018)

### REASONS TO SEE *Gleason*

- It raises awareness from different perspectives, such as the patients' and the people around him, on ALS, the disease affecting former football player star Steve Gleason.
- It is a good portrait of family relationships such as father and son, husband and wife, and of the idea of Carpe Diem.

- Tweel’s film offers an example of married love which is unconditional, no matter the circumstances.

### CONNECTED WITH

- *Jason Becker: Not Dead Yet* (2012), directed by Jesse Vile. It focuses on the life of Jason Becker, a rock star diagnosed with ALS like Steve Gleason. The documentary shows instances of him being a guitar prodigy since he was a child, a music teacher and how he has been chosen to play as a guitarist in David Lee Roth’s band. Despite not being able to move or to speak, Becker still managed to compose music with the help of his family and friends, and shows a deep appreciation for life.
- *The C Word* (2016), directed by Meghan O’Hara. The documentary approaches cancer from O’Hara’s own perspective (after surviving stage 3 breast cancer) and using theories by Dr. David Servan-Schreiber, a famous neuroscientist and also a cancer survivor. Narrated by Morgan Freeman, both share astounding truths related to cancer, discussing issues such as the continuous research for a cure, how medical industries deal with cancer and the causes of the disease. Its main message is a call to “beat cancer before cancer beats us”.
- *Charged: The Eduardo Garcia Story* (2017), directed by Phillip Baribeau. It narrates the life-changing journey of Eduardo Garcia, a chef who lost his arm and almost his life after being electrocuted with 2400 volts of electricity while hiking in Montana. It shows his recovery and determined positivity despite his condition. After this unfortunate event, Garcia learns to embrace his past and how he is grateful for what he has, his family and his other half Jennifer, rather than bemoan the accident.

### RE/PRESENTING AMERICA IN *Gleason*

*Gleason* deals with the life of Steve Gleason (b. 1977), a former American football player from the New Orleans Saints (in the NFL). He was highly recognized for the blocked punt he scored back in 2006, in their first comeback game after the hurricane Katrina devastated the city of New Orleans, and which was hailed as a symbol of the city’s restoration. Gleason retired in 2008 at the age of 30, after being active for eight seasons. In 2011 he was diagnosed with ALS, or amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (or Lou Gehrig’s disease) a type of degenerative motor neuron disease. This disease causes the death of the neurons controlling voluntary muscle movement, which gradually deteriorates. When the neurons are too damaged, they stop sending messages to the muscles, which cannot function. ALS, considered as a terminal illness with a life expectation of three to five years, is said to have been in Gleason’s case a side effect of his rough playing style.

As Tweel’s film narrates, several weeks after being diagnosed, Gleason learned that his wife Michel Varisco-Gleason was pregnant. He then decided to run a video journal dedicated to their unborn child, a boy, fearing that he might never be able to talk to him. These video logs show Steve’s thoughts, advice and opinions for his boy as

his health gradually deteriorates, affecting his mobility and his ability to talk. Gleason also talks about his past and family, his passion for football, and his religious faith. Tweel's film also shows Michel's struggles and sacrifices once Steve loses his ability to move and to help her raise their son River. Steve and Michel created a foundation right before River's birth, called Team Gleason. This helped many people with ALS to finally accept their disease and move on with their lives. Furthermore, it also helped many to acquire communication devices and electric wheelchairs which many patients did not have access to for lack of funds, especially after Medicare aid was withdrawn. "No White Flags" is their motto, motivating them to not give up their battle and appreciate life, especially those who surround the patient's lives in the worst moments associated to their condition (see TeamGleason.org).

Every member of the audience is bound to see *Gleason* as a lesson in life's choices. Pat Padua from *The Washington Post* asks readers how they would react if they "had a crippling terminal illness" and whether they would choose to live out the rest of their lives "in the face of that death sentence" (2016). Even though ALS has no cure yet, most patients decide to cope with it and move on with their lives. Padua himself answered that he would face life "with a greater appreciation for the time you have left" and this is what Steve Gleason chose. Rather than giving up and living negatively, *Gleason* deals with the appreciation of the persons Steve is surrounded by, especially when knowing that he will be a father soon and once Rivers is born. He feels thankful above all to have a wife like Michel, who shows enormous resilience but at the same time stresses that there is nothing to congratulate her on, as many people do. This is simply her and Steve's lot in life.

Reviewer Wendy Ide is right to call the film "wrenching" and "brutally candid" and to define it as "an unabashed tear-jerker that juggles themes such as religious faith, marital stress and the toilet-based indignities of the disease—the latter an earthy strand of humour as crucial for Gleason and his family as it is for the audience" (2017). *Gleason* is a rollercoaster ride; first you get to know Steve's background and his fun side but once you see him cry in despair it is hard not to maintain the optimistic approach. We feel compassion towards Steve throughout the documentary, but also for the people surrounding him, such as Michel and her helpers, even River. At the same time the bodily "indignities" and the humor that Ide highlights are part of the positive discourse on terminal disease which presents Gleason as an activist. Far from concealing the less savory aspects of his new life, Gleason exposes them to that the spectator can understand the need for help and may be inspired to contribute to his foundation, though it is important as well not to read Tweel's film as mere advertising for Team Gleason.

Reviewer Glenn Kenny from *The New York Times* wrote how "the movie begins with footage of Gleason, speaking haltingly but with good humour, into a video camera" after his ALS diagnosis. After the news of his impending fatherhood, "Gleason becomes determined to give his unborn child a document of himself. This movie is that chronicle, and more" (2016). This 'more' is a very insightful, powerful discourse on American fatherhood. Gleason did not even expect to be able to hold his son in his arms, but making the most of his time with Rivers he builds with him a deep type of father-son bond which sharply contrasts with Gleason's own relationship with his father more distant father, Mike. Raised by parents at odds with each other who later divorced, Gleason wants a very different kind of life for Rivers. Hence, Steve's

recording of his advice to his son while he faces the reality of his not being able to do normal 'dad stuff' with River, though Gleason still tries as hard as he can to be a good father despite his health. Perhaps a much better father than husband to the endlessly patient Michel.

*Gleason* shows a different side and perspective of America and of the all-American sportsman. The documentary reflects an example of how unfair life can be sometimes, but also of how we still must be grateful for what we have. It portrays not only the life of an ALS patient, but the life of an American man who is a former football athlete, a son, a father, a husband and an activist. Steve Gleason not only shows his unwillingness to give up and refuse to wave that white flag, but he himself wants to give back the love he has received and ultimately move forward, no matter the circumstances, no matter the hardships.

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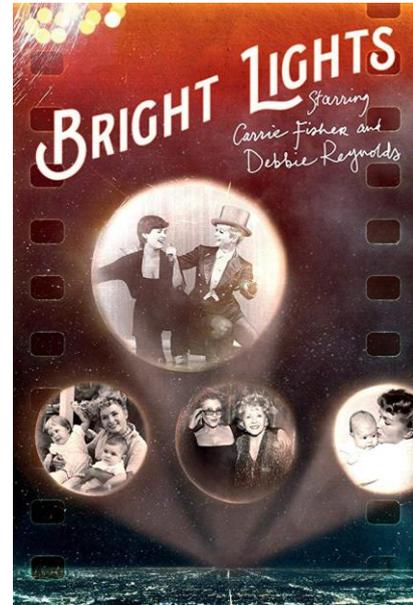
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Samantha Mae Praxidio Latumbo

## ***Bright Lights: Starring Carrie Fisher and Debbie Reynolds* (2016): Hollywood Royalty**

### **CREDITS**

**Directed by** Alexis Bloom, Fisher Stevens  
**Produced by** Todd Fisher, Alexis Bloom, Julie Nives, Zara Duffy  
**Music by** Will Bates  
**Cinematography by** Vasco Nunes, Billy Peña  
**Film editing by** Penelope Falk, Sheila Shirazi  
**Production companies** Bloomfish Pictures, HBO Documentary Films, Insurgent Docs, RatPac Documentary Films  
**Distributors** HBO  
**Runtime** 1h 35'



### **MAIN AWARDS**

**Emmy Primetime Awards (2017):** Exceptional Merit in Documentary Filmmaking (nominee), Outstanding Directing for Nonfiction Programming (nominee)  
**Cannes Film Festival (2016):** Golden Eye (nominee)  
**Critics' Choice Documentary Awards (2017):** Best Documentary (nominee)  
**Hot Springs Documentary Film Festival (2016):** Best Documentary Feature (winner)

### **OTHER NOTABLE DOCUMENTARY FILMS BY THE DIRECTOR(S)**

**By Alexis Bloom:** *Divide and Conquer: The Story of Roger Ailes* (2018)  
**By Fisher Stevens:** *Before the Flood* (2016), *Mission Blue* (2014), *Another World* (2014), *And We Go Green* (2019, with Malcolm Venville)

### **REASONS TO SEE *Bright Lights***

- It offers an honest portrayal of the lives of actors Debbie Reynolds and Carrie Fisher, as well as their very close relationship (they were mother and daughter). Sometimes, documentaries that follow the life of Hollywood stars or any other artist are highly polished, and only show a sugar-coated version of their lives and careers. This is not the case of the very candid *Bright Lights*.

- It deals with a wide variety of topics such as ageing, mental illnesses, substance abuse, parental negligence and wealth, among many others, which allows the viewer to meet a more human version of both actors.
- This documentary is especially entertaining and enjoyable for the fans of both stars, as it follows their path to global stardom while also including their career retrospectives, home movie clips and several interviews.

### CONNECTED WITH...

- *Carrie Fisher: Wishful Drinking* (2010), directed by Fenton Bailey and Randy Barbato. This is a film based on Fisher's autobiographical humorous book. As the title suggests, it deals (in a funny way) with Fisher's addiction as well as her mental health issues and many aspects of her life that would normally be kept private. Just like in *Bright Lights*, it combines interviews with friends and family members, a series of scenes from Fisher's performances and stock footage that reveal aspects of her life from the moment she got her role as Princess Leia in *Star Wars*.
- *Robin Williams: Come Inside My Mind* (2018), directed by Marina Zenovich. It offers an intimate look into the life and career of the popular actor Robin Williams (1951-2014), told mainly through audio interviews with him accompanied by archival footage. It presents the ups and downs of William's personal and professional life, dealing with his roles in different films as well as issues such as his addiction to drugs and alcohol. As it often happens, the comedian's life had a dark side and this is what Zenovich explores.
- *Grey Gardens* (1975), directed by Ellen Hovde, Albert Maysles, David Maysles and Muffie Meyer. A must for any documentary aficionado, *Grey Gardens* follows the everyday lives of the aunt and cousin of Jacqueline Kennedy (both named Edith Bouvier Beale). Mother and daughter were two reclusive women that once belonged to the upper class but that lived in Grey Gardens, a decaying mansion in East Hampton, New York State, from the mid-1950s to the late 1970s. Big Eddie and Little Eddie appear to be locked in a toxic co-dependent relationship which is in its asphyxiating atmosphere the opposite of the happy bond between Debbie Reynolds and Carrie Fisher.

### RE/PRESENTING AMERICA IN *Bright Lights: Starring Carrie Fisher and Debbie Reynolds*

*Bright Lights* follows the daily lives of Debbie Reynolds and Carrie Fisher, focusing especially on the last few years of their acting careers, as well as the strong and powerful mother-daughter bond they enjoyed. Bloom and Stevens' film touches upon many past experiences regarding their personal and professional lives, giving the audience an honest insight into what it is like to lead the life of a Hollywood star. This documentary also serves as a vivid tribute to both women: it was intended to premiere on HBO in March 2017, but the air date was advanced to January after the unexpected passing of both Fisher and Reynolds in December 2016.

The plot is non-linear, that is to say, it does not unfold in a chronological order. Instead, throughout the whole documentary the audience is presented with their

career retrospectives, fragments from old home-movie footage, recent interviews with both of them and a series of snippets of more recent events and their daily lives. In addition, on many occasions these clips are accompanied by the onscreen commentary by Debbie, Carrie and Todd Fisher (Carrie's brother), who proceed to narrate various key moments in their personal lives in broad strokes. The first instance that the audience gets of this is at the very beginning of the documentary, when clips of Carrie's childhood are being played while she and Debbie debate on whether she was a happy child or not. This paves the way for the development of the documentary, as it deals with many aspects that shaped Carrie's childhood.

Although the documentary takes a personal perspective on their lives rather than focusing on them mainly as movie business professionals, it almost seems impossible to discuss their personal lives without mentioning their careers, as they are interconnected. As a matter of fact, throughout *Bright Lights* both of Reynolds' children repeatedly mention that Debbie still feels the same on the inside despite having aged, for which they are concerned as she seems to be acting all the time. It is true that often the audience receives this kind of information through Carrie's relaxed, sincere recounting of the events shared, whereas Debbie, though charming and lovely, seems to be wearing a mask at all times. At some point, when Reynolds is not feeling well, Carrie mentions that "she's good at seeming good". By the end of the documentary, Todd Fisher refers to his mother's education at Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer and how she was taught to behave impeccably before others. He then says that trying to be her best at all times is basically rooted in her personality.

Carrie, on the other hand, seems to be more open about the darker aspects of her life as a child of Hollywood royalty, and even reveals very personal issues that helped to shape it. Both she and her brother talk about her drug addiction, which she started when she was but a teenager, and she also often addresses her bipolar disorder, of which she was diagnosed at the age of 13. Topics such as Reynolds' failed marriage to popular singer Eddie Fisher (their father) and her follow-up marriage to a gambler are also covered. In a way this implies that belonging to different generations has made a difference in the way they act and face life. While the attitude of Reynolds, who belongs to the Old Hollywood generation, is the result of her being a product created by MGM, her daughter, who belongs to the New Hollywood generation, seems to be more carefree and lighthearted, despite her immense *Star Wars*-related fame (she famously played Princess Leia).

This documentary offers a close-up look at the acting careers, the relationship and the lives of two globally famous stars. The audience has access to a large collection of home-movie clips and film memorabilia provided by Todd Fisher, who was also one of the producers of the documentary. Surely, the fact that he was able to choose in which direction the documentary was going to go is precisely what makes it so personal and intimate. At an interview for *Variety* he mentions that "if an outside company had come in, you would have had resistance. Because I was the producer, I think everybody felt they could let their hair down. And they did" (in Riley 2017).

Margaret Lyons writes in her review that "if it were just about its subjects' huge, starry lives, that really would be enough for a documentary. But it also smartly, and subtly, pushes its audience to ask two of modern pop society's central, uncomfortable questions: First, are famous people 'real' people? And second, am I becoming my mother?" (2017). This statement is very accurate. *Bright Lights* allows

the audience to witness the more tender and human side of two big Hollywood stars, and that makes us realize that no matter how famous they are, they also have the same problems as anyone else. The fact that it goes from following Debbie and Carrie around the house to seeing old home-movie clips accompanied by their commentaries makes it very personal and intimate.

We are never sure whether Debbie is 'real' but her bonding with Carrie is certainly very real. Rob Lowman comments that "as a film, it's all over the place, but in some ways its crazy-quilt nature suits its subjects and succeeds as a touching portrait of a unique mother and daughter" (2017). In fact, the structure of the documentary film almost mirrors their hectic family history and eccentric lifestyle. It goes back and forth in time and no perfect timeline is built, which seems to imply that the intention of the filmmakers was not to make a historical kind of documentary but simply provide an insight into their frenzied daily lives. In a way, it makes it more entertaining and fun to watch.

Pat Mullen describes *Bright Lights* as being "just the ticket for film buffs eager to focus on the positive and fondly remember two dearly departed icons" (2017). That is also correct. The initial intention of Bloom and Stevens' documentary was not, as noted, to serve as a tribute, but to be able to get a more personal insight into the life and work of two great stars. Many subjects are touched upon, but humor is maintained at all times. However, after the unexpected passing of both Debbie Reynolds and Carrie Fisher (the daughter died of a heart attack on 27 December 2016 aged 60 and the mother, aged 84, only survived her one day), the audience is left with a weird bittersweet feeling. It is a great documentary to remember and pay homage to the lives of these two fine actresses.

Overall, *Bright Lights* is a very entertaining, heartfelt documentary that gives the audience an insight into the great complicity Carrie Fisher and Debbie Reynolds enjoyed. It allows the audience to see how show business shaped their family history and how it affected their bond. It also shows that there is a distinction between the Old Hollywood and the New Hollywood generations, and how that molded their personalities, as well as their life choices and careers in different ways. Furthermore, the Hollywood industry has become an integral part of the American culture, and *Bright Lights* shows the impact that both actors have had on several generations by reaching a global audience throughout the years. All in all, Carrie Fisher and Debbie Reynolds have played an important role in American celebrity culture, not only through their work but also through their personal lives. Few films capture so beautifully how a mother and a daughter can deeply love each other down to the last day of their lives.

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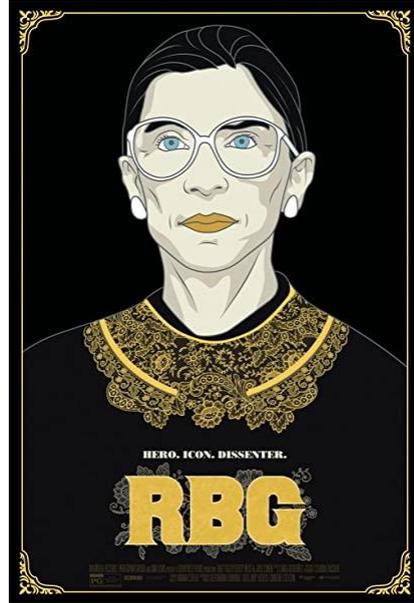
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Aitana Pérez Morenilla

## RBG (2018): Women's Voice for Justice

### CREDITS

**Directed by** Julie Cohen, Betsy West  
**Produced by** Julie Cohen, Alexandra Hannibal, Betsy West  
**Music by** Miriam Cutler  
**Cinematography by** Claudia Raschke  
**Film editing by** Carla Gutierrez  
**Production companies** CNN Films, Storyville Films, Better than Fiction Productions, Participant  
**Distributors** Magnolia Pictures  
**Runtime** 1h 38'



### MAIN AWARDS

**Academy Awards (Oscars) (2019):** Best Documentary Feature (nominee), Best Achievement in Music Written for Motion Pictures (Original Song) (nominee)  
**BAFTA Awards (2019):** Best Documentary (nominee)  
**National Board of Review, USA (2018):** Best Documentary (winner)  
**Primetime Emmy Awards (2019):** Exceptional Merit in Documentary Filmmaking (winner), Outstanding Directing for a Documentary/Nonfiction Program (nominee), Outstanding Music Composition for a Documentary Series or Special (Original Dramatic Score) (nominee), Outstanding Picture Editing for a Nonfiction Program (nominee)

### OTHER NOTABLE DOCUMENTARY FILMS BY THE DIRECTOR(S)

**By Julie Cohen** *Pedro Ruiz: Coming Home* (2011), *Ndiphilela Ukucula: I Live to Sing* (2013), *The Sturgeon Queens* (2014), *American Veteran* (2017)

### REASONS TO SEE RBG

- It gives us a direct testimony of what it was like for a woman to follow a professional career from the 1950s onward, especially in the academic field and in the judiciary.
- This documentary gives us a better understanding of how the United States legal system works and of the place of women in it.
- This is an interesting example of how an all-women production team can honor an outstanding, successful woman.

## CONNECTED WITH...

- *Ruth, Justice Ginsburg in Her Own Words* (2019), directed by Freida Lee Mock. This film also deals with the life of Ruth Bader Ginsburg focusing more on the difficulties she had to overcome as a mother, a woman and a Jew. This documentary uses archive footage and interviews with Ruth Ginsburg and her colleagues and close relations to properly represent her and her life.
- *On the Basis of Sex* (2018, fiction film), directed by Mimi Leder. This film, with Felicity Jones as Ruth and Armie Hammer as Marty Ginsburg, tells the story of her career, from her first cases to her appointment as US Supreme Court Associate Justice. This is accompanied by the representation of Ruth's personal life, particularly her relationship with her husband Marty, a supportive and loving husband unlike any other man of their time.
- *Anita* (2013), directed by Freida Lee Mock. This documentary portrays the story of Anita Hill, a brilliant African-American lawyer who accused the Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas of unwanted sexual advances and thus uncovered the problem of workplace sexual harassment within the US judiciary to the world. Her discovery led to a political controversy about race, sexual harassment, power and politics that is still very relevant nowadays. Hill's story is one of empowerment and duty to act against evil no matter how important the man accused may be.

## RE/PRESENTING AMERICA IN RBG

Julie Cohen and Betsy West's documentary follows Supreme Court Judge Ruth Bader Ginsburg's life from her youth to the age of eighty (she was born in 1933), examining her immense success and popularity. Ginsburg herself describes how in the 1950s most American women could not attend college; there were, besides, strict quotas for women in the few higher education institutions of learning that admitted them. The difficulties did not end there. Justice Ginsburg explains that despite being amongst the 25 best students of Harvard Law School and graduating from Columbia Law School, no one wanted to hire a female lawyer. Luckily for her some men were sympathetic to women's cause. Among them Marty Ginsburg, whom Ruth met in college and married (in 1954, after obtaining her BA from the University of Cornell) and who became her companion for life, supporting her in all the steps of her career.

Over the years Bader Ginsburg took on a series of cases in which there was gender discrimination on both ends. They ran from a military woman who was not paid housing allowance like her male peers to a widower who was denied the social benefits to aid sole parents because he was a male. Ginsburg soon became a famous lawyer who fought for women's rights and for equality. Her husband Marty played a great role in helping her achieve her goals, he encouraged her and prioritized her career although he was very successful himself also as a lawyer and academic. When the time came to choose a new Supreme Court, it was Marty who campaigned for Ruth. She was appointed by President Bill Clinton in 1993, the second woman to serve on the Court after conservative Justice Sandra O'Connor (1981-2006).

Bader Ginsburg has become popular as a Supreme Court for her dissenting opinions. She is not afraid of speaking her mind and she fights constantly for women and the minorities. She has become an example in times when young people are not satisfied with their politicians. Her attitude has gained her the nickname Notorious RBG, after the rapper Notorious BIG. In her eighties now, she has become an icon, being the object of *Saturday Night Live* impersonations and of memes comparing her to Morpheus from the *Matrix* trilogy. She embraces that popularity and has no intention to retire. Justice Ginsburg, her title since she became Supreme Court, has become an inspiration for many even though her key victories as a young lawyer remain somewhat unknown to the majority of her followers.

In his article Scott argues that “the movie’s touch is light and its spirit buoyant, but there is no mistaking its seriousness or its passion. Those qualities resonate powerfully in the dissents that may prove to be Justice Ginsburg’s most enduring legacy, and *RBG* is, above all, a tribute to her voice” (2018). That is true, the documentary pays homage to Justice Ginsburg but because she has always dealt with serious issues it is a serious film and not a simple celebration of her career. Still, Cohen and West’s film is put together in a way which is entertaining while stressing the importance of Ruth Bader’s achievements. The portrayal of Ginsburg makes her seem larger-than-life and it clearly comes from the admiration of the filmmakers towards her. However, even if by all means she is an incredible woman, she is still human. Although, there is mention of the illnesses and hardships that Judge Ginsburg has struggled with the past years, there is no explanation of the consequences if she were to retire or if she fell ill, as many progressive Americans fear.

Peter Bradshaw, in *The Guardian*, claims that “for good or ill, the film does not directly engage with Ginsburg’s views on contemporary feminism and sexual harassment and what is sometimes derisively called identity politics. (...) There is a strange silence—it would have been interesting, and highly relevant, to hear from Ginsburg in general terms about the legal implications of #MeToo” (2019). There is undoubtedly a gap in relation to Ruth Bader Ginsburg’s views on contemporary matters. It seems somehow that the filmmakers wanted to avoid controversy and only wanted to honor Ginsburg’s life and accomplishments. It is a rather safe choice, no doubt, and a missed opportunity. The documentary shows at least Ginsburg’s opinion on the matter of equality when she jokingly declares that the perfect number of females in the Supreme Court is nine, that is, all its members; after all, she argues to those who might be scandalized, until 1981 the nine Justices were men and few complained. Interestingly, the documentary mentions that in 2017, when Ginsburg’s granddaughter graduated, hers was the first Harvard Law School class with an equal female to male ratio.

*The Independent’s* reviewer Geoffrey Macnab argues that “*RBG* isn’t a critical portrait of its subject but an enlightening and affectionate one. Directors West and Cohen counterbalance the archive material with plenty of footage of young lawyers and law students today who see Ginsburg as their ultimate role model” (2019). There is barely any criticism towards Ginsburg, if any. The only mistake Ruth committed that was mentioned in her documentary is a negative comment she made about Donald Trump when he was still a presidential candidate. She had to apologize because it was inappropriate for a Supreme Court members to make public judgements of a presidential candidate. Still, I believe that many of those who support her did not think

ill of her for expressing her opinion; in fact, she voiced what many were thinking and dared not say though she did break an important rule about the separation between the judicial and the executive powers in the USA (and in any democracy).

*RBG* is an inspiring and heart-warming documentary about a brilliant woman, made by women. It portrays the struggles of a woman fighting against the very core of her society. Nowadays, there are two other women Supreme Court Associates: Elena Kagan and Sonia Sotomayor, both appointed by President Barack Obama. The increasing number of women in the Supreme Court of Justice is encouraging for women in the field of law. Still, Ruth Bader Ginsburg represents hope in the justice system for many in the minorities. That is why there is a concern about her health and retirement. The US Supreme Court Associate Justices are appointed for life or until they retire. If Ginsburg retired, the President would have to choose a new Supreme Court Justice Associate. Taking into account that President Trump appointed in 2019 conservative Brett Kavanaugh despite the accusations of sexual misconduct against him, there is little hope that Ginsburg will be replaced by liberal Justice (ideally a black woman). Clearly, Justice Ginsburg is still needed in America so is, in general, justice for women and the minorities.

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Xènia Rivera Fusalba

## POLITICS, 9/11, AND INFORMATION ACTIVISM

Arguably, the 21st century started on 11 September 2001 with the terrorist attacks against the Twin Towers in New York and the Pentagon near Washington DC, which claimed more than three thousands lives. This was the first direct hit against targets on American soil by a foreign enemy since the War of Independence (1775-1783) and an event that shook profoundly not only the USA but also the rest of the world (though not necessarily for the same reasons). Instead of the end of History after the Cold War what ensued after 9/11 was a poisonous politics of 'us' versus 'them' in which all of Islam, and not just the tiny radical minority, was demonized. Instead of examining the causes of the attack, basically emerging from the resentment against the arrogance of the USA's foreign interventions in Afghanistan and the Middle East among other imperialist factors, President Bush's administration embarked on an irresponsible course of action that soon led to the tragic invasion of Iraq in 2003.

War, however, is the focus of the next section. The five documentaries included here deal on the one hand with politics at a grassroots level (*Street Fight*, 2005) and on the other with how the events of 9/11, documented by the eponymous film (2002), have given rise to the gradual loss of citizen rights following the US Government's insidious attempt at controlling private communications invoking American safety from terrorism. The resistance to this generalized monitoring comes from two fronts. The whacky one based on the dissemination of conspiracy theories is here represented by *Zeitgeist* (2007), a film which, though far from being a respectable documentary is very much representative of its time, or zeitgeist. In fact, the revelations by whistleblower Edward Snowden, a former NSA employee, documented in *Citizenfour* (2014) and the disclosures by his predecessors in massive surveillance in *A Good American* (2015) might seem as fantastic as *Zeitgeist*, if it were not for the proof both documentaries offer.

Not only surveillance but the emergence of the social networks (Facebook was founded in 2004) have turned the political panorama of the beginnings of the 21st Century in the USA into a strange landscape. After Donald Trump's surprising election as 45th President in 2016 there is a strong suspicion that no single aspect of American politics is free from foreign intervention through social media manipulation. American democracy seems now more fragile than ever. What the terrorists behind 9/11 wanted to achieve is now in the hands of whoever manipulates American communications and social media.

## 9/11 (2002): A Personal Insight into Terror

### CREDITS

**Directed by** Jules Naudet, Gédéon Naudet, James Hanlon

**Produced by** Tom Forman, Jules Naudet, Gédéon Naudet, James Hanlon

**Music by** Richard Fiocca

**Cinematography by** James Hanlon, Jules Naudet, Gédéon Naudet

**Music by** Richard Fiocca

**Film editing by** Richard Barber, Michael Maloy

**Production companies** CBS, Goldfish Pictures

**Distributors** CBS (television)

**Runtime** 1h 42'



### MAIN AWARDS

**Awards Circuit Community Awards (2002):** Best Documentary Feature (winner)

**German Television Awards (2002):** Best International Program (winner)

**Primetime Emmy Award (2002):** Outstanding Non-Fiction Special (Informational) (winner), Outstanding Sound Mixing for Non-Fiction Programming (Single or Multi-Camera) (winner), Outstanding Cinematography for Non-Fiction Programming (Single or Multi-Camera) (nominee), Outstanding Picture Editing for Non-Fiction Programming (Single or Multi-Camera) (nominee), Outstanding Sound Editing for Non-Fiction Programming (Single or Multi-Camera) (nominee)

**Satellite Awards (2003):** Special Humanitarian DVD (winner)

### OTHER NOTABLE DOCUMENTARY FILMS BY THE DIRECTOR(S)

**By Jules Naudet and Gédéon Naudet** *9/11: 10 years later* (2011), *In God's Name* (2007), *November 13- Attack on Paris* (2018)

### REASONS TO SEE 9/11 (2002)

- 9/11 is a major historic event that everybody should be well-informed about. This documentary gives an insight not only on what happened on that day, but also draws attention to the brave firefighters that saved many people's lives and lost their own while trying to rescue others. It is a beautiful tribute to these men and women.

- The documentary shows footage that really depicts the severity of the attacks which leads to a very emotional experience while watching this film and therefore raises awareness of how awful terrorism is.
- The film also shows the aftermath of the attacks and acknowledges those who were lost.

### CONNECTED WITH...

- *102 Minutes That Changed America* (2008), directed by Nicole Rittenmeyer and Seth Skundrick. This documentary film shows what happened in New York on the morning of 11 September 2001 assembling together footage from a variety of cameras, narrating how the attacks unfolded. The directors use video by ordinary citizens, reporters, institutions, CCTV and so on so create an extremely realistic description of how it felt to be witnessing those terrifying events.
- *Inside 9/11* (2005-2011), documentary mini-series, eight episodes), directed by Michael Bronner and Grace Chapman. This National Geographic mini-series offers the complete narration, in four hours, of how and why the 9/11 attacks happened, from the moment Al-Qaeda chose the targets onwards. The last episode offers an in-depth interview with President George W. Bush on the events (which caught him reading a tale to the children of a primary school in Florida).
- *United 93* (2006, fiction film), directed by Paul Greengrass. This film is a reconstruction narrating what probably happened on United Airlines Flight 93, the fourth plane hijacked on 11 September 2001 which crashed in Pennsylvania leaving no survivors. Presumably, its passengers and crew decided to fight the four Al-Qaeda terrorists and take back control, knowing they might die in the attempt. The plane was possibly aimed at the US Capitol in Washington DC.

### RE/PRESENTING AMERICA IN 9/11

The documentary simply called *9/11* (2002) is a CBS report which focuses on the events that happened on 11 September 2001 when two commercial airline planes hijacked by Al-Qaeda terrorists flew into the Twin Towers of the World Trade Centre in New York City. Rookie French filmmakers and brothers Jules and Gédéon Naudet were there to accompany probationary firefighter Antonios Benetatos, assigned to the firehouse on Duane Street in Lower Manhattan. The original intention of this film, co-directed by firefighter James Hanlon, was to gain insight into the first experiences of a “probie”; this was the reason why they had been given permission to shoot their footage by the New York City Fire Department.

On the early morning of that fated day, Battalion Chief Joseph Pfeifer is called to check a reported odor of gas on Lispenard Street. Jules Naudet goes to the scene with Pfeifer; meanwhile, his brother, Gédéon stays at the firehouse to film Antonio Benetatos. While the firefighters are investigating the gas leak, the first plane of the two crashes into the WTC. Jules films the whole scene, which makes his tape one of the only three recordings that show the first plane hitting the North Tower (tower 1); Chief Pfeifer makes the first official report. The firefighters immediately drive to the

scene as first responders, believing this to be an accident, followed by Jules, who records the first rescue attempt. Shortly after that, the second plane crashes into the second tower.

The hypothesis of this being an accident quickly changes when the second plane hits the South Tower and all realize that this is a planned terrorist attack. Gédéon, worried about his brother and Antonio wanting to help eventually decide to go to the WTC and check what is happening there. After an exhausting day of trying to rescue as many victims as possible in constant mortal danger, luckily all of the firefighters of the firehouse on Duane Street return to base. However, numerous other firefighters lost their lives at the scene, among them, the Chief's brother Kevin Pfeifer. The film ends with a beautiful memorial to all those who lost their lives while trying to save others, as well as to all the innocent people that died on this day, more than three thousand.

The documentary narrates the personal traumatic experiences the directors and the firefighters faced on 11 September. Thanks to Jules and Gédéon's courageous recording of this tragic event, the film includes unique original footage; also interviews with the fire fighters but no critical analysis of the events. The Naudet brothers leave aside the various conspiracies suggesting that this tragedy was an inside job planned and carried out by the American Government under Bush, to focus on the raw nature of the attacks. The film is mainly a narration of the directors' and the firefighters' terrifying first-hand experience and a tribute to the lives lost, especially to the first responders who knew they might not survive in the chaos created by the blasts. Reviewer Phil Gallo complains that CBS allowed its sponsor Nextel to dominate the broadcasting of the film with three commercial breaks which "teetered on propaganda. Rarely would the newly formed Homeland Security office have such a captive audience willing to embrace its agenda" (2002). He adds, though, that "The quality of the filmmaking and the power of the images, however, leveled the political playing field immediately" leaving judgement in audience's hands.

Helmut Ziegler, of the *Berliner Zeitung*, one of Germany's best-selling newspapers, writes that "One could criticize a lot about the film, a mixture of tribute and trauma processing. Its narrative structure based on classic Hollywood drama, for example, or the massive use of pathetic piano tones (...). But this is petty in view of the men who decide to climb the staircase with 30 kilograms of equipment in the entrance area of the North Tower" (2002). In my opinion, critiquing a documentary that mainly functions as a tribute and narrates such a major historical event in a very neutral way by giving the firefighters a chance to speak, does indeed not seem a right thing to do. There are various documentary films on 9/11 that take on a critical approach and focus on the background and aftermath of the events, which seem more appropriate to criticize, harshly or otherwise. This is one is just what it is: raw feeling. In a similar vein, Richard Propes writes that *9/11* "defies rating. It is a valuable film that serves to remind each of us of the power of hatred, the power of violence to destroy our lives. (...) It's the kind of film that makes me want to take those I love and say it to them over and over and over again. It's the kind of film I hope I never have to see again" (undated). The directors of this accidental documentary successfully produced a film that does not only record what exactly happened on 9/11, but also gives a voice to the real heroes of this day, which results in a beautiful mixture of historical document and

memorial without making the viewer feel that they are watching a stereotypical American movie.

In conclusion, the representation of the events of 9/11 is narrated here in the most unmediated way possible, without the inclusion of any controversial political opinions or conspiracies. Unlike other documentaries, this film does not intent to introduce the filmmakers' personal beliefs or ideas to the viewer, which definitely relates to the fact that Jules and Gédéon were part of this tragic event themselves, rather than two individuals solely telling a story that they might have seen on the news. As a blogger notes, "It's not a film that is fabricated, and what you see here cannot be recreated in any other documentary (and heavens, not soundstages for Hollywood blockbusters). It's as close as you can get to that day, witnessing the event up close, from safety" (Stefan 2006). In any case, despite the absence of comment and the French nationality of the directors, their film is necessarily biased in favor of a very American discourse on manliness and heroism, embodied by the firefighters, pitted against the unmanly foreign cowardice of those who caused the cruel attacks.

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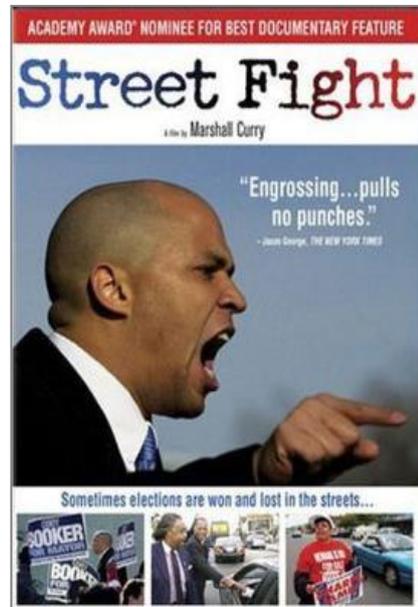
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Verena Wagner

## Street Fight (2005): Politics in the Hood

### CREDITS

**Directed by** Marshall Curry  
**Written by** Marshall Curry  
**Produced by** Marshall Curry, Jannat Gargi  
**Music by** James Baxter  
**Cinematography by** Marshall Curry  
**Film editing by** Marshall Curry, Rachel Kittner, Mary Manhardt  
**Production companies** Marshall Curry Productions  
**Distributors** Argot Pictures (theatrical)  
**Runtime** 1h 23'



### MAIN AWARDS

**Academy Awards (Oscar) (2006):** Best Documentary Feature (nominee)  
**Hot Docs Canadian International Documentary Festival (2005):** Audience Award Best Documentary (winner), Best International Documentary (winner)  
**International Documentary Association (2005):** Emerging Documentary Filmmaker Award (winner), Feature Documentaries (nominee)  
**Silverdocs Documentary Festival (2005):** Audience Award (winner)

### OTHER NOTABLE DOCUMENTARY FILMS BY THE DIRECTOR

*Racing Car* (2007), *If a Tree Falls: A Story of the Earth Liberation Front* (2011, with Sam Cullman, Oscar Award nominee), *Point and Shoot* (2014)

### REASONS TO SEE *Street Fight*

- It focuses on the charismatic figure of Cory Booker, United States Senator from New Jersey since 2013 for the Democratic Party, when he was fighting to be Newark's Mayor.
- Curry's film addresses political campaigning issues that most of people do not even know of.
- It shows very raw, authentic, and unedited material of Newark's rougher districts and gives people that live in those places a chance to express their thoughts and opinions.

## CONNECTED WITH...

- *Brick City* (2009-2011, TV series), created and directed by Mark Benjamin and Marc Levin. This American documentary series of five one-hour episodes made for the Sundance Channel, focuses on the task as Mayor of Cory Booker in Newark (also known as Brick City). He and the diverse communities, from gangs to estate developers, struggle to leave Newark's negative reputation as an unsafe, downtrodden place behind.
- *The War Room* (1993), directed by Chris Hegedus and D.A. Pennebaker. This film documents Bill Clinton's 1992 campaign for the Presidency of the United States, though it is not focused on the candidate himself but on his main spin doctors James Carville and George Stephanopoulos. Hegedus and Pennebaker follow in the footsteps of Robert Drew's pioneering *Primary* (1960), dealing with the fight between John F. Kennedy and Hubert H. Humphrey to be the democratic presidential candidate.
- *Trumped: Inside the Greatest Political Upset of All Time* (2017), directed by Ted Bourne, Mary Robertson and Banks Tarver. Part of Showtime's still ongoing documentary series *The Circus: Inside the Greatest Political Show on Earth* this film documents Donald Trump's unexpected election as 45th President of the United States, from his winning the Republican primary to his dubious defeat of Hilary Clinton. The film was generally criticized for feeling rushed and lacking nuance.

## RE/PRESENTING AMERICA IN *Street Fight*

Marshall Curry's *Street Fight* is a documentary about American politician Corey Booker (b. 1969) and his candidature for the Democratic Party to be elected Newark's Mayor in the year 2002. The documentary's title is definitely suitable as Booker faces what can be certainly called a 'street fight' as he experiences rough political clashes throughout his campaign against Sharpe James, Newark's Mayor at the time. James had been on the job for seventeen years and had never lost an election. This incredibly long time as the Mayor of Brick City, as Newark is known, means that he has a huge support network and does not tolerate the possibility of losing to his rival, particularly when the much younger Booker starts doing surprisingly much better than expected at the polls.

Curry clearly sides with Booker and aims to present him in the most positive way possible. In the documentary Sharpe James is represented as the villain and Booker as a hero. Curry's film demonstrates that racism also exists within members of the same group of minorities, as Sharpe repeatedly accuses Booker of actually being Caucasian and therefore fooling their mainly African-American fellow citizens. Corey Booker was then serving on the Municipal Council of Newark for the Central Ward, a post he held between 1998 and 2002. He describes himself as a man of the people, though he comes from a middle-class New Jersey suburban neighborhood, obtained a scholarship to the University of Stanford in California (by playing football) and later graduated from Yale Law School. As part of his political commitment, though, Booker

chooses to live in one of the roughest areas of Newark to be closer to the (mostly African-American) people he wants to fight for, and whose lives he wants to see improved.

Curry's documentary shows how politicians in positions of power play unfairly the game of gaining voters and how easy it is for them to manipulate their followers. While Corey Booker is trying to win this election in a fair way by getting close to the people and by exposing the many wrong doings of their Mayor, Sharpe James on the other side is not only being manipulative towards his voters, but also commits some serious crimes by doing so. For instance, Sharpe (the second African-American Mayor of Newark and also in the Democratic Party) and his political allies, in power since the 1970, allegedly order the local Police to rip off Booker's campaign signs, an action caught on tape by Curry. Plenty of footage shot by him shows the Police being extremely aggressive towards Booker's voters and even falsely accusing them of breaching the law. When challenged, they also get threatening towards Marshall Curry and forbid him to film. At one point, when Curry states that he is legally allowed to film, a Police officer gets his hands on Curry's camera and breaks a part off. As the dispute gets more heated the Police state that he is not allowed to film on private property, though they are standing on a sidewalk, which obviously is public ground.

Similar scenes occur at local events where Sharpe James speaks and Booker, Curry, and any persons from their team repeatedly get told off and asked to either stop filming or leave. Throughout the film, it also becomes evident that Corey Booker's opponents take every chance to disseminate false rumors and blow small things out of proportion in order to make people question his credibility. Thus, although Booker does indeed live in a small apartment in a building of a rough area, many people still do not believe him; during a campaign event, some people either sent or convinced by Sharpe confront rudely him and even call him a liar to his face.

Additionally, the Newark press also seems to be in James's favor. When Booker's team leader is spotted outside a nude dance club, which was being investigated by the Police for illegally employing a sixteen-year-old stripper, Sharpe James immediately uses this incident to discredit Booker himself. In a public speech he calls this sort of entertainment a matter of "ill repute" and states that neither he nor any members of his team have ever visited the club. Shortly after this, the owner claims that Sharpe James has often visited his club and even sat in the front row.

Given all this pressure it is no surprise that Booker fails to win the election, though he still gets about one third of the votes, which is better than his campaign team expected, especially in view of the Mayor's active work in dragging him and his whole campaign down. Booker eventually became the Mayor of Newark in 2006, defeating James the second time around, and went on to become a US Senator for New Jersey in 2013. James, who also served as New Jersey State Senator (1999-2006), retired from politics in 2008 after being charged with fraud connected with the sale of landed city property and spending eighteen months in prison.

Bryan Newbury notes that *Street Fight* is not quite as compelling as Kristian Fraga's *Anytown, USA* (2005), which also revolves around a New Jersey election, but that "its excellence is tough to dispute" (2007). I can definitely agree with Newbury's opinion on Curry's masterpiece, the film is very well-made and structured and does not leave the viewer with many points to criticize. Newbury also states that Curry once used to be a fan of Sharpe James himself, which highlights his popularity. Although the

film continually unfolds Sharpe's dark sides, the viewer still is intrigued by the Mayor's charismatic presence, which makes it understandable that the majority of people still support him. Donald Guarisco describes the film as a "disturbing portrait of how the manipulation of emotion is often more important than the issues in a political campaign" (undated), which is true of any democratic election in the USA and elsewhere. Sharpe's enthusiastic fans even continued to support him after his controversial actions against Booker had become public. The fact that even I caught myself thinking that Sharpe does indeed appear to be a well-meaning, committed leader when hearing his speeches, demonstrates the high level of emotional manipulation that Sharpe was then capable of.

In another review, Andrew Last writes that "Curry does a good job of telling the Newark story rather than just the Booker story" (2011). This is not entirely true. As to my perception of the storyline in *Street Fight*, this definitely focuses more on the representation of Corey Booker than the representation of Newark and its issues. It can be said that Booker is the main character and while the people of Newark do have screen time, it does not seem to be sufficient to do them justice. The film can clearly be perceived as a "pure propaganda piece" as Last ultimately grants. However, it has to be said that documentaries that include controversial topics such as politics and that expose wrong-doings, mostly do not aim to be neutral as it is simply not possible to represent morally questionable actions without regarding them in a critical way.

In conclusion, despite the fact that some viewers might perceive the film as political propaganda, it can be said that Curry's intention was not to solely idealize Corey Booker and his politics, but mostly to expose the unfair and highly immoral ways of Sharpe James in his last run to be Newark's Mayor. *Street Fight* is a well-made documentary that depicts dirty campaigning, which most certainly does not only occur in New Jersey but possibly all over the United States and in most democracies around the world.

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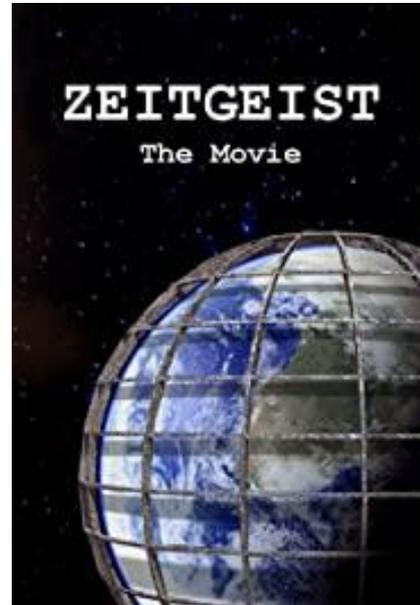
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Verena Wagner

## **Zeitgeist (2007): The Truth Unleashed**

### **CREDITS**

**Directed by** Peter Joseph  
**Written by** Peter Joseph  
**Produced by** Peter Joseph  
**Music by** Peter Joseph  
**Cinematography by** Peter Joseph  
**Film editing by** Peter Joseph  
**Production companies** Zeitgeist Films, Gentle Machine Productions  
**Distributors** Gravititas Ventures  
**Runtime** 1h 58'



### **MAIN AWARDS**

**Artist Film Festival & Awards (2007):** Best Feature - Artist Spirit (winner)

### **OTHER NOTABLE DOCUMENTARY FILMS BY THE DIRECTOR(S)**

*Zeitgeist: Addendum* (2008), *Zeitgeist: Moving Forward* (2011), *Culture in Decline* (2012)

### **REASONS TO SEE *Zeitgeist: The Movie***

- Its examination of the Christian religion, and how this is inspired by pagan religions, astrological myths and other very un-Christian beliefs.
- To explore and understand to what extent the Governments and bankers can (allegedly) control the world and its population.
- To see the origin of the Zeitgeist movement, that has expanded across the globe, and works to defend sustainability all over the planet.

### **CONNECTED WITH...**

- *Zeitgeist: Addendum* (2008), directed by Peter Joseph. A sequel to the first part, which feels as a second part of the same film. This one is concerned with the economics and the social issues of the 2000s. Joseph wants to boycott here the most powerful banks, the major new networks, the military and so on. As he promises by doing this and supporting the Zeitgeist movement, you will fight for a better world and society.

- *Zeitgeist: Moving Forward* (2011), directed by Peter Joseph. The third part of what is now known as the *Zeitgeist* trilogy. This one is concerned with the human nature and behavior, the social need for money, Project Earth (which wants to regulate the usage of Earth's resources). Joseph seeks here a major change in the world's order following, of course, his own ideology. This change is necessary, otherwise, we will not have any sustainability.
- *Invisible Empire: A New World Order Defined* (2010), directed by Jason Bermas. The film exposes to the mass public the idea that there is an invisible Empire leading the population to the new world and modern slavery. It serves as a wake-up call to the population. It explores different conspiracy theories and material surrounding this idea. Controversial American far-right radio show host and conspiracy theorist Alex Jones features abundantly here.

### **RE/PRESENTING AMERICA IN *Zeitgeist: The Movie***

*Zeitgeist* is the first part of the documentary trilogy, released between 2007 and 2011, intended to expose essential hidden truths to the general public about different significant events that have happened in the world, along with forwarding proposals for supposedly progressive economic and social change. *Zeitgeist: the Movie* was followed by *Zeitgeist: Addendum* (2008), and *Zeitgeist: Moving Forward* (2011), all made almost single-handedly by independent filmmaker and activist Peter Joseph. The structure of this documentary is quite singular for while other documentaries feature original feature shot by the director, *Zeitgeist* is a compilation (or montage) of clips and footage from other sources. In short, the director himself describes his film as a "performance piece consisting of a vaudevillian, multimedia style event using recorded music, live instruments, and video" (*Moving Forward*).

*Zeitgeist: The Movie* is divided into three very different parts. It kicks off by explaining some aspects of current established religion which are, on the whole, well known. Part I covers Christian religion and its countless links with ancient astrological systems around the world. Thus, Joseph highlights the equivalence of the figure of Jesus with the Sun, and his story with the heroic Sun myths. By comparing Christianity with pagan religious values, the film aims at exposing the lies of the Christian religion, presenting it as little more than pagan superstition. Part II is concerned with the September 11, 2001 attacks and establishes that the United States Government orchestrated these to justify the upcoming War on Terror that would occur later on. Joseph even claims that the World Trade Center buildings 1, 2, and 7 were destroyed with a controlled demolition to ensure maximum terror. Part III establishes that a secret group of international bankers control the Federal Reserve System, on which the US Government depends for credit. In this way, the bankers decide which wars the Government will wage. Moreover, as a wrap-up, the film establishes that there has been a secret agreement to merge the United States, Canada, and Mexico to form a North American Union as the first step towards a single world Government.

Regarding the film's reception, Jay Kinney mentions that "*Zeitgeist* maximizes emotional impact at the expense of a more reasoned weighing of evidence" (2007). The problem with *Zeitgeist* is that it wants to tackle different topics at the same time at a swift pace. Hence, in just two hours, it goes from discussing Christianity to how a secret cabal of international bankers want to take control of the world, leaving the

viewer barely any time to analyze what they see on screen. This documentary wants to shock the viewer rather than to give them information. Brian Dunning, writing for *Skeptoid*, rightly complains that “The problem with the film, as has been roundly pointed out by academics worldwide, is that many of the conspiratorial claims and historical references are outright fictional inventions” (2010). Peter Joseph wants to impress the viewer at all costs, even though that involves including entirely fictional inventions. The reviewer further establishes that the film is “poorly researched.” This aspect is something one can quickly notice while watching it. None of the events and stories presented, mainly in Part II and Part III, are given any sources at all, making the viewer wonder whether it all comes from Joseph’s paranoid inventiveness. Of course, this lack of sources is the reason why Joseph’s film does not enjoy any critical recognition or awards (except for one). A third reviewer, Tim Callahan, establishes that “unfortunately, this material is liberal—and sloppily—mixed with material that is only partially true and much that is plainly and simply bogus” (2009). Entertaining as this documentary is it is just hard to trust unless the spectator is also a conspiracy theory fan.

*Zeitgeist*, precisely, found a large audience because it exploits the desire and curiosity that Americans have for conspiracy theories. In the modern history of the United States, there have been many conspiracy theories, some of which remain alive regardless of how often they are denied (one example: the existence of aliens rescued from Roswell in Area 51). Thus, although most of the facts presented in the documentary are bogus and most spectators know it, *Zeitgeist* still manages to sound somehow convincing. This is possibly because it preaches to the converted and to those who might agree that the image presented by the United States of America to the world is too idyllic in comparison to stark reality. Regarding *Zeitgeist*’s most controversial claim, the supposition that the US Government directly organized the attacks of 9/11, although this sounds far-fetched Joseph captures well the suspicion that something really weird happened on that day. Strangely, it seems easier to believe that the US Government was in control of a horrific situation even killing thousands of its own citizens than grant that all control was lost and this is why the attacks happened.

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Francesc Aranda Sierra

## **Citizenfour (2014): Permanent Surveillance**

### **CREDITS**

**Directed by** Laura Poitras

**Produced by** Laura Poitras, Mathilde Bonnefoy, Dirk Wilutzky, Kirsten Johnson, Katy Scoggin

**Music by** Nine Inch Nails

**Cinematography by** Kirsten Johnson, Trevor Paglen, Laura Poitras, Katy Scoggin

**Film editing by** Mathilde Bonnefoy

**Production companies** Praxis Films, Participant, HBO Documentary Films

**Distributor** Radius – TWC (theatrical)

**Runtime** 1h 54'



### **MAIN AWARDS**

**Academy Awards (Oscars) (2015):** Best Documentary Feature (winner)

**BAFTA (2015):** Best Documentary (winner)

**International Documentary Association (2014):** Best Feature (winner)

**Primetime Emmy Awards (2015):** Exceptional Merit in Documentary Filmmaking (winner)

### **OTHER NOTABLE DOCUMENTARY FILMS BY THE DIRECTOR**

*Flag Wars* (2003 with Lynda Goode-Bryant), *My Country, My Country* (2006), *The Oath* (2010), *Risk* (2016)

### **REASONS TO SEE *Citizenfour***

- It allows the viewer to question the current meanings of 'democracy' and 'freedom'.
- It portrays Edward Snowden and his courage to relinquish his life in order to expose the intensive monitoring surveillance most persons are exposed to.
- Its focus on the lack of transparency of the National Security Agency (NSA) and how it uses its massive espionage network against the American citizens it should protect.

## CONNECTED WITH...

- *Snowden* (2016, fiction film), directed by Oliver Stone. The film dramatizes the events narrated in *Citizenfour*, but changes quite a bit the angle that Laura Poitras used in her documentary back in 2014. Stone's film focuses primarily on American espionage as the main concern beyond Snowden (played by Joseph Gordon-Leavitt), which allows us to see to what extent the dirty work of secret agents can be affected and destroyed. It also offers glimpses of Snowden's love story.
- *Risk* (2016), directed by Laura Poitras. The film deals with the foundation of WikiLeaks in 2010 by Julian Assange and the publication of classified documents on the Internet that revealed alleged abuses by the US military in Afghanistan and Iraq. It also presents a portrait of power, truth and betrayal of both the founder and their team over six years. The reason why it took so long to finish the film was because Poitras started filming *Citizenfour* (2014) down the middle as the Snowden crisis arose.
- *Zero Days* (2016), directed by Alex Gibney. After investigating high-profile cases such as the Wikileaks activities, the director has focused his attention on the future of cyber wars. This documentary reviews the story of *Stuxnet*, a self-replicating computer virus (that is, the process of making a copy of itself) that both the United States and Israel implemented to destroy key part of an Iranian nuclear facility in 2010.

## RE/PRESENTING AMERICA IN *Citizenfour*

*Citizenfour* is the final installment in a trilogy by Laura Poitras based on the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks (alongside *My Country, My Country* (2006) and *The Oath* (2010)) in which America's intention to further its measures to fight against terrorism is exposed. Back in 2013, Laura Poitras received several encrypted emails signed by a 'Citizenfour', who claimed to have evidence of illegal surveillance programs run by the NSA in collaboration with other intelligence agencies around the world. A few months later, Poitras flew to Hong Kong, which became the main stage of the film for eight long days, to meet the mysterious correspondent, who turned out to be Edward Snowden. The documentary shows the process that led to the publication of all the information that Snowden had previously gathered for several years.

Early in 2013, Edward Snowden worked for the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and subsequently as a contractor for Booz Allen Hamilton in Hawaii. His task there was to actually work for the National Security Agency (NSA) as a private security analyst. Worried about the danger that a possible enhancement of state power through the designing of new monitoring systems entailed, Snowden realized that the task he was carrying out involved the permanent surveillance of American and foreign citizens rather than their full protection. Therefore, he contacted Laura Poitras, a journalist and filmmaker interested in the subject of mass surveillance, to expose how every email, phone call and even Internet search from Americans had been monitored. Both agreed to meet at a hotel located in Hong Kong alongside two of Poitras's

colleagues, Glenn Greenwald from *The Washington Post* and Ewen MacAskill from *The Guardian*, to do an in-depth interview about America's monitoring system.

During that period of time, in which all remained locked up, Poitras and Greenwald desperately tried to make sense of Snowden's allegations and of the evidence that he claimed to have. The documents shown by Snowden revealed the high amount of mass surveillance by the United States primarily of the American population; however, it was also taken for granted that other Governments, such as the British and other US allies, were also monitoring their citizenship. What was fascinating about this whole plot was the process that led to the publication of this first-hand research by Snowden. The epilogue shows a final conversation between Gleen Greenwald and Edward Snowden in Moscow (Poitras was only a mere observer while filming), with Gleen leaving Snowden speechless. According to Gleen "There are 1.6 million people on various stages of [NSA's] watch list" and the President himself (at that time, Barack Obama) is aware of the whole situation.

Director Laura Poitras is aware from the very first moment in which she starts filming that the documentary will be entirely based on a subjective point of view. Partly due to the fact that she is the only one in charge of filming and secondly, because she considers herself the narrator of *Citizenfour* (leaving aside Snowden's own story). Poitras, next to Greenwald, are the only ones who transmit Snowden's information to the audience and allow society to follow the journey of the NSA ex-worker. Reviewer A. O. Scott writes that *Citizenfour* "is an authorized portrait, made at its subject's invitation" to turn Snowden into "an unambiguous hero, risking his freedom and comfort to expose abuses of power" (2014). The image depicted of Edward Snowden is that of a man who has made a great sacrifice and is determined to expose an ugly secret that not only affects American citizenship but the whole world. That people interpret this as mere manipulation proves how society does not acknowledge the courage and bravery required to leave behind one's own life, as Snowden did.

Mark Kermode writes in his review that "Snowden shows no signs of wanting to be the centre of any story; on the contrary, he seems positively camera-shy as Oscar-nominee Laura Poitras captures him in Hong Kong hotel room in 2013" (2014). This is absolutely true. Even though Snowden finds himself handling delicate information with high public impact, the traits that characterize him throughout the whole documentary primarily are shyness, discomfort and even a bit of tenderness. His lack of experience in the media, as he mentions on several occasions, hugely contrasts with the figures of Gleen Greenwald, Ewen MacAskill and Poitras herself, who are constantly pushing him to get as much information as possible. Nonetheless, the three of them are not the reason why Snowden feels this way (or at least it gives that impression to the audience), but rather the fact that his story places him in the eye of the storm, which indeed it did. Poitras's shots are just the final moments of his previous life, a compilation of final thoughts and pending things, but most importantly, a bitter feeling that does not feel like a win at all.

Ann Hornaday notes that "one scene in particular lands with all the drama and intrigue the filmmaker clearly intended: It's a shot of Snowden, now in Moscow, moving contentedly around his kitchen, an image all the more merrily effective for being taken outside his window, like a spy or maybe a silent, all-observing drone" (2014). That is, indeed, the most evocative thought that this scene intends to share.

The meaning of this powerful sequence is no other than to remind spectators of the constant surveillance that we all suffer, which given the circumstances, ends up raising a question: what (or who) can prevent people from being constantly watched? Snowden's image alongside his long-term girlfriend only evokes the malicious and terrible purposes of big spy agencies and the insecurity and exposure that these bring to society. Poitras does a phenomenal piece of work to capture human drama and conflict but in a very subtle way, almost imperceptibly. In fact, this scene not only implies that Snowden and Lindsay Mills are being monitored, but in one way or another, all of society as well. The lack of sound enhances the combination of intrigue and uncertainty which Governments and administrations exploit.

Given the confirmation of the massive espionage on a large part of the American population, it is important to highlight the significance of the documentary's title. Snowden contacted Laura Poitras by using *Citizenfour* as his nickname. The reason he chose the number four is not a coincidence. As the documentary *A Good American* narrates, prior to him three others, Thomas Drake, J. Kirk Wiebe and William Binney, also tried to expose NSA's mass vigilance. Unfortunately, they ended up being silenced and even arrested. This is, as a matter of fact, a reminder of how the American Government will silence and destroy any life in order to protect its interest as a nation. It must be noted that although Poitras's film won an Oscar and Barack Obama was then President when the events unfolded, Snowden continues his exile of all places in Putin's undemocratic Russia, with no chance of a return home as the hero he is.

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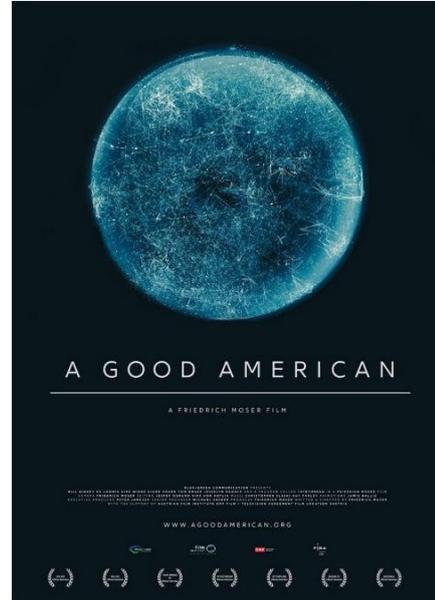
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Beatriz Ariza Castrillo

## ***A Good American* (2015): Whistleblower's Secrets**

### **CREDITS**

**Directed by** Friedrich Moser  
**Written by** Friedrich Moser  
**Produced by** Friedrich Moser, Michael Seeber  
**Music by** Guy Farley, Christopher Slaski  
**Cinematography by** Friedrich Moser  
**Film editing by** Jesper Osmund, Kirk von Heflin  
**Production companies** El Ride Productions  
**Distributors** Drop-out Cinema (Germany) (theatrical)  
**Runtime** 1h 40'



### **MAIN AWARDS**

**Cleveland International Film Festival (2016):** Best Documentary Feature (nominee)  
**Millennium Docs Against Gravity (2016):** Amnesty International Award Special Mention, Best Documentary (winner)  
**Nashville Film Festival (2016):** Best Documentary Feature (nominee)  
**Palm Springs International Film Festival (2016):** Best Documentary Feature (nominee)

### **OTHER NOTABLE DOCUMENTARY FILMS BY THE DIRECTOR**

*The Brussels Business* (2012), *The Maze* (2017), *Beer! The Best Film Ever Brewed* (2019)

### **REASONS TO SEE *A Good American***

- Moser's presentation of the role of the NSA in deciding to use programs that collect private citizens' data as antidemocratic.
- Moser's documentary deals with the programs used by the NSA (National Security Agency) to spy on American citizens and explains how Bill Binney, a former NSA employee, created the database program ThinThread.
- It offers a view of how ThinThread could have prevented 9/11 and other terrorist attacks, and complements what Edward Snowden discloses in *Citizenfour*.

## CONNECTED WITH...

- *We Steal Secrets: The Story of WikiLeaks* (2013), directed by Alex Gibney. This is a documentary about the creator of WikiLeaks, Australian activist Julian Assange, and the leaking of documents with American national secrets such as corruption, tax evasion, or Iraq and Afghanistan war documents. It also shows the socio-political impact of the leaks and delves into the importance of confidentiality. Assange was at the time the film was released a refugee at Equator's Embassy in London, where he remained until 2019 (he is currently imprisoned as the USA attempt to secure his extradition).
- *United States of Secrets (Part One): The Program* (2014) directed by Michael Kirk and, *United States of Secrets (Part Two): Privacy Lost* (2014), written by Martin Smith. Both documentaries explore the US surveillance program and question how the Government makes use of it. Part One focuses mostly on the program used in the USA whereas Part Two shows how the Government gathered citizens' private information and the role the Silicon Valley companies played in this process.
- *Killswitch* (2014), directed by Oliver Stone. This documentary film is also about US Government control on private information and the importance of defending free speech from that control in the United States. Stone also shows the harsh consequences that activists such as Edward Snowden (seen in Laura Poitras's *Citizenfour*) and Internet hacktivist Aaron Swartz have faced when they decided to reveal crucial confidential information. Swartz's life was explored in the documentary *The Internet's Own Boy: The Story of Aaron Swartz* (2014)

## RE/PRESENTING AMERICA IN *A Good American*

*A Good American* is a documentary about Bill Binney, a former National Security Agency worker who claims he had created a program that could have avoided the terrorist attacks of 9/11. Throughout the film, we learn about his interest in mathematics and his career at NSA. There he met Tom Drake, Diane Roark and Ed Loomis; together they helped to develop a massive surveillance program called ThinThread. Despite their enthusiasm for the program, the NSA decided not to use it and chose instead another one called Trailblazer, which failed to anticipate 9/11. ThinThread consisted of analyzing meta-data (data about data), that is, it extracted information from emails, phone calls or messages while at the same time it analyzed the network of which they were part. Thus, Binney and his colleagues created a global meta-data tracking network, the first one.

Binney explains that the program was able to discover encrypted private conversations and he even insists that he had predicted the 1968 Soviet Invasion of Czechoslovakia. However, NSA chief Michael V. Hayden decided to forego Binney's sophisticated software tool weeks before the 9/11 attacks. That's when the NSA decided to opt for Trailblazer, a much more expensive but less efficient program that did not have as much privacy protection as ThinThread. Later, Binney and his colleagues decided to leave the NSA and he began to openly criticize the US Government's mismanagement and the uselessness of the Trailblazer program. After

this, Binney became a whistleblower and remains a strong critic of the US Government.

In this documentary Austrian filmmaker Friedrich Moser tries to show how the NSA's surveillance system works. He also wants to demonstrate that the political interests of the US Government are placed often above the American citizens' safety and, in this way, he insinuates a possible conspiracy theory. The director tries to prove this by focusing mostly on Binney's perspective and through the different interviews with him and his colleagues. Moser tells us about Binney's life in detail to create sympathy for him. In addition, Moser uses 9/11 to capture viewers' attention as well as using CGI graphics and visual effects to explain how ThinThread and meta-data worked. He thus subtly suggests that Trailblazer was chosen to allow the Twin Towers attack to happen and thus free the road to war with Iraq (which resonates with Peter Joseph's thesis in the controversial documentary *Zeitgeist*).

Reviewer Mary Ann Johanson, precisely, notes that although *A Good American* "sounds like a conspiracy theory. It would appear to be conspiracy fact" (2017). This is a statement which I partially agree with because although it is true that what Binney sounds like one of the many existing conspiracy theories defenders, evidence provided by WikiLeaks seems to corroborate his claims. This is somewhat disturbing to the audience as it seemingly confirms that the American Government does not prioritize the safety of its citizens. Binney's testimonial and that of his coworkers is quite convincing because throughout the documentary they expose the inconsistencies of the US Government claims and actions. Moser highlights the 9/11 attacks to show that mismanagement and negligence can lead to awful consequences. In this way, the director raises awareness among the citizens inside and outside the USA about how the possible existence of state secrets that can have fatal results.

Despite Moser's strong criticism of the US Government, he does not interview anyone involved in the development of Trailblazer nor any NSA employee. Regarding this gap, Ard Vijn notes that "you do only get one side of the story. Bill Binney and Friedrich Moser don't pull punches, and very specifically point their fingers at some select individuals, but all of those have declined to comment. Nobody even speaks on behalf of the Trailblazer program, and as predictable as that probably is, it is very unsatisfying" (2016). Throughout the documentary, Moser and Binney claim to be right in their statements and they even give names in order to reaffirm their accusations. However, the director admits that it was impossible for him to find someone to stand up for Trailblazer. Although this is quite understandable, considering the seriousness of the accusations, a different perspective is needed so that the documentary does not feel biased.

This lack of a different perspective is something that Tony Macklin mentions as well. He writes that "For much of its length, *A Good American* is informative but not compelling. (...) there is a lot of artsy cinematography—flapping flags, a wash of lights on the windshield of a car, specks of light in space, upside-down reflections in water of the figures of soldiers" (2017) but not sufficient substance. This statement seems very accurate since it gives the impression that Moser is trying to compensate this lack of diverse opinions with these visual gimmicks and with plenty of CGI graphics. However, although the high-quality graphics add interest to the documentary, these are not as clear as Moser would like and sometimes feel unnecessary. Likewise, although the documentary begins by arguing that NSA could have prevented 9/11, ultimately no

convincing evidence is offered, which makes it hard for audiences to totally trust Friedrich Moser's arguments.

In conclusion, *A Good American* shows the darkest and most secret side of the American security system. The Austrian director uses Binney's story to criticize the NSA and question the need for any Government surveillance programs. Therefore, Friedrich Moser uses 9/11 to debate the usefulness of programs like ThinThread or Trailblazer to prevent terrorist attack and, at the same time, considers to what extent spying citizens is justifiable. Moser and Binney are, of course, not the only critics of this control over citizens. Edward Snowden, a well-known whistleblower who follows in Binney's footsteps, revealed classified information about NSA's Prism and criticized the program for violating the privacy of citizens. For some, he is considered a traitor, yet for others, he is a hero. In *A Good American*, however, there is no doubt that Binney is an exemplary citizen not only for his questioning of the American system but for his courage in doing so and that, implicitly, so is Snowden.

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Kerly Argos

## PAX AMERICANA: WAR IN VIETNAM, IRAQ, AND AFGHANISTAN

Although 9/11 marked the only time when a foreign enemy attacked targets on American soil after 1783, when the War of Independence ended, and even though the USA has not formally been at war with any nation since 1975, when the Vietnam War ended, the US military have been constantly involved in conflicts abroad. The still ongoing War in Afghanistan started in 2001, less than a month after the 9/11 attacks, when the USA and its NATO allies invaded this Asian nation to deprive Al-Qaeda of local radical Islamic Taliban protection. Less than two years later, in March 2003, the US military invaded Iraq, allegedly to depose tyrant Saddam Hussein and destroy his arsenal of weapons of mass destruction, though it later became evident that the WMD had never existed (and that Hussein's regime was in no way connected with Osama Bin Laden's masterminding of 9/11).

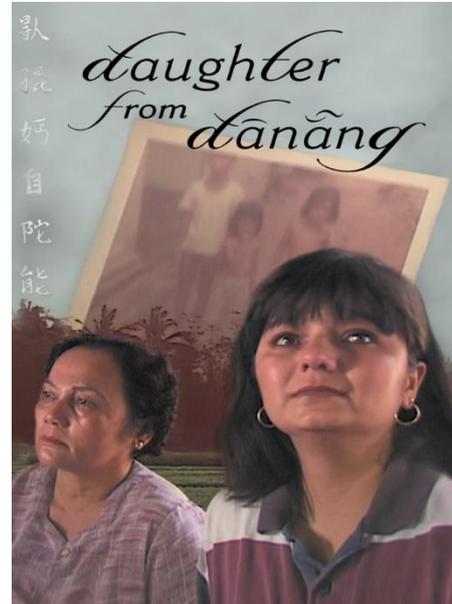
Although it would have been perhaps neater to divide the documentaries in separate blocks according to the war they depict, I have opted here for presenting the twelve documentaries in this section in chronological order. Some deal, besides, simultaneously with several conflicts but, beyond this, I would like to invite readers to consider when each documentary appeared and how the group of films shape a consistent portrait of US foreign intervention. Both *The Fog of War* (2003) and *Why We Fight* (2005) consider why this foreign intervention is so often focused on war, characterizing the Pax Americana as the barely disguised rule by what President Dwight Eisenhower called the 'industrial-military complex'. *Dirty Wars* (2003) and *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004) give more specific details about how this rule works in practice, accompanied often by the torture of foreign citizens described in *Taxi to the Dark Side* (2007).

The shadow of the defeat in Vietnam accompanies films as different as the very personal *Daughter from Đà Nẵng* (2002), the whistleblower's defense *Most Dangerous Man in America, The: Daniel Ellsberg and the Pentagon Papers* (2009) and the highly informative *Last Days in Vietnam* (2014). The minimalist *Restrepo* (2010) represents here the strange experience of combat against the Taliban in Afghanistan. The War in Iraq is the object of *Control Room* (2004), *My Country, My Country* (2006) and *No End in Sight* (2007), three films which share the virtue of looking at Iraq's occupation from a point of view which, unlike that of the Bush administration that unleashed the war, does care for the Iraqi population.

## Daughter from Đà Nẵng (2002): Cultural Shock

### CREDITS

**Directed by** Gail Dolgin, Vicente Franco  
**Produced** Gail Dolgin, Sunshine Ludder  
**Music by** B. Quincy Griffin, Hector H. Perez, Van-Anh T. Vo  
**Cinematography by** Vicente Franco  
**Film editing by** Kim Roberts  
**Production companies** Interfaze Educational Productions, American Experience, National Asian-American Telecommunications Association (NAATA)  
**Distributors** PBS, Balcony Releasing (theatrical)  
**Runtime** 1h 23'



### MAIN AWARDS

**Academy Awards (Oscars) (2003):** Best Documentary Feature (nominee)  
**Chlotrudis Awards (2003):** Best Documentary (nominee)  
**St. Louis International Film Festival (2002):** Interfaith Award – Best Documentary (winner)  
**Sundance Film Festival (2002):** Grand Jury Prize – Documentary (winner)

### OTHER NOTABLE DOCUMENTARY FILMS BY THE DIRECTORS

**By Gail Dolgin and Vicente Franco** *Cuba Va: The Challenge of the Next Generation* (1993), *Summer of Love* (2007)  
**By Gail Dolgin** *The Barber of Birmingham: Foot Soldier of the Civil Rights Movement* (2011, short film)

### REASONS TO SEE Daughter from Đà Nẵng

- It makes you realize that wars have many diverse consequences. In this case the main protagonists, a Vietnamese mother and her half-American daughter, deal with the emotional damage the Vietnam War caused many years after its end.
- The way the daughter's cultural shock when she visits Vietnam is tackled is really emotive and sad, but it is good for viewers to realize how adopted children like her and families felt.

- The reunion between mother and daughter is devastating. This appears to be just a nice documentary, with a probable a happy ending, but when reality kicks in it is harder than we imagined.

### CONNECTED WITH...

- *New Year Baby* (2006), directed by Socheata Poeuv. It deals with Poeuv's own experience. She was born on the Cambodian New Year in a Thai refugee camp. Her family was there because they had escaped the Cambodian genocide. After that, the family left the past behind and migrated to America. Her parents, however, kept silent about the story of surviving the Khmer Rouge genocide. In this documentary Poeuv journeys to Cambodia and discovers the truth about her family. She uncovers their painful secrets kept in shame but which also reveal great heroism.
- *Vietnam Long Time Coming* (1998), directed by Jerry Blumenthal, Peter Gilbert and Gordon Quinn. This documentary deals with an event the World T.E.A.M (The Exceptional Athlete Matters) Sports organized in 1998. This event was a 16-day, 1100 mile bicycle expedition through once war-torn Northern and Southern Vietnam. This was a non-profit organization that focused on events for the disabled. It drew an array of veterans from the USA and Vietnam. Those without the use of their legs used special hand-powered bikes, while blind riders pedaled from the back of tandem bikes. However, what really mattered was the past enemies rode as one team in peace, which made the painful and emotional confrontation each must make alone along the way the real finish line.
- *Regret to inform* (1998), directed by Barbara Sonneborn. A film made over the span of ten years, the documentary deals with Barbara Sonneborn as she goes to the Vietnamese countryside where her husband was killed. Her translator is a fellow war widow named Xuan Ngoc Nguyen and together the two women try to understand their losses. It is an interesting film which includes interviews with Vietnamese and American widows and offers a really interesting approach to the matter of war and how it affects not only the soldiers, but their families.

### RE/PRESENTING AMERICA IN *Daughter from Đà Nẵng*

Gail Dolgin and Vicente Franco's documentary *Daughter from Đà Nẵng* tells a really powerful, emotional, and sad story about the aftermath of the Vietnam War. The main topic is the reunion between a Vietnamese mother, Mai Thai, and her daughter by an American man, Heidi Neville-Bub, whom she gave for adoption in the USA when the girl was six. They were reunited twenty-two years later after Heidi's intense search for Mai. The documentary starts by explaining how they got separated (Mai was married and had other children) and how biracial children like Heidi were rejected by the Vietnamese after the Vietnam War. American adoption agencies intervened to take many of these children to the USA. We see harrowing images of devastated families who chose to give up their children, and the pain their departure inflicted during Operation Babylift, as it was called.

After these first terrible images we start to know the protagonists. At first, it looks as if finding each other could bring a perfect happy ending for both of them. However, we soon realize that reality is not that simple. Anne Neville, the adoptive mother, was a strict, religious, conservative woman. She told Heidi that her parents had died, instructed her to lie about being biracial, and raised her as a true American, as Heidi expresses in the documentary. When Heidi left for college, her possessive adoptive mother felt disappointed and even betrayed; after Heidi's freshman year, Neville kicked her out. In spite of what happened with her foster mum, Heidi's Americanization was complete. She had been in America since adoption and after all these years, and with her adopting family putting up a wall between her and her Vietnamese roots, her Americanization is complete.

Years later, Heidi married (a white US Navy officer) and had two children; however, the rejection of her adoptive mother, by then dead, was still painful. That is the reason she reached out to her biological family and travelled to Vietnam, accompanied by journalist Tran Tuong Nhu. When they first met mother and daughter hugged and cried with happiness. We do not know much about Heidi's dad. We just know he was an American soldier, who was with her mother when her husband left to fight with the Communist Vietcong. Heidi's mother took a job with the Americans. While working there Mai Thai met her boss, who became her lover and made her pregnant. When Mai Thai's husband got back, she had already given Heidi away. They were still married when Heidi visits them. Many Vietnamese women found themselves in situations similar to Mai Thai's. In a few cases the couple fell in love and moved together to the USA, but most cases were not like that. Men like Mai's boss left without looking back, though some American man tried to go back to Vietnam to find their children. On the other hand, Heidi's father may have not known he had a daughter but if he saw the documentary the case is that he did not contact Heidi.

When Heidi reunited with her family she was really happy and everything seemed right. However, as time went by during her stay, the cultural shock kicked in. Heidi started to feel overwhelmed and out of place because of all the cultural differences, particularly the sudden intimacy. To make things even worse, her half-brother told her that it was Heidi's turn to take care of their mother and their family, as it was customary in Vietnamese culture, so they started demanding her money. Heidi felt betrayed, exploited and devastated, so she returned to America determined to sever all connections. At the end of the documentary, we learn that she still receives letters from her Vietnamese family, still asking for money. She has not responded to any of them. In spite of being hard for Heidi, all this is also incredibly hard for her mum, who after years without her daughter, and after finding her, realizes that their reunion was more complex than she thought. This makes the situation even more heartbreaking. All mother and daughter went through to see each other again was useless, because the situation was made worse than before. Heidi's cultural shock made them unable to overcome the situation and become a real family.

Reviewer J. Hoberman from *The Village Voice* writes that "Operation Babylift itself was an attempt to provide some semblance of an American happy ending to the Vietnam debacle. But as *Daughter from Đà Nẵng* demonstrates, the war's scars may take another generation to heal" (2002). I totally agree with this review. It seems quite obvious that these children were sent to America because Americans wanted to improve their image after the war. However, as we see in the documentary, the war

scars were still present even thirty years later. What makes it worse, is that Heidi's is probably just one among many cases. There are probably hundreds of other families who are in the same situation. On his side, A.O. Scott writes in the *New York Times* that "this may not be a great piece of filmmaking, but its power comes from its soul's-eye view of how well-meaning patronizing actions masked a social injustice, at least as represented by this case" (2002). Indeed, this is not an ambitious documentary; however, this story did not need any complications. It already was a tearjerker, even before it was filmed. The fact that Heidi was separated from her family, and the way she was continuously forced by her adoptive mother to tell none about her race, is already a hard story to face. Once the documentary shows how difficult it is for families with such cultural differences to find common ground, it becomes devastating.

Marrit Ingman writes in *The Austin Chronicles* that the filmmakers "do have full access to every awkward moment of Heidi's trip, and they don't abuse the trust of their subjects. Honest and unflinching, *Daughter from Đà Nẵng* isn't always pleasant to watch, but it is powerful and memorable" (2003). Certainly, the film has a number of difficult moments to watch. Seeing how Heidi slowly realizes that it may be impossible to stay with her Vietnamese family because of their cultural differences is really sad. However, how delicately the documentary deals with the situation and the fact that the directors do respect her suffering makes the documentary more powerful. Because of the hard time spectators go through while watching the film, we empathize more with Heidi, her mother Mai Thai, her family and their unsolvable situation. In conclusion, this is a really good documentary, but you have to be prepared to suffer when you watch it. However, the realistic and emotional portrayal of this situation is captivating.

An attractive though shocking aspect of Dolgin and Franco's film, apart from the mother-daughter story is the presentation of ordinary life in Vietnam. Heidi's family are quite poor, which explains their pressing her for money but at the same time they are tightly-knit. It is not clear, however, whether this poverty is the result of the War or the effect of the Communist regime that defeated the USA. In any case, the representation of America in the film is quite dark, particularly as refers to Heidi's adoptive mother and her absent father. At one point Heidi mentions that she has decided not to contact him so as not to open another emotional front. The truth is, in any case, that biracial children like her were not wanted in Vietnam and faced racism also in the USA. Their story is evidence of the long-lasting aftermath of the war and worth knowing about.

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Ana Gómez Gasol

## **Dirty Wars (2013): The Seen and the Unseen**

### **CREDITS**

**Directed by** Richard Rowley  
**Produced by** Antony Arnove, Brenda Coughlin, Jeremy Scahill  
**Written by** David Riker, Jeremy Scahill (also book)  
**Music by** David Harrington  
**Cinematography by** Richard Rowley  
**Film editing by** Richard Rowley  
**Production companies** Big Noise Films, Civic Bakery  
**Distributors** Sundance Selects  
**Runtime** 1h 27'



### **MAIN AWARDS**

**Academy Awards (Oscars) (2017):** Best Documentary Feature (nominee)  
**CPH:DOX (2013):** F:ACT Award (winner)  
**Sundance Film Festival (2013):** Cinematography Award (winner); Grand Jury Prize for Best Documentary (nominee)  
**Cinema for Peace Awards (2014):** Most Valuable Documentary of the Year (winner)

### **OTHER NOTABLE DOCUMENTARY FILMS BY THE DIRECTOR**

*Zapatista* (1999), *This is What Democracy Looks Like* (2000), *Black & Gold* (2001), *The Fourth World War* (2003), *16 Shots* (2019)

### **REASONS TO SEE *Dirty Wars***

- It offers objective information about events that are hidden in plain sight and about wars that are not supposed to exist. It helps to understand the confrontation between the USA and countries such as Afghanistan or Somalia by showing real individual and collective cases which are directly connected to the silent war that is being waged there.
- It serves as a glimpse into what the War on Terror truly is, and how and why it keeps expanding and creating even more destruction.

- It presents and reveals the shocking actions of a relatively unknown military covert unit, which has permission to use lethal force against whomever the White House deems dangerous.

### CONNECTED WITH...

- *Death in Gaza* (2004), directed by James Miller. This documentary film is the record of a tragedy, as the director was killed by an Israeli soldier while he was making it. Miller was attempting to offer a portrait of three Palestinian children from Gaza, whose friends had already been killed by Israeli forces. Miller's own death reaffirms the dangerous situation that thousands of people, including children, have to face in their daily lives.
- *Shadow Company* (2006), directed by Nick Bicanic and Jason Bourque. This documentary deals with the investigation of the task of private soldiers that operate in Iraq, and in many other places around the world, as modern-day mercenaries. It focuses on who they are, what their reasons to perform such actions are, as well as the consequences for those who live under the ever-changing rules of war.
- *5 Broken Cameras* (2011), directed by Emad Burnat and Guy Davidi. This documentary shows images of the brutality used by the Israeli Army and Police to contain Palestinian villagers and activists. Emad Burnat, the co-director and himself a Palestinian farmer, uses his camera to record some of the events that will affect his life, and those of his loved ones. He shows nonviolent resistance to the brutal actions of the army.

### RE/PRESENTING AMERICA IN *Dirty Wars*

*Dirty Wars* introduces a series of cases in which unethical actions were supposedly conducted by the US Army against civilians, in countries such as Afghanistan, Yemen, and Somalia. They are all explained by investigative journalist Jeremy Scahill—who is the narrator, producer and writer of the book on which the documentary is based—in a way that makes spectators feel as members of his investigation team. The production of *Dirty Wars* began in 2010 when Scahill travelled to Afghanistan as a journalist from *The Nation* magazine. He travelled with the director without really knowing what they were going to find or record. *Dirty Wars* includes exclusive interviews connected with the cases, and plenty of original pictures and videos of the events, as each statement tries to be justified with evidence. Three main tragic incidents serve as the basis of the film's plot. These cases, which are presented chronologically and were uncovered in succession, are a raid in Gardez (Afghanistan), the Joint Special Operation Command (JSOC) operations in that country, and the death of Anwar al-Awlaki in Yemen.

The documentary begins with the investigation of a night raid in Gardez, Afghanistan, in which seven civilians of the same family—including a Police commander trained by the US, and two pregnant women—were killed by unknown US soldiers. Scahill has the opportunity to talk with some members of the family who were present during the attack. He gets some relevant information from those

interviews that later will lead him to JSOC; they were attacked for no apparent reason and the bullets had been taken out of the dead bodies to eliminate incriminating evidence. This last discovery makes Scahill realize that something suspicious is going on.

The second part of the documentary focuses on JSOC. After some investigation following the hints from Gardez, Scahill discovers the covert US unit Joint Security Operation Command. The members of this unit are supposed to be led by the Government itself, but as indirectly as possible so as to hide any kind of connection between them. Scahill interviewed people from both sides and discovered that the unit operates outside the law and the rules of war. They supposedly had a list of people that were considered 'dangerous' by the Government, and they were allowed to do whatever it took to end with their lives. Even if that meant killing innocent people in the process.

Finally, Scahill aims his attention at Anwar al-Awlaki. He was a popular American preacher with a large followship composed of young US and British Muslims. He first condemned the 9/11 events in many of his sermons. However, after the invasion of Iraq in 2003, he became a completely different man. He ended up praising some of the attacks against the USA and was publicly marked as a dangerous anti-American enemy. Scahill had the opportunity to talk to Al-Awlaki's father, who does not justify the actions of his son, but neither the ones by the US Government, who has him imprisoned in Yemen and then targeted for execution. After Anwar al-Awlaki is killed, another strike killed his sixteen-year-old son, Abdulrahman, who had no connection with his father as the latter had run away years ago.

Sam McCosh writes in his review that "it's an emotional journey, with an unfathomable number of disturbing truths being uncovered along the way. I found refreshing that Scahill admitted that there could be more to it" (2013). I do agree with this statement. While watching the documentary I felt sad, angry, and guilty at the same time. It makes you think about all the things that you are not aware of, but that are happening while you live your life safely. Moreover, it is interesting to deal with the idea of the American Government hiding all this information from their citizens, as it implies that this unit is not operating in a completely ethical way. It is indeed an emotional documentary that offers real cases of people that are dealing with a war that should not exist. It is also interesting how events are uncovered throughout the documentary. You have the feeling of being part of the investigation carried out by Scahill. Yet, there is always the feeling that not everything has been uncovered yet. Even in the last scenes of the documentary, you feel that there is much more to discover.

Marjorie Baumgarten noted that "there may be a little too much emphasis on Scahill in the film: When director Rowley has no relevant footage to exemplify the points being made, he resorts to shots of Scahill staring through car windows or poking at his laptop, which has the effect of making the journalist more the story than the actual reportage" (2013). Although shots mainly focusing on Scahill are found several times in the documentary, I would take more into account the many interviews, testimonies and data offered by the film. In my opinion, the scenes criticized by Baumgarten are a good way to sooth the viewers after exposing them to some of the emotionally shocking footage that is featured in the documentary. I also think that the main message of *Dirty Wars* is strong enough to allow the director the possibility of

including this kind of scenes, as finding enough images and videos to accompany everything stated would be difficult and, in most cases, dangerous. Still, they have been able to record many relevant, impressive images to prove most of their claims. Also, the topics and individual events introduced are not normally known beforehand by the viewers, but they are still happening every day under the American Government's supervision and should be acknowledged not only by Americans but also by people all around the world. These are the reasons why I did not really notice about the scenes featuring Scahill until I read this review.

Another reviewer notes that *Dirty Wars* "could play out like an extended news report. However, it is structured like a political thriller, with sufficient twists and turns to engross. And, unusually for a documentary, parts of it are beautifully shot" (The Sloth 2013). This documentary wants to capture the spectator's attention from the beginning to the end. It is structured in a way that involves the viewers by placing them inside a thriller that needs to be finished. This strategy is not usually adopted by war documentary directors, but it is a good and innovative way to attract people that might not usually watch this kind of documentaries. *Dirty Wars* has the necessary attraction and mystery to keep its viewers interested as Richard Rowley's editing promotes this feeling. He accomplished what was likely to be his main goal of keeping the interest high during the whole film, in order to deliver all the information he and the team behind the documentary wanted to uncover. Rowley also includes cinematographically aesthetic shots to boost this positive effect in the spectators, and this is enough to make viewers take in the information being delivered not only more easily, but with an actual eagerness.

*Dirty Wars* deals with very relevant topics that should be more visible and criticized by American society from the point of view of an interviewer who risks his life in order to provide enough evidence to prove his points. This documentary teaches how even the most reputable Government may still hide information about non-conventional warfare actions. It is a very dynamic documentary which tries to make US society realize that the war that is secretly being waged is not as heroic as it may seem. Many innocent people are being killed every day, and this only elicits a need for revenge from their families. This needs to be first acknowledged and then stopped.

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Anna Arregui Crespo

## ***The Fog of War: Eleven Lessons from the Life of Robert S. McNamara* (2003): Complexity Beyond the Human Mind**

### **CREDITS**

**Directed by** Errol Morris

**Produced by** Julie Ahlberg, Robert Fernandez, Errol Morris, Michael Williams

**Music by** Philip Glass

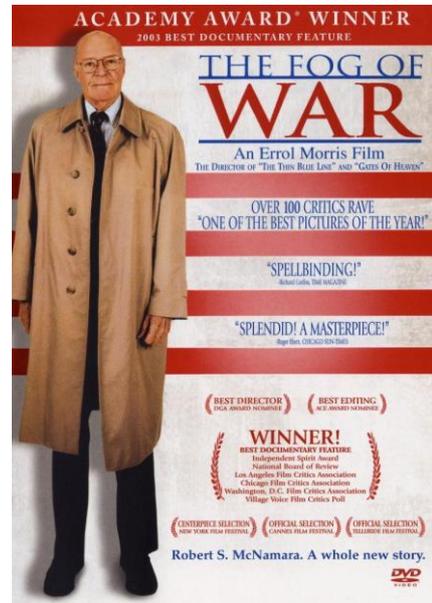
**Cinematography by** Robert Chappell, Peter Donahue

**Film editing by** Doug Abel, Chyld King, Karen Schmeer

**Production companies** Sony Pictures Classics, The Globe, Department Store, RadicalMedia, SenArt Films

**Distributors** Sony Pictures Classics (theatrical)

**Runtime** 1h 47'



### **MAIN AWARDS**

**Academy Awards (Oscars) (2004):** Best Documentary Feature (winner)

**Critics Choice Awards (2004):** Best Documentary (nominee)

**Los Angeles Film Critics Association Awards (LAFCA Awards) (2004):** Best Documentary/Non-fiction Film (winner)

**Film Independent Spirits Awards (2004):** Best Documentary (winner)

### **OTHER NOTABLE DOCUMENTARY FILMS BY THE DIRECTOR(S)**

*Gates of Heaven* (1978), *The Thin Blue Line* (1988), *Fast, Cheap, & Out of Control* (1997), *Standard Operating Procedure* (2008), *The Unknown Known* (2013)

### **REASONS TO SEE *The Fog of War***

- The explanations it offers for many of the decisions made during relevant historical events related to the United States, specifically the decisions made during the Cuban Missile Crisis and the Vietnam War.
- The narration by former US Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara. He offers 11 key lessons that he had learned as a consequence of the military conflicts in which the United States was involved during his mandate.
- It is still relevant today: it shows a close insight of the United States' position during war of the past and the present.

## CONNECTED WITH...

- *Hearts and Minds* (1974), directed by Peter Davis. This documentary film narrates the atrocious events that happened during the Vietnam War by using a combination of filmed content, news footage archive, and interviews with people who were involved or affected. *Hearts and Minds* presents the perspective of the Vietnamese people and exposes how self-centered, racist Americans in key positions tried to deceive the public into knowing as little as possible by manipulating the media.
- *Dear America: Letters Home from Vietnam* (1987), directed by Bill Courturié. This documentary film presents a compilation of written letters by US airmen, sailors, Marines, and soldiers to their respective family members and friends during the Vietnam War. This film uses a combination of real letters and archival footage of the NBC News coverage and the war to transmit real and personal stories that took place during the international conflict.
- *Going Upriver* (2004), directed by George Butler. This documentary deals with the military service of John Kerry (who would eventually become a US Senator) during the Vietnam War. The documentary also presents some of the shocking and disturbing events that the public was not aware of. Moreover, it exhibits Kerry's relevant participation in the peace movement once he finished his military service, and it gives an insight into his later political career.

## RE/PRESENTING AMERICA IN *The Fog of War*

*The Fog of War* describes key behind-the-scenes decisions connected with some of the historic events in which the United States participated in the 20th century. This is done using the testimonial of the former Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara, who served from 1961 to 1968 under Presidents John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson. McNamara was a key figure during the Cuban Missile Crisis (1962) and the Vietnam War (1955-1975). In a way, Morris's 2003 documentary aimed to explore unanswered questions in history, offering as well a valuable lesson for subsequent political and military leaders to prevent the repetition of previous mistakes.

Robert S. McNamara offers eleven lessons that would be allegedly useful in times of international conflict. Seventy-five at the time (he died in 2009), he considers that he has reached an age when he can formulate conclusions about the past and try to pass the lessons he has learned to future leaders. McNamara considers it of vital importance to empathize with the enemy, that is, to be able to put yourself in the enemy's shoes in order to understand their side of the story and avoid a critical disaster. His insight was sought by the former Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson (under Kennedy's presidency) during the Cuban Missile Crisis. Thanks to McNamara's perspicacity, a nuclear war with the Soviet Union was prevented. The United States' constant involvement in international wars, increased the need for more volunteers to fight for their country. McNamara admitted that during the Air Force missions in Japan there were many abortive missions, about 25% missed the target apparently because the US soldiers were frightened. The often patriotic, brave, and heroic image

embraced by Americans is shown to be just a façade that hides fear and terror. Moreover, according to McNamara, it was difficult to draw a line between what was moral and what was immoral during a war. He states that sometimes, in order to do good, one has to perform evil deeds to secure a nation's freedom. Eventually, he came to hate war; however, he did not think it would cease anytime soon since it is a human instinct.

Undoubtedly, this documentary film has been made from the point of view of McNamara, or so it appears. Besides the fundamental fact that it intends to present practical lessons for future leaders, it also tries to narrate and give closure to McNamara's political career. He clarifies many of the so far secret events hoping to carefully clean his dubious reputation during his time as Secretary of Defense. As reviewer Nick Rogers wrote, "It's difficult to imagine anyone from George W. Bush's administration coming forth with such awe-inspiring, agenda-free candor, contrition, insight and misgivings about America's foreign policy. A documentary about morals, respect and blind luck" (2010). Certainly, the rawness of the straightforward narration and the agenda-free insight offered help McNamara to regain lost credibility. Although this does not mean he is considered guiltless, at least Morris records the growth of his consciousness. In McNamara's words, the expression "The Fog of War" describes exactly what war is like: an immensely complex issue that goes way beyond the comprehension of the human mind, and that might be difficult to comprehend in its entirety.

Reviewer Antonia Quirke observes that "Although Errol Morris's film takes us through the nasty dramas behind various wars, few of McNamara's clarifications come as a surprise" (2004). Still, it is shocking to see him acknowledge ugly truths. As McNamara grants, what could be appropriate during war time, such as the use of the chemical Agent Orange in Vietnam was later seen as plain wrong. After the war, the Vietnamese people claimed this extremely toxic chemical had killed many of their people (as well as many American soldiers who were in contact with the substance). McNamara stresses that its use was not forbidden by law and he would have never authorized using Agent Orange if it had been illegal. I believe the problem here is when moral or immoral action is weighted based on existing laws. Laws do not always defend what is morally good. At one point in the documentary, McNamara confesses that he was slightly arrogant and admits that he had been wrong sometimes. He is asked whether he felt guilty about anything to which he answers that he was just trying to serve the President, as well as to defend the interest of the American people.

As Lisa Kennedy remarks, *The Fog of War* is "A provocative case study in power and the powerful" (2004). Its deep insight into America's position during war gives plenty to reflect on its self-presentation and the social responsibility attached to influential roles in politics. When President Kennedy undertook his presidency, McNamara was offered to be Secretary of Treasury, which he politely declined. Afterward, he was offered the position to be Secretary of Defense, which he rejected at first since he considered himself not properly qualified. However, McNamara eventually accepted, change his life completely. In 1963, returning from Vietnam, he proposed to President Kennedy to set a goal of bringing back the American soldiers in a span of two years, since the situation in Vietnam was getting to be unbearable. Ultimately, during Johnson's presidency, the Americans had to withdraw leaving Vietnam to the Communists and losing the war. While in private the Government

admitted that the situation was far worse than they imagined, in public, they kept trying to manipulate the media by insisting that the war would be soon over with an American victory.

Whether this documentary exhibits a pro-war or anti-war idea is hard to accurately determine. While it provides lessons to be practical and effective during a war, it also denounces the detrimental consequences of war itself. This inconsistency inevitably makes it difficult to label the documentary. It must be said that the American Government showed a clear lack of ethical responsibility for its actions and tried to mask its ineptness with the notion of patriotism and heroism. All in all, *The Fog of War* is relevant to attentively study America's self-representation and its role as self-appointed world leader in politics.

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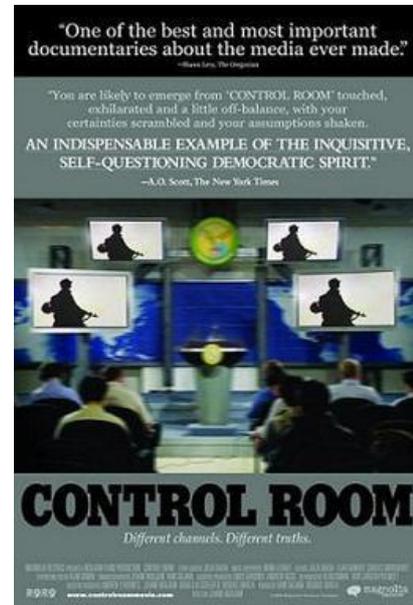
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Yusra El Bair El Abbass

# Control Room (2004): The War on Terror and the Terror of War

## CREDITS

**Directed by** Jehane Noujaim  
**Written by** Julia Bacha, Jehane Noujaim  
**Produced by** Alan Oxman, Bent-Jorgen Perlmutt, Hani Salama, Rosadel Varela  
**Music by** Thomas DeRenzo, Hani Salama  
**Cinematography by** Jehane Noujaim  
**Film editing by** Julia Bacha, Lilah Bankier, Charles Marquardt, Alan Oxman  
**Production company** Noujaim Films  
**Distributors** Magnolia Pictures (all media)  
**Runtime** 1h 24'



## MAIN AWARDS

**AARP Movies for Grownups Awards (2005):** Best Documentary (nominee)  
**CINE Competition (2005):** CINE Golden Eagle (winner), CINE Masters' Series Award (winner)  
**Full Frame Documentary Film Festival (2004):** CDS Filmmaker Award (winner), Jury Award (winner), Seeds of War (nominee)  
**International Documentary Association (2004):** Feature Documentaries (winner), Feature Documentaries (nominee)

## OTHER NOTABLE DOCUMENTARY FILMS BY THE DIRECTOR

*Startup.com* (2001), *Storm from the South* (2006, with Walid Al-Awadhi), *Rafea: Solar Mama* (2012), *The Square* (2013), *The Great Hack* (2019, with Karim Amer)

## REASONS TO SEE *Control Room*

- It shows the Arab point of view concerning the Iraq war by focusing on news channel Al Jazeera.
- It makes viewers see the horrors of war, thus triggering anti-war sentiment.
- It is a reflection on the role of the media in war. It shows how it can shape and limit our perceptions and how this is especially important if the information manipulated refers to wars. Journalists are aware of this and choose some images but disregard others to suit certain purposes. This ends up blurring the boundary

between propaganda and journalism. In the case of American media, their defense of the American Government assimilates them more to the former than the latter. On the contrary, Al Jazeera's defense of common people makes them look more like real journalists.

### CONNECTED WITH...

- *Outfoxed: Rupert Murdoch's War on Journalism* (2004), directed by Robert Greenwald. This film deals with the bias behind the news focusing on a specific channel: Fox News, owned by Rupert Murdoch. Greenwald exposes the channel's alleged favoritism towards the Republican Party and especially towards President George W. Bush. The film also evaluates Fox's treatment of the Iraq War, including the testimony of a former contributor who was dismissed after questioning American involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan.
- *Uncovered: The War on Iraq* (2004), directed by Robert Greenwald. This film focuses on how Bush's Government mismanaged the invasion of Iraq. It begins with the experts' views and presents a critique of the US Government, exposing its lies. It argues that the investigation of the 9/11 attacks was manipulated to justify the invasion and that President Bush did not have any verifiable proof of the alleged Iraqi possession of weapons of mass destruction. Additionally, Greenwald reveals the exaggerated cost of the war and the role of Republican neo-conservatives to justify the expense, which mainly benefits corporations associated to the US military.
- *Occupation: Dreamland* (2005), directed by Ian Olds and Garrett Scott. This documentary film focuses on a squad of the American Army that fights in the Iraq War. It follows the soldiers while they are working and shows detentions, interrogations and how they burst into private homes or try to locate weapons, terrorizing the occupants. However, it also shows the US soldiers' thoughts about the war and how little they like this situation and their role in it.

### RE/PRESENTING AMERICA IN *Control Room*

*Control Room* deals with the Iraq War through the coverage by both the American and the Arab television. One of its main locations is the American Central Command, also known as CentCom. CentCom is the American military office in Doha (Qatar) that informed about the Iraq war. In CentCom, TV channels like FOX, BBC or Al Jazeera had an office. Al Jazeera, a popular TV channel in the Arab world, is the other main focus of this documentary film. *Control Room* shows different perspectives about the war, contrasting the Iraqis who saw their country being invaded and their people killed and the American military who believed that war was their duty and a rightful operation to protect America and free Iraq from Saddam Hussein's tyranny. Noujaim's film narrates how mutual attacks for alleged propaganda or biased tendencies are exchanged between US and Arab media. Finally, both of them end up being subjective. This film attempts to show that the media always defends one point of view and that it can shape or even manipulate the audience's perception of a conflict to the point that

what was known as War on Terror in America, was portrayed as terror itself by Al Jazeera.

In 2003, during George W. Bush's presidency, the American Government decided to invade Iraq. Their decision, influenced by the terrorist attacks of 9/11 and the alleged Iraqi possession of weapons of mass destruction, as well as the subsequent invasion of Iraq is covered by news channels of diverse origin. One of them is Al Jazeera, the equivalent of American CNN in the Arab world. This popular state-funded channel, based in Doha, Qatar, was launched in 1996, to offer the Arab world a local point of view. CentCom, one of the American Combatant Commands, informs the media about the conflict. As the conflict develops, different versions of the war are portrayed on television, depending on whether they were originated in the Arab or on the American side.

On the one hand, President Bush argues that the American target is Saddam Hussein's regime, not Iraqi civilians, and that they aim to liberate Iraqis from the dictatorship. This is subscribed by Josh Rushing, a press officer in CentCom, and portrayed by American TV. On the other hand, Samir Khader, senior producer of Al-Jazeera, resists this view and claims that Al Jazeera's goal is to wake up Arab society and make them realize what the war really involves. To accomplish this goal, Al-Jazeera televises Iraqi casualties and even American soldiers that have been captured by Iraqi forces and are terribly affected by the conflict. As a result, American Secretary of Defense, Donald H. Rumsfeld, affirms that Al-Jazeera is not only anti-American propaganda but also "Osama bin Laden's mouthpiece".

However, the role of America, their coverage of the war and CentCom's actions are constantly questioned in the documentary, mainly by Al Jazeera's head, Samir Khader. CentCom is accused of hiding the American army's actions when they focus just on the rescue of Private Jessica Lynch, captured by Iraqi Islamist forces while they are occupying Bagdad. Later, the manipulation of news such as the destruction of Hussein's statue in Firdos Square (Bagdad) by persons who do not look Iraqi is also exposed by Al Jazeera's staff. An American bomb even kills one of Al Jazeera's correspondents in Bagdad, killed on camera while covering the attack. The US argued that the attack was in self-defense since their troops were being attacked by Iraqis. However, this is questioned by Al Jazeera and Khader even affirms that America aims to destroy anyone who does not totally subscribe to their point of view. The Sudanese Al Jazeera's journalist Hassan Ibrahim also points out the hypocrisy of the invaders, who pretend to install democracy by killing civilians. Finally, the film stresses that though Saddam Hussein was deposed this did not bring Iraqis freedom. The terrible aftermath of the conflict, with massive unemployment and a profound sense of loss due to the deaths and chaos, will determine the course of the country after US invasion.

The evaluation of different points of view is at the core of this documentary film. *Control Room* shows how both Arabs and Americans criticized each other's news and opinions. Certainly, both of them favor their own interest: Americans are portrayed as liberators by US media, but Al Jazeera rejects this view and shows the devastating effect of war on common people. Even the film itself is also biased and unapologetically pro-Iraqi. As a result, this documentary film has often been criticized. As *The Washington Times* reviewer wrote, the response of the director, Jehane Noujaim (an Egyptian-Lebanese-American and raised in Kuwait), to this criticism is that

“I’m not saying it’s the truth; it’s our truth” (2004). Thus, *Control Room* gives voice to the Middle East and portrays, as Al Jazeera does, the damage that American intervention in Iraq has caused. This may be seen as anti-Americanism. Nevertheless, the film criticizes the American Government, not necessarily the American people. Reviewer Roger Ebert points out that “the film’s buried message is that there is a reservoir of admiration and affection for America, at least among the educated classes in the Arab world, and they do not equate the current administration with America” (2004). Although I disagree with the word admiration because it implies certain superiority, Ebert rightly notes that *Control Room* establishes a difference between the US Government and the US citizens. For example, as Ebert also points out, Ibrahim thinks that American citizens could stop their Government. This film is a critique of the American Government from an Arab perspective, but also a call to the humanity of common Americans so they can empathize with the Iraqi population and distance themselves from their Government.

Ty Burr claims that *Control Room* “is about the search for common ground, among journalists on all sides of the conflict and, through them, between viewers in America and the Arab world. Only within that common ground, Noujaim believes, can something like a workable, personal truth be found” (2004). *Control Room* also hints that understanding between common people is possible. This is seen by the interaction between Hassan Ibrahim and Cent.com speaker Lt. Josh Rushing. They come from totally different backgrounds and at first, they have opposite views regarding the war. It is true that Josh Rushing does not totally reject the American perspective at the end of the documentary film. However, he distances himself from the story that the American Government wants its citizens to see. He finally finds American media, particularly Fox, propagandistic. Later, he realizes that something is wrong when he is more moved by American victims than by Iraqi casualties. Towards the end of the documentary, a thought-provoking conversation with Hassan Ibrahim shows mutual understanding despite not quite sharing each other’s perspective. Certainly, it is Josh Rushing’s ideas that are challenged since the US Government’s control of the Army and the media seem impossible to justify in comparison with Ibrahim’s defense of the common Arabs. Thus, *Control Room* makes clear that the American position in the conflict is paternalistic—they constantly stress their role as liberators—and indifferent for other’s suffering—their response to the images of death was simply that it was anti-American propaganda. Nevertheless, this is noticed even by one of CenCom officers, thus showing that there is a way out Government’s manipulation.

Majorie Baumgarten rightly writes in her review that “obviously, the title refers not only to the control booth of the TV station but also, the spinners of the news. What we discover is that information is not the enemy so much as lack of information or disinformation is” (2004). This documentary film shows that news can be shaped to highlight certain aspects but disregard others. As a result, very different versions emerge, complicating access to an objective view of the conflict. In addition, when power intermingles with the media, manipulation becomes a crucial point to consider. *Control Room* exposes how TV channels not only decided to ignore some information, which is something that Josh Rushing attributed to both the Arab and American media, but also how CentCom managed that information to favor the American Government while pretending to stick to facts.

News about war is never objective; they are always influenced by the point of view of the journalists. Nevertheless, this does not justify the American Government's manipulation of information and the attack against contrary opinions. Thus, one of the strong points of the documentary is that it encourages the audience to face news from a better informed position. It also portrays Al Jazeera as an alternative to American TV. Al Jazeera also invites Americans to give their point of view despite being opposite to what they support. Additionally, they do not seem to be influenced by the Iraqi rulers, since the Iraqi Information Minister, Saeed al-Sahaf, affirms, quite surprisingly, that Al-Jazeera is pro-American. Moreover, they defend the rights and safety of common people even putting their lives at risk. Certainly, all stories are incomplete independently of their origin, so blindly trusting media results in missing information. However, this documentary shows Al Jazeera's commitment to televise those aspects of the war hidden by the American side, thus enhancing the audience's knowledge about what was happening in the war.

*Control Room* shows how the same event can be portrayed from different positions. Back in 2003, the American audience saw President Bush defending the War on Terror and Operation Iraqi Freedom. Thus, many probably thought that it was the American duty to liberate Iraqi people from Saddam Hussain's dictatorship. However, one may wonder what could happen if more Americans watched Al Jazeera's broadcasts without the prejudices infused by their Government. Al Jazeera shows the contradiction of the term War on Terror since what this war caused was precisely terror in their homes. Maybe thanks to channels like Al Jazeera, common people would never support a war again.

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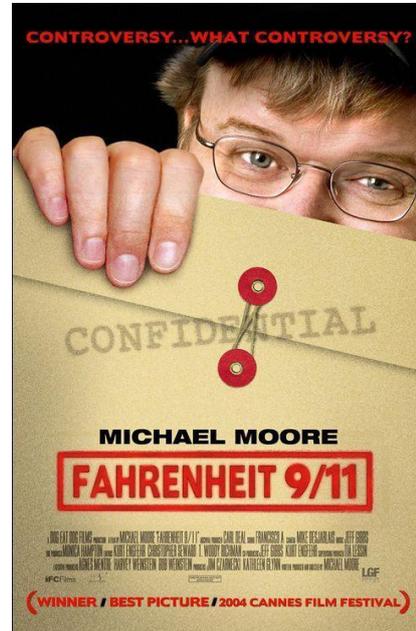
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Andrea Delgado López

## **Fahrenheit 9/11 (2004): The Temperature of Freedom**

### **CREDITS**

**Directed by** Michael Moore  
**Written by** Michael Moore  
**Produced by** Michael Moore, Jim Czarnecki, Kathleen Glynn, Monica Hampton, Kurt Engfehr, Jeff Gibbs  
**Music by** Jeff Gibbs  
**Cinematography by** Mike Desjarlais  
**Film editing by** Kurt Engfehr, T. Woody Richman, Christopher Seward  
**Production companies** Dog Eat Dog Films ,Fellowship Adventure Group  
**Distributors** Fellowship Adventure Group, Lionsgate Films, IFC Films (theatrical)  
**Runtime** 2h 02'



### **MAIN AWARDS**

**Cannes Film Festival (2004):** Palme d'Or (winner), FIPRESCI Prize (winner)  
**International Documentary Association (2004):** Documentary Feature (winner)  
**National Board of Review, USA (2004):** Freedom of Expression Award (winner)  
**People's Choice Award (2005):** Favorite Motion Picture (winner)

### **OTHER NOTABLE DOCUMENTARY FILMS BY THE DIRECTOR**

*Roger & Me* (1989), *Bowling for Columbine* (2002, Oscar Award winner), *Sicko* (2007, Oscar Award nominee), *Capitalism: A Love Story* (2009), *Fahrenheit 11/9* (2017)

### **REASONS TO SEE Fahrenheit 9/11**

- With the help of truly powerful video materials, this documentary interprets the position of President George W. Bush and the inside story of the mainstream ideology in American history from 11 September 2001 to the Iraq War.
- The absolutely real historical picture and Moore's unique narration are combined in an unconventional way in the film, forming a humorous and ironic effect.
- It focuses on common sense and proven real facts that are ignored by the American citizenships, especially how the Bush Administration used the American people's psychological need for stability in the turmoil caused by terrorism presenting itself as a guarantor of American freedom.

## CONNECTED WITH...

- *Fahrenheit 11/9* (2018), directed by Michael Moore. The documentary examines the current state of American politics, especially gun violence during Donald Trump's presidency. Moore criticized Trump for his planned destruction of American democracy, and compared Trump's speech with Hitler's public speeches. Moore also criticized himself and his generation in the documentary, hoping that the younger generation of Americans can recognize the mistakes of their parents and revive America.
- *Where to Invade Next* (2015), directed by Michael Moore. To understand what the United States can learn from other countries, Michael Moore embarked on a cultural journey. This documentary shows how European countries make use of American classic ideas to make their own country more like a paradise, to mock the American society which has long forgotten its roots and is stagnant.
- *The World According to Bush* (2004), directed by William Karel. This documentary is based on the book by Eric Laurent. It tells about the 1000 days of George W. Bush's presidency from the 9/11 attacks of 2001 to the Iraqi quagmire of 2003. It narrates how a group neo-cons hawks took control of a US foreign policy that should have been judged as war crimes against defenseless nations and individuals.

## RE/PRESENTING AMERICA IN *Fahrenheit 9/11*

*Fahrenheit 9/11* is a documentary film directed and written by Michael Moore. The film takes the 9/11 terrorist attacks of 2001 against the World Trade Center and the Pentagon as the background to describe the war in Iraq launched by the United States on the false basis that Iraqi tyrant Saddam Hussein was responsible. George W. Bush, who was President of the United States at that time, was the central figure in the process to connect the terrorist attacks of September 11 and the justification for the Iraq War. The documentary boldly reveals the inside story of the Bush Administration and the business interests linking the Bush family and Al Qaeda's leader Osama bin Laden. It also shows the impact of the Iraq War on American society because of the many combat casualties.

In 2000, in the final stage of the US election, Al Gore of the Democratic Party was leading the vote count ahead of George W. Bush by more than 500,000 votes. However, because of problems with the Florida votes (where Bush's brother Jeb was Governor), there were two recounts and a large number of invalidated votes. Most citizens of African descent were not even registered to vote and it has to be suspected that the Bush family somehow manipulated the vote in secret. In the final count, George W. Bush was proclaimed the winner, his opponent conceded the election and he became the 43rd president of the United States. However, eight months after George W. Bush took office he was still unable to cope with his duties. He was late in appointing a Supreme Court judge, and the bills he had promised to push were stranded. Bush's popularity ratings began to decline.

On September 11, 2001, two Boeing airliners crashed into the World Trade Center in New York, and another into the Pentagon, causing more than 3,000 deaths.

This terrorist attack shocked the whole world, and also led the United States into a state of panic. Finally, the leisurely President began to worry. The original plan of the attack was known by US intelligence, as early as 6 August, but the report was so vague that it was ignored by Bush, then on holiday. On the day after 9/11, all flights in the United States were cancelled but, oddly, the White House allowed six flights, one of which was carrying Osama bin Laden, to flee the country without an arrest or active investigation. George W. Bush's father, former President George H.W. Bush, had met Bin Laden in his time as director of the CIA, whereas George W. Bush's friend James Bath was actually the bin Laden family's asset custodian in the United States.

Later, Bush father got a board position in the multinational Carlisle. One of the investors in the group was the bin Laden family. Bush father and son also kept a close relationship with Saudi Arabia during their respective administrations. In order to cover up their shared interests, after 9/11 the US Government prevented any independent investigation and redacted the results of those already carried out. This is why, Moore claims, George W. Bush decided to distract the American public by targeting Hussein's Iraq as an enemy. Absurdly, at the time the main base of Al Qaeda was in Afghanistan, not in Iraq. To increase support for a war in Iraq the FBI and CIA frequently released news of impending terrorist attacks, and kept American society in a constant panic also increasing mass surveillance over American citizens.

In March 2003, the United States bypassed the UN Security Council and launched the Iraq War, falsely claiming that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction and secretly supported radical Islamic terrorists. The American people had been under the threat of terror for almost two years, so the support rate for the Iraq War was as high as 95%. Many young people enlisted. But the truth is that, from the beginning the Iraq War was a lie: the weapons of mass destruction were never found because they never existed and Iraq was destroyed. Although the United States declared victory after deposing Hussein, the nation also paid a heavy price, mainly in losses affecting low-income families. When the country called on young Americans to enlist, Moore pressed Congress lobby members to send their own children to Iraq, but no one would.

Moore pays special attention to ordinary people impacted by the war, including the Iraqi victims. He also speaks to mothers like Leila Lipscom who changed her support for Iraq War after the loss of her son in the war. The American troops who invade ordinary homes and terrorize families in Baghdad to arrest innocent citizens also hate the war. Moore reveals the invasion of Iraq is not simply war on terror; it has the main purpose of pleasing US corporations greedy for the Iraq oil industry. Bruce Weber notes that "the central motive for the war, the film suggests, is a desire to protect the ties of the Bush family and their inner circle to Saudi Arabian oil money" (2004). For this, in America people's opinions are guided and controlled by the Government, and freedom is limited. In Iraq, society is mired in the war. Moore follows a clear bias, attacking the Republican Party led by George W. Bush from a Democratic point of view, though above all he is on the side of the American public.

A.O. Scott writes in his review "it may be that the confusions trailing Mr. Moore's narrative are what make *Fahrenheit 9/11* an authentic and indispensable document of its time. The film can be seen as an effort to wrest clarity from shock, anger and dismay, and if parts of it seem rash, overstated or muddled, well, so has the national mood" (2004). I don't think Moore's narrative is confusing though it has a very

strong subjective color. An important element of this documentary film are the many satirical passages and the frantic editing. Moore wants to tell the truth and turn the national mood against Bush, as Leila Lipscom's turned when her son died and she started seeing the White House as a legitimate target of her anger. Moore also appeals to the young American soldiers who have been fooled by the US Government to fight the terrorism of the US military. They have contributed their youth to the war effort, but they are misunderstood and deprived of disability benefits after returning home. Moore wants to show how they have been cheated by the country.

Frederic and Mary Ann Brussat wrote in their review that "Moore wants this muckraking film to wake up citizens who have been lulled into complacency by the media or beaten down over the years by the powerful interests aligned behind the administration" (2004). Everyone has the right to know the truth. By exposing how George W. Bush came to power, the documentary shows the hypocrisy of politicians, their ability to hoodwink the people under their control. The Bush administration passed the USA Patriot Act, which even forced Americans to sacrifice their privacy for safety (as Edward Snowden notoriously denounced). Moore wants the American people to understand the Government's deception and react.

The image of the President of the United States on film has evolved from respect in the early 20th century to irreverence after the Vietnam War, in line with the changes in mass culture in the United States. World War II pushed the United States out of its supporting role in the world economic and political arena to become the world's leading power, turning the media image of the President of the United States into a focus of attention. After the failure of the American war against Vietnam and the Watergate scandal greatly reduced the image of the President in the eyes of the American people, mainstream culture gradually changed. The praise of the President's achievements became either partial or even overall denial of his misdeeds or harsh criticism, as the personal qualities associated with this position declined. If *Fahrenheit 9/11* won the Oscar for Best Documentary this is not because it is truly outstanding but because it catered to the anti-war, anti-Bush sentiment of American people and because it exposed with bitterness what many suspected of the American President: that he was as guilty as the terrorists of the catastrophic events on 9/11 and later.

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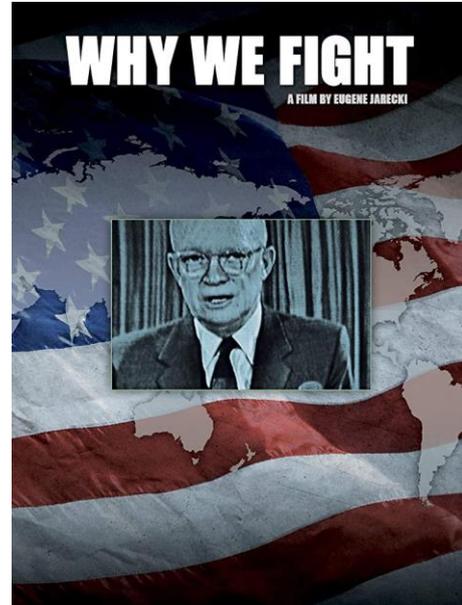
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Xueran Zhu

## Why We Fight (2005): Atrocities in the Name of America

### CREDITS

**Directed by** Eugene Jarecki  
**Written by** Eugene Jarecki  
**Produced by** Susannah Shipman, Eugene Jarecki  
**Music by** Robert Miller  
**Cinematography by** Étienne Sauret, May Ying Welsh, Brett Willey  
**Film editing by** Nancy Kennedy  
**Production companies** ARTE, BBC Storyville, Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC), Charlotte Street Films, TV2 Danmark  
**Distributors** Sony Pictures Classics (theatrical), Axiom Films  
**Runtime** 1h 39'



### MAIN AWARDS

**Full Frame Documentary Film Festival (2005):** Seeds of War (winner, tied with Tied with *Melancholian 3 Huonetta*)  
**International Documentary Association (2005):** Feature documentaries (nominee)  
**Peabody Awards (2007):** Peabody Award (winner)  
**Sundance Film Festival (2005):** Grand Jury Prize – documentary (winner)

### OTHER NOTABLE DOCUMENTARY FILMS BY THE DIRECTOR

*Reagan* (2011), *The House I Live In* (2012), *The King* (2017)

### REASONS TO SEE *Why We Fight*

- It considers the reasons behind the actions of the US Army. American people might think that they fight to defend their country, but the documentary offers another view on how there might be other political interests behind American wars.
- It shows an overview of the consequences of war and the atrocities committed by the US Army, including generating the radical terrorism which caused the 2001 attacks.
- It makes you wonder the reasons why wars are waged and whether they are worth it. It is a reflection on the consequence of wars, being the worst how innocent people die. Are wars necessary at all or can they be abandoned as obsolete?

## CONNECTED WITH...

- *Why We Fight* (1942-1945), directed by Frank Capra and Anatole Litvak. This is a series of seven films that were made in order to justify the American participation in the Second World War and the alliance with the Soviets, the UK and France. The episodes are: *Prelude to War* (1942), which explores the difference between democracy and fascism; *The Nazis Strike* (1943), an analysis of the Nazis actions in Poland, Austria and Czechoslovakia; *Divide and Conquer* (1943) on the Fall of France and of the campaign in Benelux; *The Battle of Britain* (1943) about Britain's victory against the Luftwaffe and its implications; *The Battle of Russia* (1943) about the history of Russia and how the Russians defended themselves from Germany; *The Battle of China* (1944) about the damage the Japanese caused and a part of the history of China and *War Comes to America* (1945), about the union of the Axis and the response by the allies.
- **City of Ghosts** by Matthew Heineman (2017): It follows a group of military air forces of the United States in the city of Raqqa, Syria. Again, we face the actions of the American army in a foreign land and its consequences.
- **War Crimes of the Liberators** by Annette Harlfinger & Michael Renz (2015): It provides an overview of war crimes that took place during World War II and it offers a reflection of global freedom. Again, the point of the atrocities of war and if it really is a solution of it is actually the real problem is shown.

## RE/PRESENTING AMERICA IN *Why We Fight*

Eugene Jarecki's documentary film offers an overview of the conflicts in which the American Army has been involved since the end of the World War II and what those conflicts were about. It also focuses on how the industrial-military complex, in President Eisenhower's coinage, works and how huge and important it is for the country, making the United States invest in it more than in anything else and be, in fact, a war economy. The whole point of the documentary film is to answer the question of the title: why we fight (this alludes to Capra and Litvak's famous WWII series, but with an ironic twist as that was a necessary war and the newer ones are not at all). In order to do this, we see the interviews of a variety of politicians, experts on the Army, young men who want to become soldiers or a man who lost his son in the tragedy of the World Trade Center.

In the past, Americans used to think that their Government's reasons to fight were honorable, either to defend themselves, for freedom or to help those countries that had no democracy. However, after the attacks of 2001 and the subsequent Iraq invasion of 2003, US citizens started to wonder about the real reasons for fighting. The citizens finally discovered that there were other reasons motivating the war. In fact, what happened was that the American Government under President Bush thought that it could obtain both economic and political benefits from war. Although there are shocking and graphical images throughout the documentary film, it is important to watch them in order to understand that those who were killed by the US Army were real people. Moreover, it is also important to understand how the whole military-

industrial complex works and how people are not really concerned about it because the American wars are to them remote affairs happening elsewhere.

There are two really shocking moments in the documentary film. One of them shows how the US Army killed hundreds of Iraqi civilians in their own homes, people who were not directly involved in the conflict. The point Jarecki makes is that although the US military spoke of precision bombing, the bombs were actually hardly ever precise and destroyed many lives rather than the targeted military facilities. Jarecki wants his American audience to know what the Army did following their Government orders, hoping that once they know about it, they will not be manipulated anymore and will be able to alter the situation. On the other hand, Rob Mackie writes, “Jarecki comes up with a trump card in an NYPD man who lost his son in 9/11 and was desperate to find some way of getting revenge against the perpetrators. What transpired was a bomb with his son’s name on it ‘in loving memory’ dropped on Iraq”. This “Dr Strangelove image” is “counterbalanced by the straight-talking New Yorker expressing his anger that the claimed Iraq/al Qaida links were non-existent” (2008). When this grieving father discovers the real objective of the Army, and how the bomb probably killed civilians, he regrets his decision; the pain expressed by his face shows he has not honored his dead son at all. His story could be considered symbolic of the disappointment and anger many more Americans felt.

Manohla Dargis observes, as noted, that Jarecki borrowed the title *Why We Fight* from the series of films made by Frank Capra for the military during World War II, “and it’s after that war that the story of the military-industrial complex begins. It’s a story Mr. Jarecki tells with appreciable energy, using images culled from newsreels, educational and military films, and original material. Bombs explode, wars are fought, and talking heads fill the screen. The editor of *The Weekly Standard*, William Kristol, waves the flag for the right, while Gore Vidal shakes his pompoms for the left, invoking American amnesia” (2006). Capra’s series could not afford to have right and left flags waving, as it was imperative to defeat Hitler and his Axis allies, and it is with no doubt pro-war propaganda. Jarecki considers both sides because his own film is not propaganda but a deconstruction of post-WWII military propaganda. The Cold War resulted in many other wars because a straight war with the Soviet Union could not be fought, given the risk of nuclear wipe out. The smaller wars, big as they are for the victims, have the mission to keep the industrial-military complex in business. Jarecki’s goal is making American people wonder about this situation and be concerned with the real reasons to wage wars in which US safety is not really at stake. Roger Ebert states that “*Why We Fight* compiles archival footage and intercuts it with recent interviews, many conducted for the film, but the movie tells us nothing we haven’t heard before” (2006). That is in part correct but, the point is that many people are still defending the acts of Bush’s Government even decades later, so it is important to tell new audiences as much as possible about the atrocities that took place to obtain economic benefits.

War is never (or almost never) justified. Often, armies are not that different from terrorists who only serve the benefit of a small group of powerful people while pretending to be serving the nation. After watching this documentary film, especially the last part of it, when the hidden reasons for ‘why we fight’ are revealed I confirm this thesis and pray for the American people to wake up and see what was going on during Bush’s and Obama’s presidency, but also now under Trump. The USA does not

see itself as a militaristic country in the style of the old European imperialist nations or of pre-WWII Japan but it is dominated by the industrial-military complex in the 21st century as much as it was in the 1950s. Many Americans, though, see the Army as one of the most important aspects of their nation (and, subsequently, of their lives), so we will have to wait some more next generations for the awakening into a more peaceful time.

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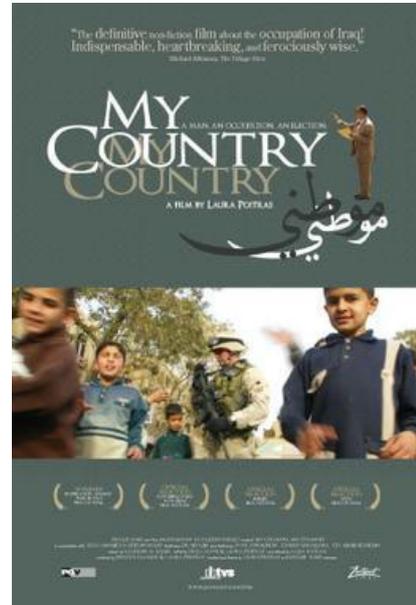
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Kiko Bermúdez Pérez

## ***My Country, My Country* (2006): Striving for Real Democracy in Iraq**

### **CREDITS**

**Directed by** Laura Poitras  
**Written by** Laura Poitras  
**Produced by** Laura Poitras, Jocelyn Glatzer  
**Music by** Kadhum Al Sahir  
**Cinematography by** Laura Poitras, Jocelyn Glatzer  
**Film editing by** Laura Poitras, Erez Laufer  
**Production companies** Praxis Films  
**Distributors** Zeitgeist Films (theatrical)  
**Runtime** 1h 30'



### **MAIN AWARDS**

**Academy Awards (Oscars) (2007):** Best Documentary Feature (nominee)  
**Full Frame Documentary Film Festival (2006):** Inspiration Award (winner)  
**Film Independent Spirit Awards (2007):** Best Documentary (nominee)  
**News & Documentary Emmy Awards (2007):** Emmy Outstanding Continuing Coverage of a News Story – Long Form (nominee)

### **OTHER NOTABLE DOCUMENTARY FILMS BY THE DIRECTOR**

*Flag Wars* (2003, with Linda Goode Bryant), *The Oath* (2010), *Death of a Prisoner* (2013, short film), *Citizenfour* (2014), *Risk* (2016)

### **REASONS TO SEE *My Country, My Country***

- This film shows the consequences of US military occupation in Iraq. Everything that is shown questions the American discourse about why the Iraq War was necessary.
- It helps audiences understand what the elections of 30th January 2005, the first after the invasion, meant for ordinary Iraqi people and includes a wide range of points of view.
- The documentary does not dig deep into the gruesome horrors of war so much as it illustrates the national trauma that this post-war period meant for Iraqi people and History.

## CONNECTED WITH...

- *Iraq in Fragments* (2006), directed by James Longley. It presents the story of three different people and their point of view regarding the American occupation of Iraq. Each of them is representative of the three main groups involved in the conflict: Sunnis, Shia and Kurds. Their stories, however, go beyond the political situation. Their expectations, set on a brighter future where conflict has ended, are a clear sign that theirs is a reality no one would want to experience.
- *The War Tapes* (2006), directed by Deborah Scranton. This singular film offers the footage recorded by US soldiers themselves who were deployed to Iraq in 2004. Having decided to join the National Guard for different reasons each, the documentary explores their perception and thoughts on the American invasion as well as the bond that emerges between men who come from different backgrounds but who share a common goal: contributing to the invasion of a country. The documentary also features stateside interviews with the soldiers and their families.
- *Occupation: Dreamland* (2005), directed by Ian Olds and Garrett Scott. The film offers the images shot by a camera crew embedded with a platoon of American soldiers during their missions in Fallujah before the final series of assaults that led to the destruction of the city in the Spring of 2004. It includes footage of everything they did as part of their job as well as excerpts from their private conversations, in which they share their thoughts and feelings about the conflict.

## RE/PRESENTING AMERICA IN *My Country, My Country*

*My Country, My Country* shows what happened in Iraq during the days before the election of 30th January 2005, almost two years after the beginning of the Iraq War (March 2003), offering the point of view of all parties involved in the process. In a time and space where conflict is part of daily life, discussions about politics and the use of war take place in homes, cars and even at the doctor's surgery. The wide range of points of view presented is a key aspect of the documentary. From Kurdish militia members who are thankful to the US for having freed them from Saddam Hussein's regime, to Islamic militants who are convinced that the elections are part of the American plot to exploit the country's oil, all these accounts help the viewer get a general picture of the conflict caused by the American occupation.

Despite the wide variety of views featured in the documentary, there seems to be an important focus around Dr Riyadh's life and family. He is arguably the protagonist of the film and, through scenes of his daily life, we discover that he is a candidate for the Sunnite minority Islamic Party in the elections to the Baghdad City Council. He is depicted as a generous man with a critical outlook in life and in politics. He is particularly opposed to the American military occupation and we usually see him talking to soldiers, hopelessly questioning the morality of their actions. Dr Riyadh is very outspoken and proves to be a firm believer in democratic possibilities. Even when his party decides to withdraw its candidature for the elections and to boycott them, he still goes around his neighborhood asking people to vote for his list or convincing them

that participating in these elections is what is best for the country. He also makes his household members vote for his party, even though he is forced at that point to stay at home because of the dangerous situation.

The context in which these elections were held did not make it easy for people to participate. American soldiers were armed in the streets and used intimidation to make sure that no Iraqi would rebel against them. Whilst telling the world that they just want to protect civilians, they also conduct offensives against strategical sites and cities such as Fallujah, which is home to many Sunni authorities. This general climate of violence makes different sectors of the Iraqi population start wondering whether there is any guarantee that the US Government will gladly accept their results. Since the situation might condition some voters' choice, these groups eventually decide not to vote in the election on the grounds that this wouldn't be a fully democratic one. In fact, American armed offensives seem to make the task of the UN and its Electoral Assistance Commission even more difficult. Poitras deliberately shows footage of an American military meeting or media reports of their attacks in contrast to the actions of the UN in order to emphasize that Americans made their own decisions and that their actions were only motivated by their own interests rather than those of Iraq.

Although their actions apparently contradicted this, the American forces were really concerned about the legitimacy of the elections. They made every possible effort to ensure that 'Joe Iraqi' (a more than questionable term that an American soldier uses to refer to the average Iraqi citizen) believed in the result of the elections. They are shown using a discourse which presents the elections as a purely Iraqi achievement, even though they actually forced the country to accept them through occupation and bombings. One of the soldiers training Iraqi civilians to act as the security forces during the day of the elections keeps insisting that the world will be looking at them and that this is *their* show. However, he is put in a very uncomfortable position when one of the attendees asks whether this is, after all, just a *show*. The US military also decided not to let uniformed soldiers patrol the streets on the day of the election in order to give it the appearance of being a genuinely Iraqi process.

A feeling of imminent danger and insecurity pervades every aspect of the election. People are frisked before entering the polling stations and helicopters fly over the city of Baghdad looking for any possible threat. Yet Dr Riyadh's family members and close friends seem to be the ones most afraid. They know that candidates and their family members or friends have been attacked or held captive. Because of the ballot marking system they use in Iraq, their fingers are visibly stained with the ink they used for voting. They mention that they felt the need to hide their fingers so as not to let anyone know that they voted. The film also shows how the son of one of Dr Riyadh's friends is kidnapped some days before voting by criminals connected with the insurgency. The importance of these elections is perfectly expressed by a journalist, appearing in Dr Riyadh's TV, who says that if these elections fail, the country will be led into chaos. If they succeed, though, the US will be tempted to repeat the experiment of so-called democratization elsewhere. Thus, the documentary shows that, whatever the outcome, Iraq has already lost.

Jeanette Catsoulis comments that Laura Poitras's *My Country, My Country* "may appear to be strictly observational, but its images and structure inevitably question the legitimacy of democracy at gunpoint, leaving us with the feeling that this particular mission is far from accomplished" (2006). Indeed, the camera becomes the eyes of the

spectator and the lack of narrative voiceover leaves the viewer with the mission of making sense on their own out of the footage presented. Despite this apparent lack of bias and fly-on-the-wall style, the film manages to convey a powerful message. In fact, I would argue that the fact that the images speak for themselves and that it is up to us to reach our own conclusions without a narrator makes the message more convincing and heart-felt.

Steve Davis finds that another key element that enables the audience to empathize with the conflict is its focalization on Dr Riyadh. He writes that “watching Dr Riyadh become more disillusioned about the future of his nation is painful; the weight of the world appears to grow heavier on his shoulders as the film progresses” (2006). It is true that it is very sad to witness Dr Riyadh’s frustration when, at the end of the film, he has achieved none of his objectives. We see him denouncing everything he finds unfair and the problems of his country become his own, so it is not difficult to sympathize with him and see him as a hero. In the end, however, our expectations on his potential heroism are not fulfilled, which makes the film a very disheartening one. Regina Lawrence coincides that the focus on Dr Riyadh plays an essential role in conveying the message of the documentary and highlights that “[his] obvious faith in the possibilities of real democracy in Iraq make his trenchant criticisms of the US policies and presence in Iraq more jarring than they might otherwise be to both supporters and critics of the war” (2007: 349-50). Dr Riyadh is admirable because he fights American occupation within the rules of democracy. In contrast, the USA is evidently breaking these rules from the start of the film. This shows that, in contrast to their own account of the story, American soldiers are not the heroes or liberators of the country, but rather the cause of its misfortune.

Poitras’s film offers a very disheartening view of the conflict. The viewer witnesses how the American occupation of Iraq only served US interests and contributed only to escalating the violence and anti-American feelings in the streets of Iraq. President Bush’s Administration masqueraded reality in order to offer the world the picture that best suited their version of the story. This documentary questions these actions and intrinsically shows that Americans cannot be considered the heroes of the story. Besides, it clearly shows that people, heroic or ordinary, are powerless against politics that use violence; this is why we see our expectations about Dr Riyadh’s heroism frustrated. *My Country, My Country* makes the audience conclude that the occupation period was, in short, a tragedy for all Iraqi peoples (including those who sympathized with it), since they were all forced to face the horrors and the consequences of war. It seemed to many that life under tyrant Saddam Hussein was better. However, for the USA, the botched invasion constituted the first triumph of interventionism and aggressive foreign affairs policies in the 21st century.

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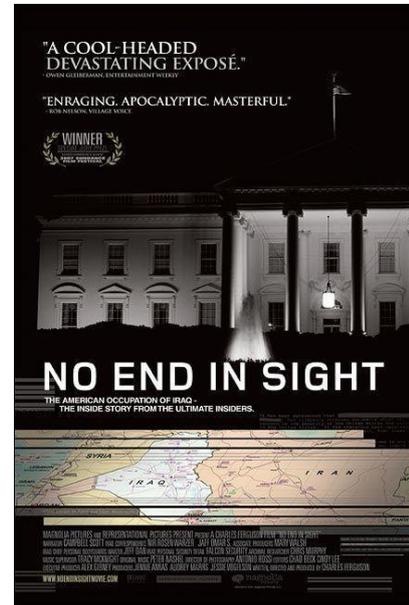
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Àitor Garrido Jiménez

## ***No End in Sight* (2007): Iraq's Descent into Chaos**

### **CREDITS**

**Directed by** Charles Ferguson  
**Writing credits:** Charles Ferguson  
**Produced by** Jennie Amias, Charles Ferguson, Jannat Gargi, Audrey Marrs, Jessie Volgeson  
**Music by** Peter Nashel  
**Cinematography by** Antonio Rossi  
**Film editing by** Chad Beck, Cindy Lee  
**Production companies:** Red Envelope Entertainment, Representational Pictures  
**Distributors:** Magnolia Pictures (theatrical)  
**Runtime:** 1h 42'



### **MAIN AWARDS**

**Academy Awards, USA (2008):** Best Documentary, Features (nominee)  
**National Society of Film Critics Awards, USA (2008):** Best Non-Fiction Film (winner)  
**Sundance Film Festival (2007):** Documentary – Special Jury Prize (winner),  
Documentary – Grand Jury Prize (nominee)  
**Toronto Film Critics Association Awards (2007):** Best Documentary (winner)

### **OTHER NOTABLE DOCUMENTARY FILMS BY THE DIRECTOR**

*Inside Job* (2010, Oscar winner), *Watergate* (2018, TV documentary mini-series), *Time to Choose* (2015)

### **REASONS TO SEE *No End in Sight***

- This documentary unveils the reality of the post-invasion of Iraq and clarifies why and how this conflict was so devastating.
- It gives a sense of Iraq's current situation: 50% unemployment; psychological trauma; over 2 million young widowers; 75% unschooled children (many in prostitution and slavery); poor electricity, drinking water and sewers, which leads to diseases and accumulated garbage.
- It shows how malpractice and greedy interests in the USA can lead to detrimental and long-term consequences for foreign nations like Iraq.

## CONNECTED WITH...

- *Voices of Iraq* (2004), directed by “People of Iraq” (Martin Kunert, uncredited). The documentary is the result of an innovative filmmaking, a compilation of the footage from one hundred fifty digital video cameras that were distributed to ordinary Iraqis from April to September 2004, in an attempt to record their feelings about their life after the American bombing of Fallujah and the fall of the dictatorial regime of Saddam Hussein. Through the cameras’ circulation, individual and regional differences emerge and there are many contrasted views exposed. Overall, the documentary film seeks to move away from the filtered Western perspective and capture Iraqis’ most genuine and emotional intimacy.
- *Iraq for Sale: The War Profiteers* (2006), directed by Robert Greenwald. The documentary deals with the corrupt actions of four main US corporate contractors who profited from Iraq’s war while being there as part of the US war effort. Contractors working there under the justification of ‘reconstructing Iraq’, cared more for profit than for the welfare of their workers, and that the profits generated were always much higher than the quality of services provided. In a nutshell, war profiteering and negligence are exposed.
- *Standard Operating Procedure* (2008), directed by Errol Morris. The documentary examines the consequences of the Iraqi war with a focus on the events at Abu Ghraib prison in late 2003. By exploring the content of the photographs taken by the US military forces, they revealed the US soldiers’ torture and abuse of its prisoners, which led to a public scandal featured in global media in 2004.

### **RE/PRESENTING AMERICA IN *No End in Sight***

*No End in Sight* focuses on the 2003-2004 post-invasion occupation of Iraq by the United States, particularly in a period in the Spring and Summer of 2003, in which the flaws and incompetence of the Bush administration in the crucial post-war decision-making led to chaos and the wholesale destruction in Iraq. The operation was justified by the President of the US, George W. Bush, who claimed that Iraq represented an urgent and immediate threat to the USA and its interests, and so their mission was to “defend the world from great danger”. This was motivated by the unfounded suspicion that Saddam Hussein’s regime was behind the 9/11 attacks and by the plain lie that he had weapons of mass destruction. So, in the view of the Bush administration, the US military were not occupying Iraq but “freeing” the nation.

They initially planned to disarm and invade Iraq, overthrow Saddam Hussein, and then use the oil resources to reconstruct the country, send humanitarian help, and create a new democratic Government with ONU’s help. To carry out these plans, the ORHA (Office for Reconstruction and Humanitarian Assistance) was created, led by Jay Garner; later on, it was replaced by the CPA (Coalition Provisional Authority), led by Paul Bremer. However, once the March 2003 bombings were over, the truth was quickly revealed. After Iraq’s invasion, the reality was completely different from what President Bush had announced. The lack of any occupation plans, the appointment of an inadequate team to run the country, the insufficient troops to maintain the social

order and Bremer's controversial decisions caused major problems. Adding more fuel to the fire Bremer decided to have no provisional Iraqi Government, to implement a process of de-Ba'athification which affected many civil servants needed for reconstruction, and to disband the Iraqi armed services. As a result, massive, uncontrolled looting and violent chaos erupted, which resulted in the organized destruction of Baghdad by a mixture of criminal and resistance forces.

The documentary provides some war footage and thirty-five interviews with different people who in some way or another, were involved in this occupation and post-war reconstruction: high-ranking officials, former soldiers in Iraq, authors, academics, and journalists. Indeed, Charles Ferguson eventually published a book, with the same title, based on the 200 hours of footage he had accumulated. Many of the Iraqi interviewees were disappointed and critical of the way the Bush administration handled the so-called liberation. According to them, one of the many flaws was the military and post-war inexperience of the Bush Administration members since only a few of them spoke Arabic, and there were no interpreters; the void in the power structures and the lack of forward-looking planning was clear though by no means inevitable. The Bush Administration refused to seek or accept help or advice from more experienced people who disapproved and disagreed with the war and post-war planning, including those in the American diplomatic corps.

To top it all off, there were at least twenty essential Government buildings and cultural sites in Baghdad that were supposed to be protected, but "surprisingly", only the oil Ministry was guarded. Among those neglected sites, there were the national Iraqi museums which contained priceless artefacts from some of the earliest human civilizations and which were looted. This is a clear sign, along with the fact that only \$1 billion was spent from the \$18 billion that was given for the reconstruction, of the rampant fraud, corruption, and waste. The American forces did not intend to maintain law and order, instead, they ruined the country that Iraq was before the US invasion, making the nation worse off than during Hussein's regime. The consequences were devastating and long-lasting. Up to today, the overall cost of the Iraq War amount to \$1860 trillion leaving aside the damage done to Iraqis: mental breakdowns, suffering, losses, and the rise of the insurgency and terrorism.

Anthony Oliver Scott described the documentary as "exacting, enraging" (2007). He claims that Charles Ferguson "presents familiar material with impressive concision and impact, offering a clear, temperate and devastating account of high-level arrogance and incompetence." And also, "most of the movie deals with a period of a few months in the spring and summer of 2003, when a series of decisions were made that did much to determine the terrible course of subsequent events", in which "the knowledge and expertise of military, diplomatic and technical professionals were overridden by the ideological certainty of political loyalists". Ferguson tries to give a sincere, and contrasted view of what happened after Iraq's invasion and how imperialist interests and political ideologies, but also personal egocentrism and arrogance, prevailed over the need for reconstruction and salvation of a country devastated by the Bush Administration. Ill-advised decisions made in haste and in a short period can lead to irreversible future events, lasting for decades and this is what happened in Iraq.

Rob Nelson describes the documentary film as "Masterfully edited and cumulatively walloping, Charles Ferguson's *No End in Sight* turns the well-known

details of *our monstrously bungled Iraq war* into an enraging, apocalyptic litany of fuck-ups” (2007, my italics). Unexpectedly, the adjective “enraging” is here also used and the truth is that while watching the documentary, the spectator feels deeply at the fate of those helpless Iraqi people; it is almost impossible not to get caught by rage when watching the Bush Administration do nothing but protect their interests and act in the exact opposite way of what was intended in the first place, which was to restore, reconstruct and free the country. Undoubtedly, the war and the post-war period was full of poor decisions that catapulted the country into a disaster.

Richard Corliss writes in his review that the documentary “stands out for its comprehensive take on how we got there, why we can’t get out”; he claims that everyone should see it, calling it, somewhat unfeelingly, “the perfect stocking-stuffer for holiday enlightenment” (2007). As mentioned before, the documentary specifically focuses on the moment after the invasion and offers real insights into what happened, how, and why. It is revealing, entertaining, and a must-watch for everyone seeking to know the truth, the motives, and overall, a deeper understanding of the situation. Particularly, how despite knowing these ugly truths, nothing was really done to help Iraq and their poor situation still lasts today.

The title of the documentary *No End in Sight* refers to the fact that indeed, there is no happy ending in sight, because the conflict that the US Government created still lasts today, seventeen years later. A great deal of this can be attributed to the failure of US intelligence because due to their maneuvers and short-sightedness, this war caused some Iraqis to hate America and to become terrorists with the necessary motivation, skills, and expertise to take them into future jihads. Overall, far from enhancing safety, Iraq’s situation jeopardized peace and increased the risk of terrorism in the West and in the USA. In other words, the CIA and military intelligence ‘naively’ promoted terrorism and the rise of insurgency, which is ironic because stopping terrorism was the reason why they wanted to invade Iraq in the first place. Right after Iraq’s invasion, President Bush announced to the world that this was “Mission accomplished”, when the war and Iraq’ bleakest time had just started.

The director, Charles Ferguson, who has a doctorate in Political Science, invites Iraqis and Americans to describe what they experienced during the immediate post-war period of which they were the protagonists. Throughout the interviews, most of them show their disagreement and astonishment with the Bush Administration’s inability and blindness, based on its deep ignorance about Iraq, especially its political-religious sectarianism; after Saddam Hussein’s fall, the Shiite Government started to dominate the country and to repress the Sunni minority. As a result of infighting, extremist Islamic terrorism grew, with Daesh/ISIS still occupying sections of Iraq today. The results of the war and invasion affect Iraqis most negatively but also the USA; this major fiasco in the US foreign affairs has brought on a loss of image, prestige, and international influence. Ferguson, together with other American filmmakers, at least has the courage to show to the world how deeply the Government of his nation blundered.

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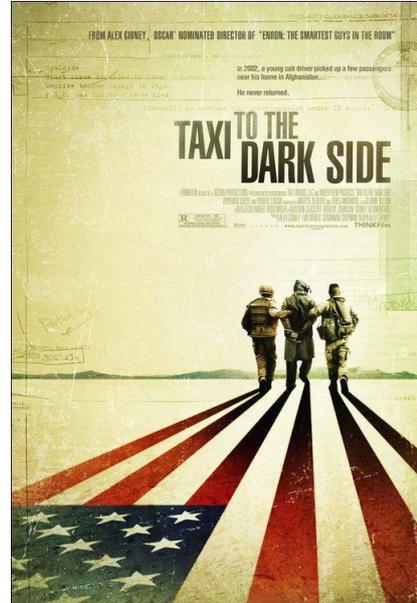
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Júlia Galceran Esteve

## Taxi to the Dark Side (2007): Torture Is Torture

### CREDITS

**Directed by** Alex Gibney  
**Written by** Alex Gibney  
**Produced by** Alex Gibney, Eva Orner, Susannah Shipman, Marty Fisher, Blair Foster  
**Music by** Ivor Guest, Robert Logan  
**Cinematography by** Maryse Alberti, Greg Andracke  
**Film editing by** Sloane Klevin  
**Production companies** Discovery Channel, Jigsaw Productions, Tall Woods, Wider Film Projects, X-Ray Productions  
**Distributors** THINKFilm (theatrical)  
**Runtime** 1h 46'



### MAIN AWARDS

**Academy Awards (Oscars) (2008):** Best Documentary Feature (winner)  
**National Board of Review (2007):** Top Five Documentaries (winner)  
**News & Documentary Emmy Awards (2009):** Outstanding Individual Achievement in a Craft: Research (winner), Best Documentary (winner), Outstanding Investigative Journalism – Long Form (nominee)  
**Tribeca Film Festival (2007):** Jury Award (winner)

### OTHER NOTABLE DOCUMENTARY FILMS BY THE DIRECTOR

*Enron: The Smartest Guys in the Room* (2005), *Gonzo: The Life and Work of Dr. Hunter S. Thompson* (2008), *Mea Maxima Culpa: Silence in the House of God* (2012), *Going Clear: Scientology and the Prison of Belief* (2015), *The Inventor: Out for Blood in Silicon Valley* (2019)

### REASONS TO SEE Taxi to the Dark Side

- Its focus is on the crimes of the US military regarding their interrogation techniques, which include straightforward torture.
- It takes the murder of an Afghan taxi driver as a starting point to expose a system supported by the US Government, demonstrating that his murder and torture are not isolated events.
- It shows real footage of the tortures performed by the American military accompanied by interviews of the American perpetrators themselves.

## CONNECTED WITH...

- *The Guantanamo Trap* (2011), directed by Thomas Wallner. The documentary follows four different persons associated with the Guantanamo Bay detention camps in different capacities. One is Murat Kurnaz, a German-Turkish man arrested in Pakistan for bounty; military lawyer Diane Beaver, known for a memo detailing torture; Navy lawyer Matthew Diaz, sentenced to prison for leaking names of Guantanamo captives and Spanish lawyer Gonzalo Boye, working to charge those responsible for Guantanamo with war crimes.
- *Doctors of the Dark Side* (2011), directed by Martha Davis. This documentary tracks down the different torture methods used by the CIA and the US military after the 9/11 attacks. Sleep deprivation or sexual humiliation are some of those extreme techniques that this documentary exposes through footage and images of Abu Ghraib, the infamous military prison in Iraq.
- *The Report* (2019, fiction film), directed by Scott Z. Burns. This drama film, based on an article by Katherine Eban for *Vanity Fair*, explains through more than a decade the true story of US Senator Daniel J. Jones (Adam Driver) as he investigates and exposes the torture methods used by the CIA after the 9/11 attacks. Jones wrote a 6,700-page report about his investigation.

## RE/PRESENTING AMERICA IN *Taxi to the Dark Side*

*Taxi to the Dark Side* is a documentary that takes the murder of an Afghan taxi driver while in hands of the US military after being interrogated, to expose a generalized system of torture supported by the American Government. On 1 December 2002, Dilawar (the taxi driver) and three passengers were accused of organizing a terrorist attack and were held prisoners at the Bagram Air Base prison, in Afghanistan, where Dilawar died after being tortured for five days. While the documentary deals in detail with Dilawar's murder, his case is not the main topic. This is actually the interrogation systems used by American soldiers, a system that is based on humiliation, torture and murder and that has claimed many other victims like him.

Gibney's documentary narrates how Dilawar was tortured and humiliated in the Bagram detention center. He was wrongly accused of organizing a terrorist attack and after five days of tortures, he died. After his death, the second one in a short period of time at the same base, the US soldiers involved become concerned but reach the conclusion that these two deaths were isolated incidents. Soon, however, it is proven that the techniques they were told to use were the beginning of a new interrogation system based on torture consisting of sleep deprivation, sexual humiliation and beatings that ended up with more than a hundred deaths in different US bases. A *New York Times* journalist investigating the events surrounding the torture and abuse to which Iraqi prisoners had been subjected in Abu Ghraib interviewed the soldiers seen in the infamous viral photos; they claimed to be following orders. However, it is useless to excuse their behavior and their acts claiming that they were following orders when in the 21st century enlisting in the US military is no longer mandatory and everyone enlisted has done so voluntarily, knowing exactly where they

were enrolling on. Someone who enrolls voluntarily and accepts torturing people, even if following orders, does not look repentant to me.

Torture was not an habitual practice but after the 9/11 attacks everything changed when Vice President Dick Cheney announced that interrogations techniques would become more severe and straightforward. President George W. Bush and his administration supported these changes, even though they breached the Geneva Agreements for the protection of prisoners. These new interrogation techniques were applied by the CIA in Guantanamo (Cuba), an American high-level security detention center where detainees were kept for years with no formal accusation and no trial, with full knowledge of the US Government during President Bush's and President Obama's administrations. Finally, there was a trial in which colonels, lieutenants, specialists, officers, sergeants and frontline soldiers were convicted for the war crimes committed, but no one was convicted for the torture and murder of Dilawar and the Bush administration was pardoned.

*Taxi to the Dark Side* is narrated by Alex Gibney himself, the director of the documentary. He is not seen on screen, but he does explain the events surrounding Dilawar's murder and the torture methods used. The tone of the documentary is always one of denunciation, with the direct objective of exposing the war crimes committed by the American Government. Gibney seems motivated by personal family experiences connected with his father. Reviewer Jay Weissber writes for *Variety* that "Gibney allows his father, a naval interrogator during World War II, to voice the righteous outrage he hitherto withheld, wrapping the docu up with an excoriating blast of indignation and true patriotism" (2007). In the final credits, Gibney describes through his father's voice the image he has of America and of the US military, one based on honorability that is completely destroyed by the Bush administration and by the events depicted in the documentary. Gibney feels that men like his father would have never participated in these tortures, and that is the feeling of "true patriotism" that thrives in his mind. However, how can one know about the tortures that the CIA and the military infringe and still be proud of being American? The documentary correctly suggests that it is not possible to defend the concepts of "Americanism" and "patriotism" and much less be proud of them as long as they disrespect human values.

David Edelstein, a film critic for *New York Magazine* notes that "Alex Gibney's *Taxi to the Dark Side* is the documentary that many of us have prayed for, the one that could break through even to people who relish the torture set pieces on 24 and will hear no evil about the War on Terror. It leaves you brooding on the human capacity for cruelty in a way that transcends the gory details" (2008). This is completely true. Gibney shows the cruelty perpetrated in all its graphic detail and the faces of the torturers: the ones practicing the violence, the ones giving orders and the ones in the Government defending the techniques. It is not enough to expose the crimes: you have to blame the persons responsible for them. The documentary accurately accuses the US Government of allowing these tortures to happen for years as well as the officers who gave the orders to the frontline soldier. One of the officers responsible for drafting the interrogation rules in Abu Ghraib was Captain Carolyn Wood. She and her team were also involved in the practice of brutal interrogation techniques in Bagram, Afghanistan. There are even pictures of the soldiers happily and proudly posing with the victims while and after being tortured. The US Army Criminal Investigation Command investigated these behaviors and these tortures, and after the investigation

concluded, not everyone received the sentence they deserved for their actions. Some soldiers plead guilty and some others were removed from their duties. A few soldiers were charged and sentenced to some months and years of prison. Some other soldiers saw all charges against them dropped. Other soldiers and captains were absolved or relocated, like Captain Wood, who was given staff position elsewhere. President Bush and his administration apologized for the abuses without further legal persecution.

Stephen Edelstein writes in his review for *The Hollywood Reporter* that “Some of the material has of course been seen in other films (including Michael Winterbottom’s semi-documentary *The Road to Guantanamo*). But Gibney pulls it all together with impressive clarity and command. In the end, this passionate indictment of present US policies stirs both sadness and outrage” (2007). These words seem correct. However, it makes the viewer question whether showing explicit footage and photos that contain humiliation, tortures and even dead bodies is disrespectful towards the victims or if it is necessary in order to expose thoroughly the war crimes committed by the US military. The raw images do provoke both outrage and sadness but the intentions justifying their use are crystal clear: Gibney is not looking for morbidity, he wants to expose torture. The images and videos of the tortures, that also show the places where the tortures were practiced and what the victims looked like after those tortures, are cleverly distributed and they never feel overused, but there is enough of it for the viewer to question the morals behind their use. The documentary even shows a recreation of one of the tortures that Dilawar was subjected to in which it is seen how he was beaten by a soldier while being tied up.

Finally, the documentary provides introspection on American politics. It is a denunciation of the ones in charge that allow inhuman behaviors down to the last soldier. Gibney is ashamed of the atrocities shown in the documentary and does not want to be associated with this concrete view of America, since the military and the US Government do not necessarily represent all US citizens. However, they do represent a part of America that is perfectly fine with the events depicted in the documentary or that do not care enough to question them and therefore question their own values.

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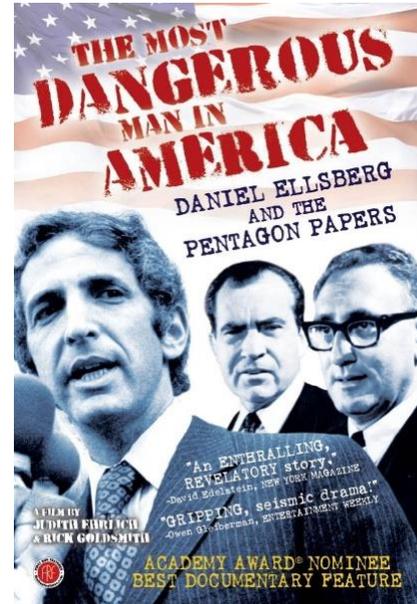
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Àlex Dalmau Barreal

## ***The Most Dangerous Man in America: Daniel Ellsberg and the Pentagon Papers (2009): An Unwinnable War***

### **CREDITS**

**Directed by** Judith Ehrlich and Rick Goldsmith  
**Written by** Lawrence Lerew, Rick Goldsmith, Judith Ehrlich, Michael Chandler  
**Produced by** Judith Ehrlich, Rick Goldsmith  
**Music by** Blake Leyh  
**Cinematography by** Vicente Franco and Dan Krauss.  
**Film editing by** Michael Chandler, Rick Goldsmith, Lawrence Lerew  
**Production companies** Kovno Communications  
**Distributors** First Run Features (theatrical)  
**Runtime** 1h 32'



### **MAIN AWARDS**

**Academy awards (Oscars) (2010):** Best Documentary Feature (nominee)  
**American Historical Association, USA (2010):** John O'Connor Film Award (winner)  
**International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam (2010):** Special Jury Award (winner)  
**Palm Springs International Film Festival (2010):** Audience Award Best Documentary (winner)

### **OTHER NOTABLE DOCUMENTARY FILMS BY THE DIRECTOR(S)**

**By Judith Ehrlich,** *The Good War and Those Who Refused to Fight It* (2000)  
**By Rick Goldsmith,** *Tell the Truth and Run: George Seldes and the American Press* (1996), *Everyday Heroes* (2001), *Mind/Game: The Unquiet Journey of Chamique Holdsclaw* (2015)

### **REASONS TO SEE *The Most Dangerous Man in America: Daniel Ellsberg and the Pentagon Papers***

- It introduces viewers who do not remember or do not know about the Vietnam War era to the causes for the conflict; for those who remember it, the film offers some new revelations.
- Ehrlich and Goldsmith show how the American Government knew that the war was unwinnable but still decided to bomb Vietnam and send American soldiers to die.

- This documentary demonstrates that not even leaked key information that should work against a President's misdeeds and the press have power to stop a crooked Government.

### CONNECTED WITH...

- *The Post* (2017, fiction film), directed by Steven Spielberg. *The Post* is a documentary style fiction film that shows the true story of how major journalists and daily US newspapers struggled to publish the Pentagon Papers. Spielberg narrates the competition between *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times* to expose the story about the manipulative involvement of the US Government in the Vietnam War, focusing on Richard Nixon. As a side note, the movie ends with the beginning of the Watergate Scandal.
- *Watergate* (2018, TV series), directed by Charles Ferguson. Watergate is a documentary which compares the President of the United States, Donald Trump, with Richard Nixon, one of the most criticized presidents of the US for his administration of the Vietnam War and political scandals such as the Watergate Scandal which, finally, cost him his presidency. This documentary is also a compendium drawing from 34000 hours of archival footage, audio tapes and declassified documents which also uses flashbacks to compare the current situation to the Watergate-era.
- *Vietnam in HD* (2011, TV series), directed by Sammy Jackson. This is a TV series that was originally aired on History Channel, which presented vintage footage from the Vietnam War with narrations from war veterans, it follows key events and the impact they had on the war and the American public. The program focuses on the firsthand experience of thirteen American soldiers during the Vietnam War. The tagline for this TV series is "It's not the war we know, it's the war they fought".

### RE/PRESENTING AMERICA IN *The Most Dangerous Man in America: Daniel Ellsberg and the Pentagon Papers*

*The Most Dangerous Man in America: Daniel Ellsberg and the Pentagon Papers* is a documentary by Ehrlich and Goldsmith that explores the events leading up to the publication of the key documents which exposed top-secret military information about the involvement of the United States Government in the Vietnam War. This documentary tells several stories, but its main focus is on the release of the Pentagon Papers, motivated by Daniel Ellsberg's change of heart. The documentary follows Ellsberg, a former United States military analyst employed by the RAND Corporation, along the path of his disillusionment with the US Government's action in the Vietnam War. The film uses Ellsberg's narration combined with images and sound recordings of President Richard Nixon and his aides, including the Watergate scandal which helped to end Nixon's political career. Ehrlich and Goldsmith show the contradiction between what the American Government said publicly about the war in Vietnam, and the reality: that the war was unwinnable from the beginning, and the Government knew it. Following that realization, Ellsberg decides to become a whistleblower and leak the information to the press, risking his freedom in order to make a difference.

The documents revealed the real history behind the Vietnam war and how US Presidents all the way back to Truman had been deceiving the US population, acting for their own interests rather than helping the South Vietnamese Government against the Communist Vietcong as the Government said they were doing. This documentary also explains Ellsberg's own personal war experience (he spent two years in Vietnam), from leading a patrol in 1966, which showed him the difficulties of fighting against guerrillas, to having contact with the Defense Secretary Robert McNamara. The documentary shows Nixon's obsession to win this war, to the point of even suggesting the use of nuclear bombs, as the USA did with World War II against Japan, although several key members of the US military convinced him that using nuclear bombs was excessive and finally he dropped the idea.

At the beginning Ellsberg decided to leak documents just to selected members of Congress, in order to show that Nixon's Government was lying about the war but when that did not work, he decided to give the documents to *The New York Times*. Ellsberg's courage stood sharp whereas those who also knew what was going on and saw how wrong it was decided to do nothing. The documentary shows Ellsberg as someone thoughtful and humble but also changed by his own actions and the decision he made to make things right. The leaks had a huge impact and led to the Supreme Court decision to permit the publication of the information, which is considered one of the most important decision made by the Court. Nixon's desire to destroy Ellsberg's life led to the establishment of his Plumbers spy unit, whose actions caused the Watergate Scandal that ended Nixon's presidential and political career. Judith Ehrlich and Rick Goldsmith are not subtle in their view about the Pentagon Papers' leak, and clearly support Ellsberg point of view in the situation. As the movie progresses, they try to expose Nixon and the US Government as the antagonists in Ellsberg's story.

Reviewer Ronnie Schneib states that "some may criticize the filmmakers' strict adherence to Ellsberg as both narrator and star, but the documentary focuses on his moral turnaround, which directly impacted history. This unique fusion of personal and social drama allows the pic to avoid the usual canned montage-of-the-times approach. The footage places Ellsberg at the centre of both polar factions regarding Vietnam: playing Pentagon war games and marching in peace protests" (2009). Schneib's points that using Ellsberg as the narrator of the story and the star makes the documentary more interesting, because we have the input of his personal experience and what led him to leak the documents. The documentary shows us the reality of his situation as a whistleblower (quite similar to Edward Snowden) and what he felt, giving the viewer something different and more personal and not only the information about what happened.

Mike Hale writes in his review that "One problem the filmmakers have, in fact, is that the narrative of Mr. Ellsberg's disillusionment and of the subsequent First Amendment battle after he leaked the papers is so familiar, and its lessons regarding Government malfeasance so accepted, that it has become an official story in its own right. Ms. Ehrlich and Mr. Goldsmith try to jack up the tension with moody Errol Morris-style shots of telephones, safes and briefcases, but they're just distracting" (2009). Although I partially agree with Hale's opinion and it is true that the narrative of this documentary is familiar, I think it still arises anger toward Nixon's Administration and praise for the people who did not accept what they did. Also, those transitional shots are not distracting as Hale's claim; most are usually followed by Nixon's

recordings showing his anger against Ellsberg and his own horrible decisions in the Vietnam War. These help to show the appalling actions that the US Government carried out and to what extent they were prepared to go in order to win the war and secure a zone of influence in Asia against the Soviet Union.

The NYC Movie Guru states that “Co-directors Judith Ehrlich and Rick Goldsmith do an expert job of combining background information about Ellsberg that lead up to that history-changing moment in 1971. The many interviews, including those of Ellsberg himself, are quite fascinating, lively and illuminating. To top it all off, you’ll find very stylish and suspenseful re-enactments of Ellsberg photocopying the Pentagon Papers with the help of his kids before giving it to *The New York Times* which published different sections of it in a series of articles.” (2009). Certainly, the suspense is well managed and the film well balanced. The amount of information before the leak of the Pentagon Papers and the amount of interviews alongside Ellsberg’s narration of the events are well combined. Spielberg’s movie *The Post*, which also re-enacts the moment Ellsberg photocopied all the documents to give them to *The New York Times*, is really not better at recreating the suspense elicited by Ellsberg’s risky acts.

This documentary show us two sides of the same coin: it exposes the US Government, showing to the viewer how far they can go to wage war, including lying to its citizens about wars known to be lost from the beginning, but at the same time, Judith Ehrlich and Rick Goldsmith show to the viewer the power of the people, putting in the spotlight a man that decided to sacrifice everything to show his fellow American citizens what the Vietnam War really was about and how the Government was manipulating everything. In the movie *The Post* Steven Spielberg shows an example of this manipulation: Nixon’s Government tried to censor both *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* when they started to release information taken from the Pentagon Papers. As a conclusion, we can say that *The Most Dangerous Man in America* show us the best and the worst of America, the ambition and selfishness to achieve what the politicians want to do, whatever it takes, and on the other side, the fighting spirit of its citizens, willing to sacrifice part of their lives to do what is right. The film’s ending is, in any case, bitter because the revelations did nothing against Nixon, who even won the next elections. At least, Ellsberg’s actions were the first act were a prelude to another event that showed again the best and the worst of America: the Watergate Scandal.

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Laura Hidalgo Gutiérrez

## Restrepo (2010): War in the Deathliest Place

### CREDITS

**Directed by** Tim Hetherington and Sebastian Junger

**Produced by** John Battsek, Tim Hetherington, Sebastian Junger, Nick Quested

**Music by** Ruy García

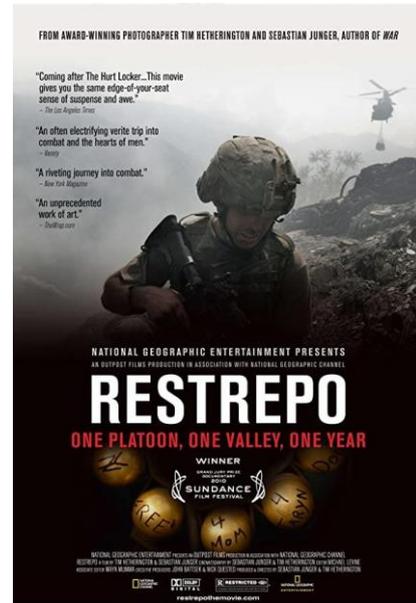
**Cinematography by** Tim Hetherington and Sebastian Junger

**Film editing by** Michael Levine

**Production companies** Outpost Films, Virgil Films & Entertainment, Passion Pictures

**Distributors** National Geographic Entertainment (USA theatrical), National Geographic Channel (worldwide, TV)

**Runtime** 1h 33'



### MAIN AWARDS

**Academy Awards (Oscars) (2011):** Best Documentary Feature (nominee)

**Sundance Film Festival (2010):** Grand Jury Prize (winner)

**Satellite Awards (2010):** Best Motion Picture (winner)

**Television Critics Association Awards (2011)** Outstanding Achievement in News and Information (winner)

### OTHER NOTABLE DOCUMENTARY FILMS BY THE DIRECTORS

**By Sebastian Junger** *Which Way Is the Front Line from Here? The Life and Time of Tim Hetherington* (2013), *The Last Patrol* (2014), *Hell on Earth: The Fall of Syria and the Rise of ISIS* (2017)

**By Tim Hetherington** *Diary* (2010)

### REASONS TO SEE *Restrepo*

- *Restrepo* offers a first-person perspective of a platoon fighting in the valley of Korengal, in Afghanistan, one of the most dangerous areas in the world, thus providing a more realistic point of view.
- Junger and Hetherington use a fly-on-the-wall style, with no narrator and, supposedly, no bias to manipulate events and viewers.
- Apart from providing real footage, the documentary also offers the opinion that the soldiers have on war. Nevertheless, the conclusions are up to the spectator.

## CONNECTED WITH...

- *Korengal* (2014), directed by Sebastian Junger. This film is a direct sequel to *Restrepo*. Directed only by Sebastian Junger (due to Tim Hetherington's death in 2011 while covering the Libyan Civil War as a photojournalist). The documentary is made out of the amount of hours of footage they had left after making *Restrepo*. However, the aim of this film is to offer the spectator a different view of the war. If *Restrepo* was more about the battle, *Korengal* focuses on the individual experiences of the soldiers.
- *Armadillo* (2010), directed by Janus Metz. This Danish documentary film, winner of the Critics Week Grand Prize at the Cannes Film Festival in 2010, is named after an operating base in Helmand, Afghanistan. *Armadillo* is similar to *Restrepo* in that the director, Janus Metz, accompanies a platoon to Afghanistan in order to portray the daily life of these Danish soldiers and provide an inside view of war as realistic as possible.
- *Taking Fire* (2016, TV series), directed by Jim Nally and Stuart Strickson. *Taking Fire* is a Discovery Channel documentary series that consist of six episodes, five of them directed by Jim Nally. The footage was recorded, once more, in the Korengal Valley. However, it was the soldiers themselves who recorded the footage by means of mini cameras placed on their helmets. As "gabriellekatz", an IMDB user, puts it, this way of recording the footage makes the documentary more realistic since "It's not close to the action, it's IN THE ACTION".

## RE/PRESENTING AMERICA IN *Restrepo*

*Restrepo* is a 2010 documentary film about a group of young US soldiers that go to war in what has been multiple times called the most dangerous war zone on Earth. American journalist Sebastian Junger and British photojournalist Tim Hetherington, directors of the film, follow the second platoon B Company, 2nd Battalion, 503rd Infantry Regiment, 173rd Airborne Brigade Combat Team of the US Army to the Korengal Valley in Afghanistan to film their daily life on the battlefield during their fifteen month stay. Both the film and the outpost that they had to defend are named after one of the most beloved members of the platoon, Colombian-born medic PFC Juan Sebastián Restrepo, who unfortunately lost his life shortly after their arrival. The documentary combines real footage in Korengal with interviews of the members of the platoon that returned home.

The film opens with Restrepo himself recording the rest of the platoon during a train trip taken one week before deployment. The group of young men seems more than happy about going to war. As a matter of fact, they do not show any sign of fear and they even make jokes about their oncoming tour of duty. In one of the interviews, one of the recruits asserts that whenever he was asked about where they were going those who asked would feel sorry for him. However, he decided not to think about his feelings instead. Their main aim in Korengal is to protect the valley against Taliban insurgent forces and win the locals' trust. The interviews, which are mixed with real

footage filmed by Junger and Hetherington, offers extra information that the real footage sometimes cannot offer since it is presented with no narrator. In the interviews the platoon members acknowledge that the jokes cracked on the train turned into fear once they actually were on the battlefield. However, they finish their testimony smiling if not laughing to show their fears were overcome, though they did have cause for them. Shortly after they arrive, Restrepo is shot two times in the neck and although he seemed stable he eventually bled out in the helicopter and died.

As mentioned before, one of platoon's goals is to win the locals' trust; this is achieved by holding weekly meetings with the elders of the village. During the meetings the sergeant in charge promises to flood the place with money, healthcare and everything they may need if they support the United States military. The elders, however, are hard to convince since the preceding soldiers were not as committed as the new platoon now seem to be. In fact, the elders are right to mistrust the American soldiers since they not only kill the Taliban enemies but sometimes also locals, apparently by accident. The documentary finishes when the remaining soldiers returning home after being replaced by yet another platoon.

Even though Junger and Hetherington tried to give an unbiased portrait of war, the documentary indirectly provides a high sense of patriotism and a pro-war feeling. Not only are the soldiers more than happy to be there but they would even return to fight for their country if a second tour of duty were necessary; they do not seem to mind dying for their comrades and, ultimately, for their country. Private Pemble states that he comes from a hippie family and that even though he never played with a toy gun as a kid there he was, at war, and content enough. This testimony, which seems very innocent, is somehow a subliminal way of supporting the use of guns and promoting war as senseless as that in Afghanistan.

A.O. Scott wonders "What are these guys doing there? It's hard to watch this movie without asking that basic, hard question" (2010 online). Scott aptly raises the right question. Someone who is in the dark about the war in Afghanistan might feel the need to look for context. The film provides an answer. As Scott notes, "the captain sets out to expand the American footprint and improve relations with the local residents" (2010 online). However, this answer might not be sufficient for everybody. Instead, another question could be raised: Why would the US want to expand their footprint and improve the relations with the local residents? Unfortunately, this discussion is never addressed.

Mick LaSalle notes in his review that "What keeps the film from being a complete success is that it is rather like how people describe war: intervals of boredom punctuated by moments of action-packed terror—except that, in a documentary, the terror is not terrifying, not for the audience. We hear shots, and the camera starts swerving and shaking and ducking underneath things" (2010 online). Indeed, LaSalle's words describe very well what a spectator might feel when watching this film. Even though Junger and Hetherington risked their lives to produce a realistic documentary, it, unluckily, does not accomplish the task of capturing and transmitting the fear and terror the platoon suffered. Roger Ebert writes in his review that "the film is nonpolitical" (2010 online) but, in my opinion, this is not true. Hetherington and Junger's intention might not be that of choosing sides but to deliver a documentary that provides an overview of what war looks like. However, wars are always the consequence of politics. In addition to that, Mr. Ebert cannot be taken seriously when

he refers back to the elders with whom the soldiers hold weekly meetings as “a group of men who could not look more aged, toothless and decrepit if they tried” (2010). This comment shows that not only the soldiers but also those back in America need to feel more empathy for these victims of war and US politics.

*Restrepo* is a documentary that raises various questions but that are not addressed in the film. Firstly, why would Junger and Hetherington risk their lives to produce a film of this kind? And secondly, why would Restrepo, a Colombian born young man, be willing to die for America? All in all, *Restrepo* is a highly patriotic documentary that fails at trying to capture a fifteen-month deployment in a ninety-minute film. What is more, the US soldiers that appear in the film seem to have a childish, incompetent, and quite ignorant behavior. Nevertheless, what the documentary does well is to praise the United States armed forces and so, in a way, make war appealing to those watching the documentary. Whether the documentary is purely propagandistic or not is for the spectator to decide.

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Jordi Camí González

## ***Last Days in Vietnam (2014): Broken Promises***

### **CREDITS**

**Directed by** Rory Kennedy  
**Written by** Mark Bailey, Keven McAlester  
**Produced by** Rory Kennedy, Keven McAlester  
**Music by** Gary Lionelli  
**Cinematography by** Joan Churchill  
**Film editing by** Don Kleszy  
**Production companies** Moxie Firecracker Films  
**Distributors** American Experience Films (theatrical),  
PBS Distribution (TV)  
**Runtime** 1h 38'



### **MAIN AWARDS**

**Academy Awards (Oscars) (2015):** Best Documentary Feature (nominee)  
**International Documentary Association (2014):** Best Editing (winner)  
**Online Film & Television Association (2015):** Best Writing of a Non-Fiction Program (winner), Best Documentary Picture (nominee)  
**Writers Guild of America, USA (2015):** Best Documentary Screenplay (nominee)

### **OTHER NOTABLE DOCUMENTARY FILMS BY THE DIRECTOR**

*American Hollow* (1999), *Pandemic: Facing AIDS* (2003, mini-series), *Ethel* (2012), *Without a Net: The Digital Divide in America* (2017), *Above and Beyond: NASA's Journey to Tomorrow* (2018)

### **REASONS TO SEE *Last Days in Vietnam***

- The opportunity to watch how the American Government's hesitation to organize the withdrawal of troops and personnel during the fall of Saigon caused victims.
- How the American people in Vietnam experienced the erratic decisions taken by their Government and the actions they themselves decided to take at the end of the war.
- A view of not only the American Government's failure to win the war but also of the South Vietnamese people's.

## CONNECTED WITH...

- *Dear America: Letters Home from Vietnam* (1978) directed by Bill Couturié. This documentary won the Special Jury Prize at the Sundance Film Festival in 1988. Couturié's documentary narrates how the American soldiers lived the Vietnam War through their own letters home, which can be read in the book subsequently edited by Bernerd Edelman, along with more of them. The documentary portrays a personal experience of the war.
- *The Vietnam War* (2007), directed by Ken Burns and Lynn Novick. This ten-part American television documentary about the Vietnam War, written by Geoffrey C. Ward, has been hailed as a major work. It covers in its eighteen hours all the events connected with this war since the mid-1950s, when the USA started its ill-fated involvement in the area following French imperialist withdrawal and the mismanaged Korean War (1950-1952). Its eighty witnesses included North and South Vietnamese combatants.
- *The Spy in the Hanoi Hilton* (2015) director by Vincent Kralyvich. In 1973 591 American POWs returned home from the Vietnam War, bringing with them harrowing stories of torture and survival, but also essential information for the war effort. Kralyvich narrates the exciting story of how James Stockdale and the ex-prisoners lodged in the Hanoi Hilton hotel, alerted the CIA and the Pentagon to the horrors of Vietnam POW camps and set up a rescue mission to save many MIAs.

## RE/PRESENTING AMERICA IN *Last Days in Vietnam*

Rory Kennedy's *Last Days in Vietnam* follows the events in Saigon during April 1975 and the final days of the city before the entrance of the Vietcong Communist forces and the end of the war. Those days are recalled through by interviews with first-hand witnesses. The events went back to 1973 when the Paris Peace Agreement was signed with North Vietnamese leader Ho Chi Minh. President Nixon promised that if it was ever broken the US Army would be sent back to defend South Vietnam. Following the peace talks, the USA withdrew the troops, although they maintained the infrastructures and aircraft, mistrusting the cease fire between North and South Vietnam. Besides, many US soldiers who had not left Vietnam had married Vietnamese women and were raising biracial families.

As Nixon feared, in March 1975, the North Vietnamese Army launched a massive invasion into South Vietnam. Despite the imminent danger, the Americans did not send troops again. The terrified Saigon population tried to leave for places further South or leave the country. The North Vietnamese approached fast and the South needed to start planning for evacuation in the absence of any reliable Government authority. Stubbornly, the American Ambassador, Graham Anderson Martin, thought that there was no need for an evacuation, which forced US and Vietnam people to take matters into their own hands and start fleeing the city. The US Government and Congress were ready to send money and allow the citizens to evacuate but could not do that as long as the Ambassador saw no need.

When the Ambassador finally started considering the need to evacuate, the American Government told him that he could not evacuate Vietnamese people, even when they were part of the family of an American citizen. For this reason, a group of young Army members stationed at the Embassy, started a secret or black ops evacuation. At the same time, they also started rationing all Army material, because the Congress decided to not send any money, food, troops or weapons. There were different options for evacuation. The first was using commercial ships to go up the river to the Embassy; the second was using commercial flights, keeping the airports open as long as possible; the third was using military flights; and finally, using helicopters, the last resource in case everything else failed. When the North Vietnamese attacked Saigon, however, they destroyed the airport, which the Ambassador had tried to keep open as long as possible. That meant that the official evacuation had to start, following the fourth plan, before Vietnam fell to the Communists. This was a shock for Martin because he had lost his son during the war, and he was very much emotionally invested in the country.

The American Ambassador had to improvise during this difficult time for the US Congress was not passing any laws to send help to Vietnam, but the need to evacuate the country became extremely urgent. The evacuation order was broadcast in the American Radio by pre-arranged message (105<sup>th</sup> and raising) and followed by the song "White Christmas". Vietnamese people flooded the American embassy hoping to leave the country. The first person to leave had to be Martin but he decided to stay on until all the people inside the Embassy had been evacuated. They were aware that when all the American citizens left, the evacuation would be over. For this reason, the helicopters left with only one or two American passengers and the rest Vietnamese. The Navy ships used to protect the helicopters started seeing other dots in their radar, which turned out to be South Vietnamese aircrafts carrying other evacuees. The ships were full much above their capacity, intending to sail to the Philippines.

Finally, although the Ambassador announced that no one was going to be left on American soil, meaning the Embassy, the problem was that Washington did not know how many Vietnamese people were there. The President, Gerald Ford, sent an order to only transport American citizens, from then onwards and the Ambassador left finally in the last helicopter. They left thousands of South Vietnamese people stranded in the Embassy who looted it in revenge and anger. Ho Chi Minh asked for surrender to avoid having a blood bath while the South Vietnamese soldiers destroyed everything related to the Army, trying to pass off as common citizens. Nobody knew what was going to happen from then on, neither the ones who stayed in Vietnam nor the ones who left. In the end, all promises had been broken and the war in Vietnam was history for good or bad.

As Ann Horney states "There's still no question that those final days and hours in Saigon, when thousands of US operatives and South Vietnamese clamored to escape an encroaching North Vietnamese army, were fraught with pain, even betrayal. But in this judicious, deeply moving account of that episode, Kennedy illuminates the human—and humane—responses to the situation that have hitherto been forgotten or lost to history entirely" (2014). Kennedy illustrates the staggering human loss and how the people living in Saigon suffered. However, something that the documentary shows clearly is how the Ambassador should have acted earlier. If he had acted earlier maybe not so many people would have died and feel left behind in their own country. The

responses given by the Ambassador where not the humane ones; he had the opportunity to take action early on the situation but he decided to not do it, ending in a difficult position where people needed to be desperately evacuated by the American Army. The humane responses we can see comes from those of citizens trying to help each other to leave the country, both Americans and Vietnamese despite the authorities' negligence.

Scott suggests that "Now that so much time has passed, and relations between the United States and Vietnam have normalized, it might have been good to hear a voice or two from the other side, to learn what was going through the minds of the soldiers entering Saigon as the Americans left" (2014). I think that having the view of North Vietnam and discover how it felt for the other side would have enriched the story. Furthermore, it would have been desirable too to have more South Vietnamese speak along the documentary. In my opinion Rory Kennedy might have decided to leave the Vietnamese view out because the country has hardly recovered from the conflict and from going through a very harsh post-war period. At the same time America has not really overcome its defeat and having lost Vietnam to the Communist. She may have wanted to avoid conflict.

Ian Tuttle stated that "And so while there is much to recommend *Last Days in Vietnam* —much of the footage is simply stunning— perhaps most remarkable is that the film manages to raise such questions without peddling easy ideological answers. It is not, as one has come to expect of Vietnam retrospectives, an anti-war propaganda piece. It is, instead, a straightforward story of people, of every human being in Saigon and Washington, D.C., who made costly mistakes and noble sacrifices" (2015). I do agree that the footage is stunning and gives an important view on the conflict. However, I think that the documentary is biased by only showing the American side, as noted. During the film we see interviews with Americans or a couple of Vietnamese people who were in favor of democracy; they were afraid of the North Vietnamese Army and they were strong believers on America's promises. Furthermore, the non-participation of North Vietnamese army or people rises questions about what sacrifices did they made, what kept them going and how they won the war. It would have been interesting to have a different view to the American view, because in every story there are two different sides.

*Last Days in Vietnam* is a clear representation of America's way of imposing their ideas, and of what they think is the best way of living for another country or community. This is what happened in Vietnam. However, when things got complicated, the US Government decided to leave the South Vietnamese without help and to deal by themselves as well they could. In a way, this is a general representation of American patriotism, a way of believing that they can dictate to any country how things are done, in a paternalistic way, as it has also happened in Iraq more recently. This belief cost not only a huge amount of taxpayers money but the lives of many Americans and Vietnamese (60,000 Americans died in Vietnam, but the war claimed the lives of 5 to 6 million Vietnamese persons, including soldiers and civilians). This was chaos, as Kennedy's film hints but does not openly tell, caused by irresponsible American intervention.

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Anna Guiteras Pérez

## RACE: SLAVERY, GENOCIDE, AND INJUSTICE

The murder of African-American George Floyd during his arrest by a white Police officer on 25 May 2020, in Minnesota, recorded by a cellphone camera in the hands of another African-American, has unleashed a still ongoing wave of protests (I'm writing in late June 2020), organized around the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter. As this section shows, the USA is still stranded in a post-slavery regime of racist contempt for black lives, which may be seeing now a major turning point (connected with President Trump's bid for re-election in November 2020) or that might simply dwindle to become yet another step in the long fight for total Civil Rights.

Racism has many fronts in the USA, having recently affected American Arabs after 9/11 or Latino migrants from 2016 onward when Donald Trump was elected on the basis of discriminatory, nationalistic, chauvinistic policies supported by the disempowered white majority irritated with President Barack Obama. American top documentaries, however, tend to focus mainly on African-Americans, leaving mostly aside other ethnic backgrounds. This might explain why only one of the documentaries in this section focuses on another ethnic group: Native Americans or Indians. *Reel Injun* (2009) is, besides, a Canadian documentary which raises the question about why the topic is so little dealt with in the USA. Unfortunately, we had no room here for Oscar nominee *The Garden* (2008) on the efforts of a mostly Latinx community of farmers, or for another Oscar nominee of the same year, *The Betrayal/Nerakhoon*, on the difficult life of a Laos migrant in New York City.

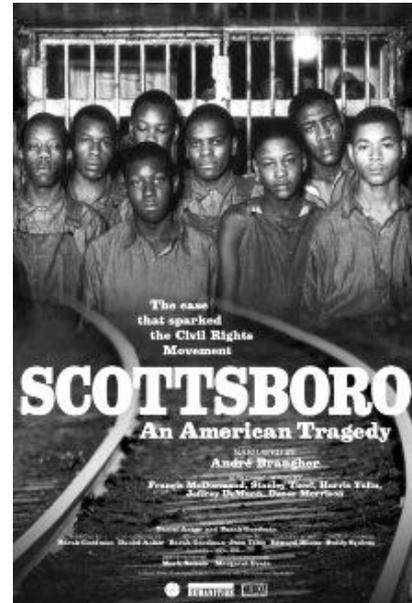
From *Scottsboro: An American Tragedy* (2000) to *I Am not Your Negro* (2016), the story told by American filmmakers is very similar: slavery may be over but the brutal racism its end generated (and on which it was based) keeps American citizens of black African descent in a position of constant vulnerability to personal and institutional violence. This may be expressed by means of sheer economic exploitation (*Slavery by Another Name*, 2012), the deprivation of publicly-funded education (*LaLee's Kin: The Legacy of Cotton*, 2001), constant miscarriages of justice (from *Scottsboro* to *The 13th* (2009), passing through *Murder on a Sunday Morning* (2001) and *The Central Park Five* (2013)), sheer murder (*Let the Fire Burn* (2013); *I Am not Your Negro* (2016)) and inter-gang violence (*The Interrupters*, 2011).

Other stories about African-American resilience in the face of adversity can be found elsewhere in the e-book: *Trouble the Water* (2008), *What Happened, Miss Simone?* (2018), *Undefeated* (2011). For the Asian community see *Abacus: Small Enough to Jail* (2017) and *Daughter from Đà Nẵng* (2002).

## Scottsboro: An American Tragedy (2000): The Violence within the Stigma

### CREDITS

**Directed by** Daniel Anker, Barak Goodman  
**Written by** Barack Goodman  
**Produced by** Daniel Anker, Barak Goodman, Mark Samels  
**Music by** Edward Bilous  
**Cinematography by** Buddy Squires  
**Film editing by** Jean Tsien  
**Production companies** PBS, Social Media Production  
**Distributors** Public Broadcasting Service (PBS), Social Media Productions, Films Transit International (theatrical)  
**Runtime** 1h 24'



### MAIN AWARDS

**Academy Awards (Oscar) (2001):** Best Documentary Feature 2001 (nominee)  
**Primetime Emmy Award (2001):** Non-fiction Special (winner)  
**Sundance Film Festival (2000):** Grand Jury Prize – Documentary (nominee)  
**Writers Guild of America, USA (2002):** Documentary – Other Than Current Events (winner)

### OTHER NOTABLE DOCUMENTARY FILMS BY THE DIRECTORS

**By Daniel Anker:** *Imaginary Witness: Hollywood and the Holocaust* (2004), *Music from the Inside Out* (2004), *Through My Eyes: The Charlie Kelman Story* (2010), *Voices Unbound: The Story of the Freedom Writers* (2010), *Icebound* (2012)  
**By Barak Goodman:** *Clinton* (2012), *Oklahoma City* (2017), *Slay the Dragon* (2019, with Chris Durrance), *Woodstock* (2019, with Jamila Ephron)

### REASONS TO SEE *Scottsboro: An American Tragedy*

- It showcases one of the most notorious legal fights of the early 20th century, centered on the rape accusation in 1931 against five African-American boys. The division between North and South due to racial, political and geographical postures drew a razor shape line on the USA, seventy years after the Civil War.
- It continues the discussion on racism and how prejudices can shape our perceptions on what should be moral or not, and result in miscarriages of justice.

- It gives voice to those African-Americans who, at the time, were denied their rights, besides exposing the American judicial system.

### CONNECTED WITH...

- *Judge Horton and the Scottsboro Boys* (1976, fiction TV movie). Directed by Fielder Cook, this drama based on Dan T. Carter's book is a retelling of the Scottsboro case. The plot focuses on the point of view of the judge in the second trial, Judge James Edwin Horton. He, despite the adamant opinion of the town in Alabama in which the first trial happened, believes that the nine boys accused of rape are innocent. As the documentary here discussed, this film sheds light on the initial trial and the subsequent events and the importance it had for American race relations.
- *Heavens Fall* (2006, fiction film), directed by Terry Green. *Heavens Fall* is a slightly abridged version of the Scottsboro case. Green focuses on the defense attorney, Samuel Leibowitz (Timothy Hutton), and his own relationship with the nine boys as well as the nuances regarding his Jewish heritage and the weight race had as a component of the apparent rape case.
- *Southwest of Salem: The Story of the San Antonio Four* (2016), directed by Deborah Esquenazi. A documentary dealing with a case that happened back in 1994, when four young Latino lesbian women were accused of assaulting the two nieces of one of them in San Antonio, Texas. The girls, who were openly gay within the community, were accused by their homophobic environment, with the added accusations of the act having been "satanic-related" despite the lack of forensic evidence to support it.

### RE/PRESENTING AMERICA IN *Scottsboro: An American Tragedy*

Anker and Goodman's *Scottsboro: An American Tragedy* follows the Scottsboro boys' trial. This spanned more than a decade and introduced important changes in the jury system of the United States (to balance its racial make-up) due to the massive press coverage it got. Nine African-American teens were falsely accused of raping two white women; all were drifters seeking to survive the 1929 crash and ensuing depression. On March 25, 1931 a freight train was traveling between Chattanooga and Tennessee but the journey came to an end after a group of white boys tried to push one African-American teen off the train; this eventually sparked a full fight that ended up with the train needing to make a stop in Scottsboro, Alabama. Two white women got off and, after being questioned, they accused the group of black men of gang-raping them both (probably to deflect the accusation of being vagrants off). The case was first brought to trial in Scottsboro itself, and in a very short of time the defendants, with the entirety of the white community against them, were considered guilty and sentenced to death. The Communist Party as well as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People were brought into action after the resolution was known and they appealed the case. The Supreme Court of Alabama finally ended up ruling out the initial sentence yet for that a total of two appeals was

needed. Yet, it was not until much later, with the case already being considered closed, that full parole came into view for the young men.

The importance of this apparently easy case comes from the fact of how riled up many Americans became with the situation. Defended by the North of the country while the boys were considered guilty by the South, the case caused an enormous rift. It was eventually considered a miscarriage of justice in which white privilege came into view, as it was showcased under quite a magnifying lens. In order to explain how and why we need to go back to the actual timeline of the case that begins as stated before, back in March 1931, in the midst of the Depression. The *Jackson County Sentinel* printed news of the apparent crime that had been committed and white outrage poured onto the streets as a mob tried to break into the Scottsboro jail where the nine boys were being held. This resulted in the Sheriff calling the Governor who in turn called the National Guard in order to be sure that the prisoners remained in jail. Less than a month after this events and in the span of three days, eight of the nine boys were tried, convicted, and sentenced to death.

After the ninth boy, aged 13, was also accused and seemingly about to be also sentence to death, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People as well as the International Labor began to raise money for the boys' defense. This caused the first appeal that was presented in the Alabama Supreme Court. Yet, in January of 1932 the NAACP withdrew from the case; besides, during a quick succession of events one of the girls admitted in a letter to never having been raped. This caused a rift between both sides. Despite this letter the convictions were upheld for seven out of the nine boys and, finally, the United States Supreme Court agreed to hear the case which finalized on November 7. The Court ruled that the defendants were denied the right to counsel, which violated their right to due process.

The cases were remanded to the lower court once more, lengthening the situation as well as the ire amongst the two sides, North and South. In 1933 New York City Jewish lawyer Samuel Leibowitz became the defendants' counsel. Soon the other girl, Ruby Bates, admitted that the rape cases were, indeed, falsehoods. Despite this, one of the boys was still found guilty and sentenced to death by electric chair. The rulings of the other eight boys present in the case were postponed, a decision that caused even more stirring among the community. The previous decision of sentencing the first boy to death was also cast aside, granting the possibility of yet another trial. In this third trial two out of the nine ended up in death sentences despite the previous admission by Bates and the obvious bias of this new court (with no black members in its jury) and the judge's blatant manipulations.

During the following year, 1934, Leibowitz kept on representing the boys, arguing against the persistent racism within the all-white jury but it was not until 1935 that he appeared before the Supreme Court of the United States, describing the lack of any representation of people of color during the trials. The case was overturned once more and remanded back to the lower court. Yet, thanks to the still rising tensions in Alabama, the prosecution was reorganized and in 1936 the boy who had been considered guilty time and time again was finally sentenced to 75 years in prison. The other boys soon followed suit during that year and the next one, being sentenced to between 20 and 99 years. During the next couple of years some of the boys were released on parole albeit the main ones needed to wait up until the 1940s to be

released with several added complications to most of them during those times. The last one of the boys died in January 23, 1989.

While it could be said that the documentary merely showcases the flaws of a system deeply based on classism and racism, there is also a second take on how sexual abuse is perceived. After the eruption of the #MeToo movement in 2017 one must pose the question of what would have happened if everyone involved in the case had been from the same race or social stratum. The Scottsboro case involved much inherent structural racism but also a strange reverse sexism by which white women were believed, even though they were apparently lying, by their racist fellow Southerners. In the webpage of The Urban Institute the concept of structural racism is brought into light: racial disparities “permeate the criminal justice system in the United States” hence undermining its effectiveness. But what would have happened if the possibility of a fair trial would have been a reality? What if the women had been black or not lying at all?

The documentary comes as a very bitter reminder of how the Scottsboro wound is very much open nowadays even though Americans, as a whole, would like to pretend it is a thing of the past. Amy Taubin writes in *The Village Voice* how “in the ongoing saga of race and American injustice, there are few episodes as horrifying as that of the Scottsboro boys” (2001). Personally, I would say that the passage offers quite a good summary of what the court case represented to many. It was not only the continuous rulings against every single one of the boys but the constant gaslighting they received by which the rulings against them were equal to the constant redraws the Supreme Court took in all of them. It seemed an awful no-win situation, which only changed because Judge Horton finally decided to do justice. The use of scapegoats during moments of tension is, very much, a real yet ugly truth that is still common today. This was, no doubt, “A shameful chapter in American History” as Joe Leydon writes (2000) but, at the same time, also one of many. Ken Fox writes how films like this one are “Essential in American history, painstakingly assembled but painful to watch” (2001) and this is a fair conclusion. The documentary pays homage to those who, at the time, were muffled or edited out. While the answer it gives to why American justice miscarried is unsavory, it must be watched for its bitter lesson.

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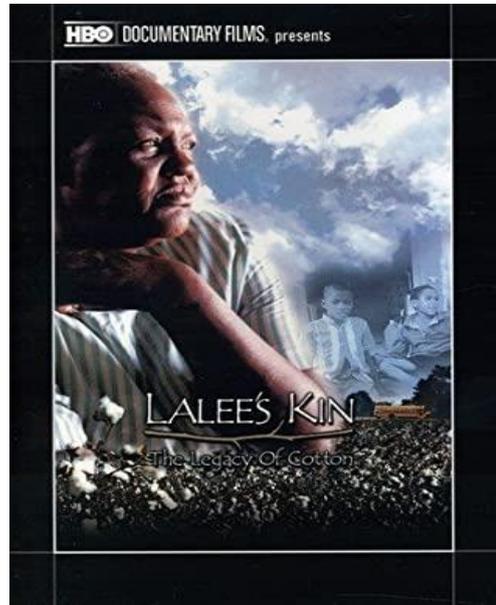
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Lucía Merino

## **LaLee's Kin: The Legacy of Cotton (2002): Trapped by Poverty in the US South**

### **CREDITS**

**Directed by** Deborah Dickson, Susan Froemke, Albert Maysles  
**Produced by** Susan Froemke, Douglas Graves, John Hoffman  
**Music by** Gary Lucas  
**Cinematography by** Albert Maysle  
**Film editing by** Deborah Dickson  
**Production companies** Home Box Office (HBO), Maysles Films  
**Distributors** Maysles Films, Home Box Office (HBO)  
**Runtime** 1h 29'



### **MAIN AWARDS**

**Academy Awards (Oscar), USA (2002):** Best Documentary Feature (nominee)  
**Film Independent Spirit Awards (2002):** Best Documentary (nominee)  
**Sundance Film Festival (2001):** Gran Jury Prize (nominee), Cinematography Award (winner)

### **OTHER NOTABLE DOCUMENTARY FILMS BY THE DIRECTOR(S)**

**By Deborah Dickson** *The Art of Influence* (1998, with Robert Guerra), *Ruthie and Connie: Every Room in the House* (2002), *Another Day in Paradise* (2008),  
**By Susan Froemke** *Horowitz Plays Mozart* (1987), *Escape Fire: The Fight to Rescue American Healthcare* (2012, with Matthew Heineman), *Wagner's Dream* (2012), *The Opera House* (2017)  
**By Albert Maysles** *Salesman* (1969, with David Maysles and Charlotte Zwerin), *Grey Gardens* (1975, with David Maysles), *Gimme Shelter* (1970, with David Maysles and Charlotte Zwerin), *The Beales of Grey Gardens* (2006, with Davis Maysles), *Iris* (2014)  
**By Deborah Dickson, Susan Froemke and Albert Maysles** *Ozawa* (1985), *Christo in Paris* (1990)

## REASONS TO SEE *LaLee's Kin: The Legacy of Cotton*

- It shows the devastating effects of the exploitation connected with the cotton crop in the Mississippi Delta on an already poor and exhausted African-American family.
- The documentary illustrates some of the measures being taken to counter the legacy of slavery, such as trying to raise the level of education in primary schools.
- It tells the parallel stories of two different types of educators: one within the public school system (Bearden Elementary School's superintendent Reggie Barnes); the other within a family (Laura Lee 'LaLee' Wallace).

## CONNECTED WITH...

- *Deepsouth* (2012), directed by Lisa Biagiotti. Four Americans attempt to navigate traditional American Southern values under pressure from history, poverty and expanding AIDS. College student Josh, friends Monica and Tammy, and activist Kathie each seek their own solutions to life in a community deeply beset by homophobia, red tape and a general lack of resources, in an area comprising the Mississippi Delta, Louisiana and Alabama.
- *Hale County This Morning, This Evening* (2018), directed by RaMell Ross. This film focuses on young African-Americans Daniel Collins and Quincy Bryant, from Alabama, over the course of five years in their very different lives. Collins is a college student seeking to pull himself by his bootstraps, whereas Bryant's life is centered on the birth of his son. Their contrasted lives give an impression of what it is like to be a young black man in the deep South of the USA, with its opportunities and frustrations.
- *500 Years Later* (2005), directed by Owen Alik Shahadah. This film traces the imprint left by the African diaspora caused by the Transatlantic slave trade, visiting more than twenty countries to examine its effects on contemporary black communities. Still today these are plagued by a cycle composed of faulty education, poverty, crime, and a lack of opportunities for their children. The director also compares the black communities in Africa, which suffer from these problems, with the addition of political corruption.

## RE/PRESENTING AMERICA IN *LaLee's Kin: The Legacy of Cotton*

This documentary by Dickson, Froemke and the much experienced Albert Maysles takes us deep into the Mississippi Delta and the intertwined lives of LaLee Wallace, a great-grandmother struggling to hold her world together in the face of dire poverty, and Reggie Barnes, superintendent of the embattled West Tallahatchie School System. The film explores the painful legacy of slavery and sharecropping in the Delta. Sixty-year-old LaLee Wallace is the lifeblood of this film. Matriarch to an extended family that moves in and out of her house, LaLee is a woman of contradictions and hope. "Could have been worse", she says quietly in one of the many scenes in which she is the main character, surveying the rat- and roach-infested second-hand trailer

home she has been granted through a Government program after her own house was condemned.

“Cotton still is a king in Mississippi”: this is the most striking phrase that is uttered at the beginning of the documentary, in which we can see scenes from the daily life of this woman with enormous strength of spirit, in the company of her numerous grandchildren and great-grandchildren. In fact, LaLee’s eight children all live nearby but they often leave their children and grandchildren in LaLee’s care. The common thread that links the woman to another community hero Reggie Barnes, the superintendent of the West Tallahatchie School district, is her educational and cultural commitment. And it is precisely in this situation that we notice how difficult it is for LaLee and her entire family, her kin, to even buy pens or notebooks in this case for her granddaughter Granny and her nephew Antonio Main.

Wallace grew up in a family of sharecroppers; she began picking cotton at the age of six, stopped attending school a few years later, and still cannot read. As happened throughout the South, sharecropping gave way to low-paid labor, but with the enforcement of minimum wage laws and increasing mechanization, even those jobs were hard to come by. Without education or skills, Wallace and other residents of Tallahatchie County had few options, and the poverty and hopelessness they felt was passed down to the generations that followed.

A. O. Scott writes in his film review “Pride, Hope and Hardship In the Land of Cotton” for *The New York Times*, that “Harsh as it is, *LaLee’s Kin* is also a testament to the resiliency of people, Mr. Barnes among them, who struggle with the grim aftereffects of generations of slavery and sharecropping, and try to provide the children of Tallahatchie County with love, education and hope” (2001). This is a statement that perfectly represents the general meaning of the documentary. In fact, the foundations on which the whole story told rests is that one must never give up and never lose heart, starting from the incontrovertible fact that to build a life in conditions of poverty like those described in the film is a daily miracle.

Reviewer Jami Bernard from *Daily News* writes that the film’s “simple, straightforward storytelling makes mincemeat of the idea that, gee, if this people just worked a little harder and got motivated, they, too, could get a piece of the American Dream” (2001). We must give more credit to the people described in this documentary. It is easy to talk about the achievement of the American Dream when you are born in much more affluent conditions. People like Reggie Barnes had to fight hard to put his best ideas at the service of his school, so that the whole population could benefit from them. The American Dream should be a celebration of the actions of these true heroes who, knowing only their strengths and ideas, put themselves at the service of others and not a celebration of personal material achievement.

Maitland McDonagh from *TV Guide* writes in his review that “Froemke and Dickson’s film opens a window onto rural poverty so dire it’s almost inconceivable that it exists in 21st century in America” (2001). The point is that the effects described in this film come from a cause that is much broader and even less conceivable in the 21st Century in America, but which unfortunately exists: racism, as a major foundation and legacy of slavery. You can see in the documentary how LaLee has always done her best, has always given the best of herself to take care of her family made up of many different members and personalities with different dreams in their drawers, but

unfortunately the enormous willpower that she has always put at the disposal of her loved ones is not always enough, as we see mostly in the case of her own children.

*LaLee's Kin: The Legacy of Cotton* is a sumptuous project, with a strong social impact, made by documenting stories of people who, only with the use of their voices in the dialogues and the implementation of their willpower in the different scenes that make up the film, convey to the viewer a sense of guilt and discomfort that should not be absolutely tolerable these days. The most atrocious lesson we are being taught by the attitude of the most powerful American authorities is that in particular states of the USA people have been condemned to poverty since birth, that the so-called "American Dream" is not even visible in certain territories and that, in these sad conditions, the signs of time are still being felt. The past is constantly intertwined in the present of these poor families who find themselves fighting alone every day to achieve basic needs thanks only to their own strength.

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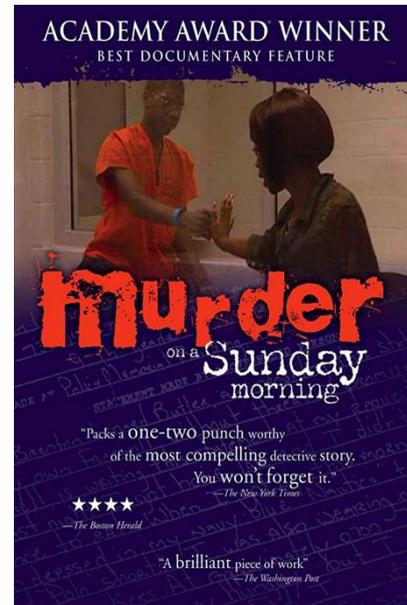
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Andrea Laurino

## **Murder on a Sunday Morning (2001): A Convenient Conviction**

### **CREDITS**

**Directed by** Jean-Xavier de Lestrade  
**Produced by** Denis Poncet  
**Music by** H  l  ne Blazy  
**Cinematography by** Isabelle Razavet  
**Film editing by** Pascal Vernier, Ragnar Van Leyden  
**Production companies** Centre National du Cin  ma et de l'Image Anim  e, France 2 Cin  ma, Home Box Office (HBO), Maha Productions, Path   Archives, Procirep  
**Distributors** HBO (TV)  
**Runtime** 1h 51'



### **MAIN AWARDS**

**Academy Awards (Oscars) (2002):** Best Documentary Feature (winner)  
**Christopher Awards (2003):** Television & Cable (winner)  
**Prix Italia (2002):** Documentary – Current Affairs (winner)

### **OTHER NOTABLE DOCUMENTARY FILMS BY THE DIRECTOR**

*Une Australie blanche et pure – B  b  s vol  s* (1998), *La Justice des hommes* (2002), *The Staircase* (2004, mini-series), *The Staircase II: The Last Chance* (2013)

### **REASONS TO SEE Murder on a Sunday Morning**

- Its focus on the presence of racism in the American criminal justice system, which is still present nowadays.
- It is a direct criticism of how institutions abuse marginalized populations, and of how the Police take important decisions on dubious grounds and dehumanizing some specific communities.
- The great defense carried out by the public defenders. If someone is interested in the justice system, and in how lawyers defend their unfairly accused clients, this documentary offers a great portrayal of a great defender.

## CONNECTED WITH...

- *The Staircase* (2004, French original title *Souçons*), directed by Jean-Xavier de Lestrade. This documentary miniseries deals with the trial of Michael Peterson, a novelist who was convicted for the murder of his wife. It was suspected that he had thrown her down the stairs of their mansion. Lestrade followed the case in sequels, released in 2013 and 2018.
- *The Trials of Darryl Hunt* (2006), directed Ricki Stern and Anne Sundberg. This documentary deals with a brutal rape/murder case and a wrongly convicted man, Darryl Hunt, who spent nearly 20 years in prison for a crime he did not commit. It is also based on real events and shows this capital offence including exclusive footage of Darryl Hunt himself.
- *After Innocence* (2005), directed by Jessica Sanders. DNA evidence has caused plenty of death row convictions to be revised. Here Sanders examines the cases of a number of exonerees (Dennis Maher, Calvin Willis, Scott Hornoff, Wilton Dedge, Vincent Moto, Nick Yarris, Ronald Cotton and Herman Atkins) as she offers an overview of the Innocence Project and the Life After Exoneration Program.

### RE/PRESENTING AMERICA IN *Murder on a Sunday Morning*

*Murder on a Sunday Morning* narrates the story of Brenton Butler, a fifteen-year-old black boy who was wrongly accused of murdering a white woman. De Lestrade narrates how Butler was forced to confess to a crime he did not commit. On that fatidic Sunday morning, Butler planned to go out to apply for a job in a local Blockbuster Video. Meanwhile, the real murderer was attacking a Georgian couple of tourists outside a motel. The wife, Mary Ann Stephens, was finally shot in the head in front of her husband, and the murderer ran away. This documentary narrates Butler's defense by two public defenders, Patrick McGuinness and Anne Finnell, following the events, which happened in Jacksonville, Florida in 2000. By showing the trial that Butler had to face in order to prove his innocence, the documentary approaches the genre of the courtroom drama.

After the crime was committed, the Police began to search for the murderer around the neighborhood. Following Mr. Stephens' description of the man who had just murdered his wife, the Police took the first man that fit his portrayal: a black, young male. Without checking his real whereabouts, the Police arrested quite randomly Butler and he was taken to the Police station. The twelve hours he spent there are what the documentary focuses on most. According to Butler's attorneys, Patrick McGuinness and Ann Finnell, the Police had forced him to confess the crime by physically assaulting him. Butler hinted at the possibility of the Sheriff's son, Michael Glover, being one of the perpetrators of the assault he suffered. This proved to be a shocking revelation to everyone in the court.

Jean-Xavier de Lestrade does not use his voice in the whole documentary. He conveys all his thoughts via Patrick McGuinness, the public defender assigned to the case. He is an intelligent man who constantly puts prosecutors on the spot by using clear and obvious facts. The documentary challenges the American criminal justice

system by showing this unforgivable miscarriage of justice. The lack of evidence against Butler is one of the main arguments used to declare him innocent. Following this standpoint, the only remaining basis for an accusation would be the fact that he is a black male, which would indicate racism among the Police system. It is also interesting to point out how Brenton Butler does not speak throughout almost the entirety of the documentary. It is a wonderful metaphor referring to how he was silenced by the Police, and how he gave up on trying to defend himself as an innocent person. Also, it is important to highlight de Lestrade's decision to make the public defenders the ones who tell the story firsthand. This makes the viewers feel more closely connected to Butler's side in this terrible experience.

Carla Meyer writes in her review that "perhaps the film packs such a wallop because it was made by outsiders, a French film crew led by director Jean-Xavier de Lestrade. Americans have become so injured to institutional racism that they tend to nod gravely and mutter, 'yeah, those Southern cops...,' then move on" (2002). I agree with Meyer. Being French, it is easier for Lestrade to comment on the American Police system and to criticize and remark its terrible actions and decisions. Racism is still considered to often influence both judicial and Police systems. However, it is also true, that documentaries such as *Murder on a Sunday Morning* help to prevent this from happening and should be more readily available. Wrong accusations poisoned by racism should completely disappear, and this documentary is a good stepping-stone toward getting to that goal.

Joel Cunningham noted that "de Lestrade paints the cops as clueless buffoons, and liars, but he doesn't suggest that they ever thought Butler was innocent. Merely that they didn't look hard enough for alternatives, and thus imprisoned the wrong person" (2003). This review shows the clear process by which people can get caught up in the system and being accused of a crime that they did not commit. In the events related to Butler, social class had no influence as he was middle class, however, most of the wrongly accused innocents belong to marginalized sectors of the population. It is in these cases that the Police tend to dehumanize people and take final and important decisions vaguely. There are some hints during the documentary which can make us think that the Police did truly believe that Butler was indeed guilty. This opens up the possibility of thinking that inside of the Police there might be Policemen who really knew that Butler was innocent, while others believed their lie.

Finally, Nostra suggested that "you see the psychological games which need to be played by them (the public defenders), to make Police witnesses uncomfortable and try to let them make mistakes. It is thrilling stuff to watch and as a viewer you side with them, believing that they didn't do it. Still, you know that during a trial people can be convicted even if they are innocent" (2013). De Lestrade convinces us of Butler's innocence from the beginning of the documentary. It is not explicitly said, but it is very likely that you feel more attached to the public defenders and to Butler than to the son of the Sheriff or to Detective Darnell. He accomplishes that by presenting Butler as what he is, a fifteen-year-old boy who is being accused of a terrible crime that he did not commit. As stated previously, Butler remains quiet throughout most of the documentary, making even more clear how hopeless he feels towards the Police system and the final decision of the judges. Brenton Butler was indeed a very fortunate boy as to have McGuinness and Finnell as his defenders, as they treated him as he deserved: as an innocent human being.

This documentary shows what many black males have to face due to the still existing racism in the USA, which is still very present in the American society and should be eliminated. *Murder on a Sunday Morning* also deals with how some Police decisions and actions should be remarked in order to learn from them and avoid them happening again due to their shameful and questionable nature. It is really terrifying to think how many failures in the American justice system have led to a young black or Latino male being prosecuted for a crime they are innocent of. But not only that, it is doubly heinous because of the many criminals that remained free because of a wrongly made accusation. Whether this will change for the better—which is essential for a good community prevalence—remains to be seen.

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Anna Arregui Crespo

## Reel Injun (2009): The Power of the Native American Voice

### CREDITS

**Directed by** Neil Diamond, Catherine Bainbridge, Jeremiah Hayes

**Written by** Catherine Bainbridge, Neil Diamond, Jeremiah Hayes

**Produced by** Catherine Bainbridge, Christina Fon, Linda Ludwick, Adam Symansky

**Music by** Claude Castonguay, Mona Laviolette

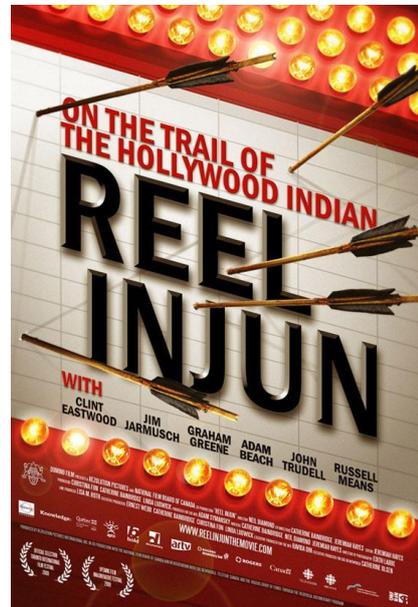
**Cinematography by** Edith Labbe

**Film editing by** Jeremiah Hayes

**Production companies:** National Film Board of Canada, Rezolution Pictures

**Distributors:** Domino Film & Television International (Canada), Lorber Films (USA), Mongrel Media (Canada)

**Runtime:** 1h 25'



### MAIN AWARDS

**ImagineNative Film + Media Arts Festival (2009):** Best Documentary (winner)

**Gemini Awards (2010):** Canada Award (winner); Best Direction in a Documentary Program (winner); Best Visual Research (winner)

**FOCAL International Awards (2011):** Best Use of Footage in a Factual Production (winner)

**George Foster Peabody Award (2011):** Best Documentary (winner)

### OTHER NOTABLE DOCUMENTARY FILMS BY THE DIRECTORS

**By Neil Diamond** *Heavy Metal: A Mining Disaster in Northern Quebec* (2004, with Jean-Pierre Maher), *One More River: The Deal That Split the Cree* (2004, with Tracy Deer), *Inuit Cree Reconciliation* (2013, with Jean-Pierre Maher)

**By Catherine Bainbridge**, *Smoke Traders* (2012, with Jeff Dorn), *Rumble: The Indians Who Rocked the World* (2017, with Alfonso Maiorana)

**By Jeremiah Hayes** *Elefanti* (1989, short film), *Silence & Storm* (1995), *God Comes as a Child* (1998, short film), *The Prom* (1999)

## REASONS TO SEE *Reel Injun*

- It puts the matters of the documentary in a historical context by giving a broad overview of some of the most important events of the history of Native Americans down to the 20th Century.
- It clearly shows an evolution in the way that Native Americans have been represented in cinema from the 1930s to the 1990s.
- The story is mostly told from the point of view of Native Americans, which, as the documentary explains, is not how it has been told in the past.

## CONNECTED WITH...

- *Imagining Indians* (1992), directed by Victor Masayesva Jr. The documentary combines interviews with Native Americans, staged scenes and graphic imagery to show Native Americans' views on Hollywood representations of themselves. The film argues that the new 1990s glamorizing views of native American culture and history disregards their suffering and the battles fought.
- *Atanarjuat* (2001, fiction film), directed by Zacharias Kunuk. This film, mentioned in the documentary and discussed with the director, is said to be a great representation of native Americans. It is based on a legend from a Canadian indigenous town about an evil shaman casting a curse between two families, which will be in constant conflict for generations. The director's goal with this film was to be able to tell the stories of the older generations to preserve their culture.
- *Rich Hall's Inventing the Indian* (2012), directed by Chris Cottam. In this documentary, American comedian Rich Hall and Indigenous actor/activist Dallas Goldtooth travel through the United States to meet activists and discuss the misrepresentation of Native Americans in Hollywood films and literature. It contrasts film clips with real testimonies of Native Americans, in a more humorous vein than *Reel Injun*.

## RE/PRESENTING AMERICA IN *Reel Injun*

*Reel Injun* is the story of Native American filmmaker Neil Diamond's trip across the United States, where he explores different historical landmarks, while commenting with other Native Americans working on the film industry some of the most iconic portrayals of Indians on film. Throughout his journey he interviews Native Americans whose ancestors fought against white people in battles which have been used by Hollywood to glamorize and stereotype them, with characters usually found in westerns. These films perpetuate the idea that Native Americans are scary and wild, while they are often mocked for their culture and clothing. During the documentary, the commentators analyze some of the most famous movies that include Native American characters, both to show how the stereotypes are perpetuated or, as it began to happen in the 1980s, to offer a more accurate alternative of how Native Americans can be depicted on the screen.

Native Americans were the main character of numerous movies of the classic Hollywood era down to the 1970s, mainly because of the popularity of westerns, which routinely depicted white people battling with Native Americans, caricatured from the way they talked, dressed and fought. Furthermore, filmmakers were fascinated by Native American culture and would record them as a way to try to understand their lifestyle. However, even after observing and recording them a lot of conventions were created based on ignorance, which has shaped the fictional Native American and therefore, the way most of Americans see them. A telling example of that is the Native American-themed summer camp that Diamond visits, where young children are taught to behave and act like Native Americans by non-Native Americans. They are taught to fight each other, yell war cries and paint their faces, further reinforcing this fictional idea of Native Americans as savages.

Native women also have to deal with misrepresentation. Never the center of the movies, whenever they are shown on screen they are heavily sexualized. One of the few movies and the most well-known with a Native American woman as the protagonist is *Pocahontas*, which turns a real tragic story of a nine-year-old girl forcibly taken to Britain into a children's movie. What these films failed to recognize is that within the Native American community there are tribes, and cultures with different traditions, and to include everyone in the same box is not representative of their people. However, from the 1980s onward, when the western lost much popularity, there has been a new wave of films about Native Americans. Some try to go deeper into their culture, while Native American filmmakers are given more opportunities to direct and write their own stories.

The documentary is told from the point of view of the Native Americans, which is essential, because as Cree co-director Neil Diamond argues throughout the film, their story has been mostly told from the point of view of the people who weren't part of any of the Indian nations addressing non-Native audiences in their movies. Often these characters were intended to be the punchline of the joke or just a means for the non-Native American characters to get something. The 1939's film *Stagecoach*, amongst others, contributed to the depiction of Native Americans as savages. In the popular movie *Dances with Wolves*, from 1990, though it showed a more accurate representation of Native Americans, they were still sidelined for the white characters to dominate. The documentary gathers a very diverse group of people to explain how they understood those pop culture moments, such as actors, directors, comics and activists. One that stands out is Sacheen Littlefeather, an actress and activist who in 1973 represented Marlon Brando in the Academy Awards to use the spotlight to talk about Native American representation on film, and who was blacklisted from Hollywood for that.

Mike Hale summarizes the documentary very well in his review. *Reel Injun*, he writes, "is absorbing and amusing for as long as it looks back at those Hollywood westerns, recounting their sins against American Indians. A celebratory ending addressing independently produced films telling native stories, like *Powwow Highway*, *Smoke Signals* and *Atanarjuat*, feels rushed and tacked on" (2010). The documentary goes from the damage that misrepresentation in the westerns has done to the native American community to better examples of representation towards the end of the century. However, it does feel rushed as it does not leave much space to develop this process of change; and at times it feels like a listing of events and movies rather than

an explanation of the evolution of the onscreen representation of Indian Americans. V.A. Musetto writes that “*Reel Injun* will most likely give you a new perspective the next time you watch John Wayne battle Native Americans” (2010), which raises the issue of how audiences should deal with classic movies that often fall within the canon despite neglecting part of society or using stereotypes to portray minorities. In this case, most John Wayne movies depict Native Americans as savages and often mock their language or clothing, which makes us question how harmful are the works that we consider classics. On his side, David Fear criticizes some stylistic choices and the way the information is given throughout the documentary: “The first-person sections, however, couldn’t be more clumsy or grating, and every time Diamond’s tone-deaf narration starts repeating the obvious, you can feel an eye-opening history lesson turning into a quirky, orbs-glazing travelogue” (2010). This connects with the first review in the sense that the documentary feels incomplete and the explanations often stay on a surface level instead of going deeper.

The fact that throughout the 20th Century films that included Native American characters have not been really nuanced and well written is just a reflection of the systematic racism that dominates America, disregarding other minorities and silencing their opportunity to tell their story. But as it is shown at the end of the documentary and judging by the conversations of these past years about representation and diversity in Hollywood, more and more minorities are finally creating their own art and telling their own story, showing a more accurate representation of what it means to be Native American.

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Sonia Muñoz Gracia

## ***The Interrupters: How to Stop a Riot (2011): An Attempt at Peacemaking***

### **CREDITS**

**Directed by** Steve James

**Written by** Alex Kotlowitz (from his *New York Times* magazine article)

**Produced by** Steve James, Alex Kotlowitz, Zak Piper

**Music by** Joshua Abrams

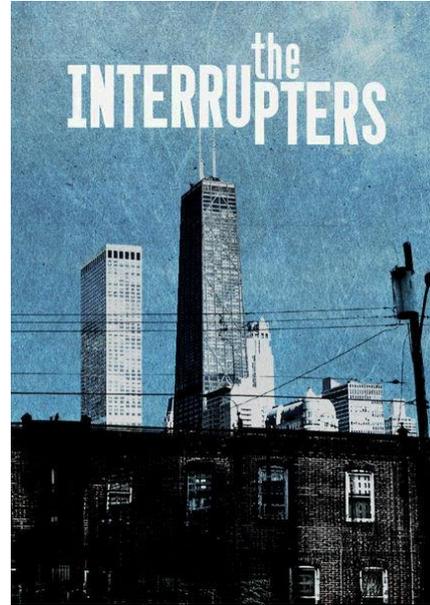
**Cinematography by** Steve James

**Film editing by** Steve James, Aaron Wickenden

**Production companies:** Kartemquin Films, Rise Films

**Distributors:** Cinema Guild (theatrical)

**Runtime:** 2h 5'



### **MAIN AWARDS**

**Cinema Eve Honors (2012):** Outstanding Achievement in Nonfiction Feature Filmmaking and Best Direction (winner)

**Film Independent Spirit Awards (2012):** Best Documentary (winner)

**Independent Spirit Awards (2012):** Best Documentary (winner)

**Miami International Film Festival (2011):** Best Documentary (winner)

### **OTHER NOTABLE DOCUMENTARY FILMS BY THE DIRECTOR**

*Hoop Dreams* (1994), *Stevie* (2002), *At the Death House Door* (2008, with Peter Gilbert), *Life Itself* (2014), *Abacus: Small Enough to Jail* (2016, Oscar Award nominee).

### **REASONS TO SEE *The Interrupters: How to Stop a Riot***

- To see the reality of the gangs who live in the suburbs of Chicago from an extremely personal point of view.
- The director Steve James shows the psychological aspects of belonging to gangs and how the members become violent.
- After watching the documentary the audience will realize that the USA has a dark side and that racial segregation is a massive issue.

## CONNECTED WITH...

- *Slippin': Ten Years with the Bloods* (2005), directed by Joachim Schroeder and Tommy Sowards. The film deals with a few members of the Los Angeles gang "Bloods" for ten years and with their mundane reality. The members appearing in the documentary show what life is like when belonging to a gang and the hardships of doing so. As a viewer you see them grow up in the middle of violence as well as the troubled lives the members of this gang have to deal with.
- *Bastards of the Party* (2005), directed by Cle Sloan. The film deals with the two most important rival gangs in Los Angeles: the Crips and the Bloods from the perspective of the Los Angeles community. The documentary explicitly shows the violence between the two gangs and the extreme pain that takes place there. Furthermore, racial segregation is well exemplified in the film as a way to explain the little possibilities of living a good life that those people have.
- *Crips and Bloods: Made in America* (2008), directed by Stacy Peralta. The film is also about the Crips and the Bloods but in this case the documentary uncovers their rising. It provides a new perspective of the gangs since it shows the origins of these rival gangs and tries to make the viewer understand why is violence still very present nowadays and what kind of rivalry they have.

## RE/PRESENTING AMERICA IN *The Interrupters: How to Stop a Riot*

*The Interrupters: How to Stop a Riot* (2011) is a documentary film that deals with the so-called interrupters, persons employed by the local authorities, that try to avoid the violence that rises from the gangs in the suburbs of Chicago. These interrupters know exactly what they are doing since they also went through the same hardships when growing up and have experience of belonging in gangs as well. Chicago's African-American and Latino communities suffer from racial and social segregation and that leads to violence. Most of the people that live in these gangs are poor or excluded from quality education and getting a good job so most of them are brought up with feelings of hate and revenge. As the interrupters say themselves in Steve James's documentary, it is not that they are aggressive or bad people however their limited upbringing and poor education has led them to act this way.

One of the three interrupters on which James's film focused, Ameena, is the daughter of one of the biggest criminals of Chicago, and a notorious gang leader herself; her colleagues, Cobe and Eddie, have been in jail convicted of murder and substance abuse and trafficking. However, their terrible life conditions allowed them to understand that living is not just being alive and they managed to become good citizens devoted to helping others in their communities. In the film, Ameena constantly helps Derrion, a nineteen year old girl whose mother is a drug addict and whose anti-social conducts are hard to contain. Cobe on the other hand, helps people who recently got out of jail and are trying to start over (he had served a long sentence for a gang-related murder) whereas Eddie teaches art to kids who live in those neighborhoods and witness the violence all day long, traumatizing them.

The key scene of the documentary records the reactions to the murder of a seventeen-year-old black teenager killed outside his high school by kids in a rival gang; this murder was filmed and the brutal video became viral. The documentary later on shows how other youngsters and children die because the members of the murdered boy's gang decided to get back at their rivals by murdering their loved ones, thus continuing the cycle of violence. It is important to note that the US media mentions these gang-related crimes only when they are utterly shocking; otherwise they describe these acts as "regular acts of violence that take place in the suburbs of Chicago". This shows how these gangs are marginalized and how instead of helping them or trying to stop the violence, politicians and authorities in high positions look down on them as social pariahs and judge them in a very superficial way.

Steve James's film clearly insists that non-white minorities are not protected or sufficiently represented in American institutions and power. A big step was made when Barack Obama was elected President of the United States in 2008 because most of these segregated communities are either black or Latinos. African-American Obama, a former State and Federal Senator for Illinois and a Chicago activist, brought hope, as a black man who despite his struggles had managed to be the President of the nation. However, he was an exception and there is still a lack of political representation of this part of American society, which tends to be ignored in election campaigns. Much has to change in order for these people to stop growing up normalizing violence and abuse as a way of communicating with one another.

Reviewer Noah Berlatsky writes that *The Interrupters: How to Stop a Riot* (2011) "makes the case that if you want less killing, you need not more guns, but more neighbours" (2011). The documentary makes the viewers realize that limiting the possession of guns is not the main issue but treating people with respect and kindness, which will only be accomplished with better education. Jason Gorber writes that the documentary is "moving, heartbreaking, yet intensely hopeful, *The Interrupters* is a world-class feat of journalism and documentary craft" (2016). The film is very personal and shows very different aspects of the gangs and the environment they are brought up in, without passing judgment. It is sad to get to know that some American people live in those conditions but the interrupters themselves give the spectators hope that one day all the strugglers will overcome these difficulties. Reviewer Yasmin Shehab writes that "the cameras are allowed access to places and moments that are so shocking in their vulnerability that it's a wonder the filmmakers were allowed to shoot there in the first place" (2012). This was also the case with Steve James's indispensable documentary *Hoop Dreams* (1994). This vulnerability impacts the viewer, who sees pure reality and understands the gangs from a psychological way, rather than in the biased, superficial way in which US news present them.

Clearly, American society is still in the grip of racism, as blacks and Latinos know well. This film shows how hard it is for American people who are marginalized to move on with their lives. It also shows how this segregation affects them to the point that they get themselves into trouble and find violence against each other as the only solution to their problems. Furthermore, James's film allows the spectators to realize how education is the solution to get out of this marginalization. Gang members act impulsively and believe it is fine to shoot someone if that person has shot someone they love before, because they are trapped in a vicious circle of violence and lack of

prospects. All this would be changed with a better education and a better neighborhood environment, as the interrupters teach.

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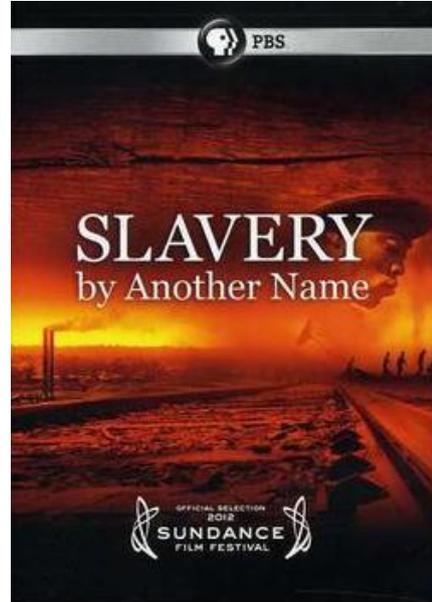
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Laura Menor Pérez

## ***Slavery by Another Name* (2012): Overlooked History**

### **CREDITS**

**Directed by** Samuel D. Pollard  
**Written by** Sheila Curran Bernard, Anne Seidlitz  
(from Douglas A. Blackmon's book, *Slavery by Another Name*)  
**Produced by** Daphne McWilliams  
**Music by** Tom Hambleton, Alex Khaskin  
**Cinematography by** Ryan Richmond, Mike Rossetti, Andrew Young  
**Film editing by** Jason Pollard  
**Production companies** TPT National Productions  
**Distributors** PBS (USA) (all media)  
**Runtime** 1h 30'



### **MAIN AWARDS**

**Sundance Film Festival (2012):** Grand Jury Prize (nominee)  
**Black Reel Awards (2013):** Outstanding Television Documentary (nominee)

### **OTHER NOTABLE DOCUMENTARY FILMS BY THE DIRECTOR**

*Two Trains Runnin'* (2016) *Maynard* (2017), *ACORN and the Firestorm* (2017, with Reuben Atlas), *Sammy Davies Jr: I've Gotta Be Me* (2017), *Mr. Soul!* (2018, with Melissa Haizlip)

### **REASONS TO SEE *Slavery by Another Name***

- It recalls a post-slavery historical period which is usually overlooked in history lessons and mostly unknown to the American population.
- It gives evidence that slavery did not end after the ratification of the 13th Amendment in 1865, but almost 80 years later.
- It offers testimonies by the descendants of the victims of forced slavery, as well as of descendants of those who inflicted the hardships.

## CONNECTED WITH...

- *4 Little Girls* (1997), directed by Spike Lee. Set during the Civil Rights movement, the documentary produced by Pollard tells the story of the bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama in 1963. The explosion, provoked by members of the Ku Klux Klan, resulted in the death of four little African American girls. The feature film relates the politically charged context that paved the way for the attack, as well as the posterior outrage at the tragic events, among other things.
- *The Black Power Mixtape 1967-1975* (2011), directed by Göran Olsson. This documentary film explores the anti-Vietnam War and Black Power movement in the USA from 1967 to 1975. The long feature contains footage shot by Swedish journalists found 30 years later by the Swedish director. The film offers a chronological view of the movement through the discovered material as well as contemporary footage edited together.
- *Freedom Riders* (2016), directed by Stanley Nelson. The feature, based on Raymond Arsenault's book of the same name, deals with the story of hundreds of activists self-called Freedom Riders. These activists appeared during the Civil Rights movement and fought racial segregation by riding public transports in small interracial groups. The film documents the six-month journey featuring declarations of Government officials, journalists and the Riders themselves.

## RE/PRESENTING AMERICA IN *Slavery by Another Name*

*Slavery by Another Name* presents in chronological order the events that unfolded in the South of the USA after the adoption of the 13th Amendment in 1865, until the beginning of World War II. The 13th Amendment, issued after Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation of 1863, formally abolished slavery in the USA. However, the documentary tells a different story. Pollard's feature, based on Douglas A. Blackmon's book of the same title, narrates the different ways in which slavery was still forced upon African Americans, only by another name. The documentary clearly states that its aim is to highlight a period in time which is usually overlooked in History lessons.

When the Civil War ended in 1865, there was a great amount of hostility towards black people in the South, both from ex-slaveholders and those whites who lived in poverty. As a result, many laws were passed targeted to convict African-Americans. This resulted in the appearance of slave leasing, the first of the four methods that re-enslaved African Americans on which the documentary focuses. This practice originated from the US states' beginning to charge monthly fees for renting prisoners to companies. It is argued that this practice was worse than slavery, as prisoners were cheap and could be worked to death by fraudulently extending their debt. Slave leasing was possible due to the fact that the 13th Amendment actually abolished slavery except as a punishment for crime.

Pollard's film goes on to focus on peonage, a phenomenon which became illegal after the Civil War ended. Through this method, African Americans were tied to

white employers by many forms of debt and exploited until it was deemed paid. Next, we are introduced to chain gangs, a practice which was billed as the reformed version of slave leasing, as the latter was starting to raise eyebrows in the North. Now, instead of leasing them to private industry, the states started to use prisoners on state-run enterprises. Still, the conditions were hardly better than those of convict lease. The last method mentioned in the film is sharecropping, a system in which a landlord allowed its tenant to work his land for a percentage of the crop. However, African-Americans were especially vulnerable in these deals which usually ended with them not being allowed to leave the farms. These last three methods continued in the South during the 20th Century until 1941, when President Roosevelt took steps to enforce the 13th Amendment due to the start of World War II.

Samuel D. Pollard provides a very clear picture of the events in the post-American Civil War period. The story is supported by a very firm and clear narration, supplied by famous actor Laurence Fishburne. Reviewer David D'Arcy writes that "you won't find cinematic innovation in *Slavery By Another Name*. The doc tells its story deliberately and methodically, ensuring that schoolchildren will get its point by repetition" (2012). I mainly agree with the statement. The documentary does indeed not come across as a piece of art, but it is able to convey its message with astounding clarity. Furthermore, I would be inclined to add that instead of shocking the viewer with its cinematography, *Slavery by Another Name* does so with its content. Apart from this, it is true that the documentary presents an air of educational material, its many statistics and numbers adding to this, as corresponds to a PBS film. However, these also give credibility to the documentary and prevent it from coming across as biased.

The documentary makes use of different resources to showcase the historical events apart from its narration. John DeFore writes that "we hear details of these and other outrages from scholars, in letters written by inmates and their families, and, poignantly, from descendants of those who used convict labor", although "he's less successful in bringing these stories to life with actors, who speak (...) in a way that recalls the clumsy informational films one might see in a museum exhibition" (2012). Letters and photos add a great strength to the film, and to the movie's sentimental value, while the testimonies of experts add to its seriousness. Also, the appearance of the author of the source book is a welcome presence. On the other hand, I also have to agree with DeFore that the re-enactments portrayed in the movie do not rise to the standard. Nevertheless, there is one element that truly deserves our attention, which is the inclusion of the relatives' testimonies. The commentaries from descendants of various victims, most of them unaware of their family history, are revealing. What is even more revealing though, is the statements of descendants of those partaking in the discussed methods of slavery. The film certainly succeeds in including this perspective, giving the exposure of the abuses more depth. It is not usual to see modern generations of white people realize with horror that their ancestors and relatives actively participated in slave-holding practices.

Reviewer Francis McKay notes that the documentary "is an important piece of work. It carefully reviewed data and anecdotal evidence to provide a different account or hidden view of the events of the past. It showed how profit and national progress were put ahead of peoples' rights and dignity" (2013). This is completely true. As mentioned, the documentary presents carefully researched data that point out an extremely corrupt system interested in profit. Black labor in the South of the States

was deemed to be extremely profitable, and it provoked a great industrial growth as well as enormous profit. The film states that in 1982, the revenue from convict leasing was \$164000, \$4.1 million today. This profit resulted from the low cost of slaves, who could be rented for \$9 a month, pushed to their limits, and then replaced with another individual. About 30 to 40% of the prison camp convicts died each year, but that was not an issue as long as their exploitation brought money to the state. The documentary has the intended effect when it states that the system was brutal in a social sense but fiendishly rational in an economic one.

*Slavery by Another Name* ends with some deep reflections about the origins of the American society. What made America the superpower it is today is in great part its abuse and neglect of the African-American population. Right after the Civil War, convict leasing became the new form of economic development in the South, so it was made sure that arrests of African Americans went up the moment it was convenient for the state. This, however, had consequences beyond the obvious ones. A great number of prisoners were convicted of crimes such as burglary or larceny, with 90% of the convicts being African American. Consequently, this data caused a relationship to be established between criminality and race in people's minds, indicating that black people were criminals. That belief is still inherent today as well as its consequences. The American Government is also put into perspective many times. At the end, when Franklin Roosevelt took interest in enforcing the 13th Amendment, it was due to the prospect of these practices being held against the US by the Japanese in preparation for the Second World War. All in all, it sheds light on how corporations, landowners and the state have always put humanity aside in favor of financial gain.

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Sofía Lázaro Jongman

## The Central Park Five (2012): Justice Gone Wrong

### CREDITS

**Directed by** Ken Burns, Sarah Burns, David McMahon

**Produced by** Ken Burns, Sarah Burns, Jim Corbley,  
David McMahon

**Music by** Doub Wamble

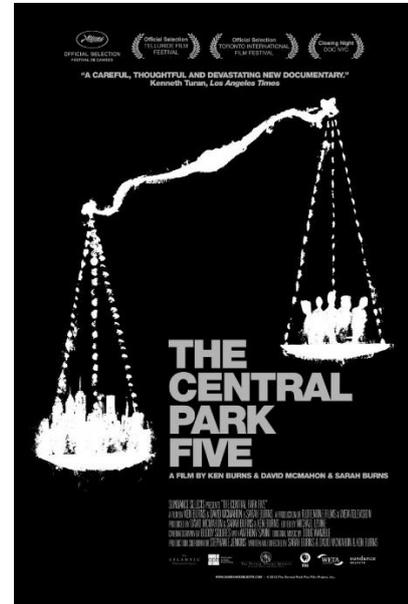
**Cinematography by** Anthony Savini & Buddy Squires

**Film Editing by** Michael Levine

**Production Companies** WETA, Florentine Films

**Distributors** GathrFilms (theatrical), Sundance Selects  
(theatrical), PBS International (all media)

**Runtime** 1h 59'



### MAIN AWARDS

**Black Film Critics Circle Award (2012):** Best Documentary (winner)

**International Documentary Association (2012):** Best Feature (nominee)

**Alliance of Woman Film Journalists (2013):** Outstanding Achievement by a Woman in  
the Film Industry (winner)

**News & Documentary Emmy Awards (2014):** Outstanding Historical Programming –  
Long Form (nominee), Best Documentary (nominee)

### OTHER NOTABLE DOCUMENTARY FILMS BY THE DIRECTORS

**By Ken Burns** *Brooklyn Bridge* (1981, Oscar Award nominee), *Huey Long* (1985), *Frank Lloyd Wright* (1998), *Defying the Nazis: The Sharps' War* (2016), *The Vietnam War* (2017)

**By Sarah Burns and David McMahon** *East Lake Meadows: A Public Housing Story* (2020)

**By Ken Burns, Sarah Burns & David McMahon** *Jackie Robinson* (2016)

### REASONS TO SEE *The Central Park Five*

- It is a good depiction of New York society in the 1980s and 1990s, focusing on the African-American community and their struggles. “The Jogger Case” (which The Central Park Five were accused of) shook the nation and brought out the worst in people, as everyone seemed to have a say in it.

- 1989 was not that long ago. The issues at stake here were part of a long history of a system that favors the ones who run it. The Civil Rights Movement has come a long way since the 1950s, culminating in the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which banned discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, or national origin, and prohibited racial segregation. Unfortunately, this has not yet translated into all areas of American Society. This documentary is an instance of it, and its legacy is very much present nowadays.
- In spite of all of the above, *The Central Park Five* has a feel-good tone overall. It doesn't lose hope at any moment and it ends with the rightful release of the five boys who were wrongly accused and the withdrawal of all charges against them. It may not be the most realistic ending, but sometimes it's just nice to believe things work out.

### CONNECTED WITH...

- *When They See Us* (2019, fiction mini-series), created and directed by Ava DuVernay. *When They See Us* is a fictionalized recreation of "The Jogger Case" and the lives of the five young men wrongfully accused. It focuses not only on the trials but their lives in prison and their subsequent release. It is followed by a sort of spin-off on Netflix, which is an interview of the five men with Oprah Winfrey, one of the producers of the show.
- *Time Simply Passes* (2016), directed and produced by Ty Flowers. *Time Simply Passes* is Ty Flowers' first feature film. Just like *The Central Park Five*, this documentary deals with a wrongful conviction due to a corrupt justice system. James Joseph Richardson is an African-American who was unjustly convicted of the murder of his seven children in 1968. He was exonerated in 1989 after 21 years in prison when new evidence appeared. He received compensation in 2014 (\$1.2) after a long fight with the State of Florida.
- *The People vs O.J. Simpson: American Crime Story* (2016, mini-series), directed by Ryan Murphy, Anthony Hemingway and John Singleton. Based on Jeffrey Toobin's book *The Run of His Life: The People v O.J. Simpson* (1997), this miniseries relates the murder of Nicole Brown Simpson and Ron Goldman in 1994, and the subsequent trial. Although there are many documentaries dealing with cases like those in *The Central Park Five* and *Scottsboro: An American Tragedy*, this one is interesting because it tells a completely different story in the same setting as the aforementioned. O.J. was accused of the crime, all the evidence pointed to him, several witnesses regarded him as a violent man with a history of domestic abuse against Nicole, he could be placed at the scene of the crime, he had a motive, and there was no other viable suspect. Ironically, just like *The Central Park Five* were convicted, in spite of the lack of evidence, on account of their race, O.J. was acquitted of all charges, in spite of the huge amount of evidence against him, because his lawyers played the race card (although the actual intricacies of O.J.'s case are much more complicated than that).

## RE/PRESENTING AMERICA IN *The Central Park Five*

*The Central Park Five* relates the events that took place on 19 April 1989 in Central Park, where a group of 30-or-so young African-American boys happened to be at the same as white investment banker and jogger Trisha Meili was knocked down, dragged out of sight and violently assaulted. The Police didn't find it hard to connect the dots. Known by the press as "The Jogger Case", this crime followed a series of violent sexual attacks against women in the city of New York perpetuated by Matias Reyes, known by the press as the "East Side Slasher". However, when the Police connected the dots Reyes wasn't one of them. What followed was a witch-hunt for anyone who matched 'the profile' of the boys that were in the park that night: a young black male. Out of the twenty teenagers brought in for questioning, five were interrogated. They were Anton McCray (15), Yusef Salaam (15), Korey Wise (16), Raymond Santana (14), and Kevin Richardson (14). By means of ambiguously reliable methods (among them, the Reid technique no longer in use for the high rate of false confessions) the Police spent over 24 hours interrogating the boys, which resulted in a set of taped 'confessions'.

That is where the story truly begins. The film attempts to explain to its audience how it is possible to turn an entire city against five young innocent boys. Once the confessions are out, there is no going back (Meili had been in a coma and could not recall any details of the assault). The documentary follows the events in chronological order, focusing on the media coverage. One of the most outrageous key points of this case was Donald Trump's demanding that the death penalty be reinstated for these boys. He even paid for advertising his request in the media (he was then known as a major New York business tycoon). When the trials take place (they were split into two) the documentary tries to deconstruct the case evidence by evidence, offering alongside the personal accounts of *The Central Park Five*, all of whom participated in the documentary. In spite of the overwhelming lack of evidence, the confession tapes played a key role in their sentence. They were found guilty and sentenced to five to fifteen years in prison each except for Korey Wise, who was sixteen at the time. He was judged as an adult and sentenced to five to twenty years in prison.

After various interventions by the participants of the documentary explaining the situation in full, the historical background, what the case meant for the boys and for the city of New York, and the sort of precedent it set, the film culminates with the exoneration of all charges against the boys, now men, after years in prison. This did not happen because justice was pursued, but because the actual perpetrator, Matias Reyes, came forward as the actual culprit in 2001 while serving life in prison. In fact, the confession was triggered because of a casual encounter between him and Korey Wise at that same prison. Reyes claimed that no innocent man should pay for his crimes.

In 2003 the men sued the City of New York for malicious prosecution, racial discrimination, and emotional distress. They finally settled in 2014 for \$41 million. To this day, Assistant District Attorney Elizabeth Lederer (the lead Prosecutor), Linda Fairstein (the District Attorney), the two key people in the sentencing of the five boys, have not apologized. In fact, Fairstein (and Donald Trump) reaffirmed their claims that the boys were guilty even after their release. Ms. Lederer became a teacher at

Columbia Law though she has recently decided to step down from her job due to the negative publicity against her generated by the Netflix show *When They See Us*.

David Rooney wrote for *The Hollywood Reporter* that the documentary, “while relatively conventional in style and structure (...) tells a shocking story in eloquent, even-handed and affecting terms” (2012). Although it is true that the style of the documentary is conventional, that is because the film hugely relies on the facts, so the directors did not see any need to dress them up. The film is straight-forward and very clearly structured, to make the case easy to follow. Rooney also makes a good point when he says that *The Central Park Five* “illustrates how, once the ‘confessions’ were out there and the sensationalistic media had helped create a lynch-mob mentality – coining the term ‘wilding’ to describe gangs of teens in rampaging wolfpacks– the absence of proof became secondary” (2012). The term “wilding” appears in various Police reports of the events that took place in the park, and it allegedly refers to individuals (presumably of African-American descent) marauding in search of ultra-violence. By presenting the men as a wild wolf pack, as the Police saw them, the media also helped to convict the young men.

Roger Ebert, the renowned film critic, wrote a review in which he complained that this film “unfortunately sidesteps part of its story. The five young men (...) were indeed in Central Park that night, part of a larger group of perhaps 30. Members of that group, some as young as 15, may have been responsible for other attacks. Were they caught up in a mob mentality?” (2012). This comes as a bit of a shock, as the documentary is very explicit on the boys’ innocence, and Ebert just seems to be hinting that this ‘innocence’ is merely speculative. Moreover, in spite of criticizing the term “wolf-pack”, which was used to refer to the defendants, he uses it widely. It becomes apparent that for Ebert the documentary is an excuse to discuss the supposed racism of the Police and the State of New York. For Ebert, “race was not the only factor; non-whites in New York were as horrified as whites at the violent and lawless behaviour of the assailants”. Although what he says may be true, race was undoubtedly a factor in how the media covered the case and how the boys were prosecuted by the District Attorneys, not only because they were black but because the victim was white. Either Ebert is blind to the racial issues or he is choosing to ignore the facts in an attempt to defend the intrinsically racist institutions that were at play in this case.

Manohla Dargis protested in *The New York Times* about how “frustrating” the film is, “because while it re-examines the assault on the jogger and painstakingly walks you through what happened to the teenagers (...) it fails to add anything substantively new” (2012). Although she has a point and the documentary does not add any new information to the case, I would argue that this was not its aim to begin with. In fact, the simplicity of the narration and the straightforward structure of the documentary serves the purpose of focusing solely on the story. It plays on everyone’s knowledge of the case by building a well-developed plot that encompasses all of the events. Dargis adds that “the one thing that it fails to do persuasively is explain why so many people in New York, including African-Americans and professional skeptics writing in left-leaning publications like *The Village Voice*, almost immediately accepted that the teenagers were guilty and believed the Police, with whom these same skeptics had often been politically at odds”. Again, this is missing the point entirely. This documentary was not made to assuage anyone’s white guilt over believing that the boys did it, or comment on the racist complicity with the Police, but merely tries to tell

*their* story. In fact, it explains really well how the media manipulated the events and was able to convince so many people, but to focus uniquely on that would be counterproductive.

This case is far from over. It is an open wound, which makes the film by Ken Burns, Sarah Burns, and David McMahon very much relevant even today. It tells a horrifying story about how the justice system, along with the media and the entire City of New York, failed a group of young African-American boys. As I have mentioned before, the documentary ends on a happy note, given the fact that they were publicly exonerated of the crimes they were wrongfully accused of. However, the theme of the film as a whole is quite dark and draws a harrowing picture of how the American society has a long way to go when it comes to racial issues.

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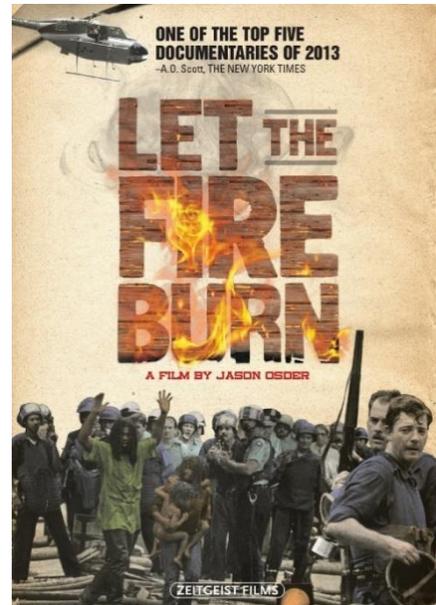
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Helena Martínez Pijuan

## Let the Fire Burn (2013): This Is America

### CREDITS

**Directed by** Jason Osder  
**Produced by** Jason Osder, Andrew Herwitz  
**Music by** Christopher Mangum  
**Cinematography by** Nels Bangerter  
**Film editing by** Nels Bangerter  
**Production company** George Washington University  
**Distributor** Zeitgeist Films  
**Runtime** 1h 35'



### MAIN AWARDS

**Cinema Eye Honors Awards, US (2014):** Outstanding Achievement in Editing (winner), Outstanding Achievement in a Debut Feature Film (nominee)

**International Documentary Association (2013):** Creative Recognition Award for Best Editing (winner)

**Philadelphia Film Festival (2013):** Jury Award for Best Local Feature (winner)

**Tribeca Film Festival (2013):** Best Editing in a Documentary (winner), Best New Documentary Filmmaker (winner)

### OTHER NOTABLE DOCUMENTARY FILMS BY THE DIRECTOR

*Let The Fire Burn* (2013) was Jason Osder's debut as a documentary director, and also his only film up to this date.

### REASONS TO SEE *Let the Fire Burn*

- It is a powerful, must-see documentary about a horrible historical event that seems to have been weirdly dissolved into history. Not many people know about it nowadays.
- Without offering any personal insight or critique, Osder elicits a very personal response from viewers, who are left thinking about how Governments, and society in general, deal with dissenting opinions.

- Furthermore, it makes you think about whether or not the law is equal for everyone, as the Police officers and members of the Government responsible for this tragic incident did not face any legal consequences.

### CONNECTED WITH...

- *Let it Fall: Los Angeles 1982-1992* (2018), directed by John Ridley. This film offers an in-depth look at the culture of Los Angeles in the ten years that preceded the 1992 uprising, also known as the Rodney King riots. These riots erupted after several Police officers, who had brutally beaten a black construction worker named Rodney King, were cleared of all charges even though the assault had been filmed on video by a neighbor.
- *The Murder of Fred Hampton* (1971), directed by Howard Alk. This documentary narrates the short life and death at the age of 21 of Fred Hampton. He was a young African-American Civil Rights activist in Chicago, and also the leader of the Illinois Black Panther Party. During the film's production, Hampton was fatally shot in a Police raid at his apartment on December 4, 1969.
- *Waco: The Rules of Engagement* (1997), directed by William Gazecki. *Waco* deals with the 1993 siege by the US military and the American federal and Texas's law enforcement on a compound that belonged to a religious sect called Branch Davidians, carried out between February 28 and April 19. The assault, which involved ferocious gunfights and tear gas attacks, resulted in a fire that engulfed the compound and killed almost 80 people, including the leader, David Koresh.

### RE/PRESENTING AMERICA IN *Let the Fire Burn*

*Let the fire burn* (2013) deals with what has been described as one of the most shameful episodes in Philadelphia's history, the altercations that occurred between the revolutionary group MOVE and the City of Philadelphia between 1975 and 1985, the year when a terrible fire destroyed the MOVE compound, plus other sixty houses in the neighborhood, killing eleven members of the group.

The documentary is composed of pre-existing footage of the events put together and edited in such a clever way that the viewer gets a masterful overview without needing a third-person narrator, alien to the facts, intervening. This footage comes from the deposition testimony of a MOVE child named Michael Moses Ward, also known as Birdie Africa, a 1976 documentary about MOVE, footage from the Philadelphia Special Investigation Commission that took place five months after the fire and also Police debriefing footage, filmed by stakeout Policemen. Moreover, the music accompanies the narrative spectacularly well, moving from subtle and tense at the beginning to melancholic and tragic at the end. Regarding the plot, it is important to note that the documentary does not follow a chronological order. Precisely, the director plays with the combination of the aforementioned visual material to construct a narrative that, on the one hand, ratifies the declarations presented at the 1985's commission and, on the other hand, exposes how incorrect and judgmental were the media and the Police's approaches to MOVE.

Chronologically, the first event tackled in the documentary is 1976 Frank Rizzo's campaign ad for re-election to Mayor of Philadelphia. There, Rizzo claimed that MOVE was a threat that had to be stopped, for they were a violent cult and their goal was to impose their ideology on the majority. After witnessing that, however, the viewer gets to hear different Police statements in the 1985 investigative commission stating that, if anything, they were vocal, but not violent, and yet, as one former MOVE member says in the end, they were harassed, jailed and threatened at gunpoint from the very beginning. To put an example, in the same year a Police unit went to investigate a noise complaint at the MOVE compound and this ended in a violent altercation. In the end, six Move members were arrested for harming Police members and a baby was found dead in the compound. MOVE said the baby had been killed by the Police during the raid, but no investigation was ever conducted.

After this introduction to the organization through the eyes of outsiders, the documentary moves on to show some scenes of the 1976 film about MOVE, which helps the viewer get a glimpse of the movement's ideals and lifestyle. John Africa (born Vincent Leaphart), founded this black liberation group in 1972 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. To MOVE members, John Africa was considered a prophet, and the move doctrines a religion to celebrate life. The group's ideology consisted of rejecting the use of technology, electricity included, and embracing an anarchic/primitivist life philosophy. Everything about them was considered revolutionary, especially their education method, which was based on questioning the system, the establishment, and exposing the corruption that runs in it. However, if the viewers pay attention to Michael's deposition, they discover that not everything was as ideal as MOVE claims in the aforementioned documentary. In fact, children were raised in very poor conditions, with no clothes and eating mostly raw vegetables.

In 1977, Mayor Rizzo ordered the Police to barricade the MOVE quarters after some members had been seen carrying guns, which later were found to be incapable of firing. Later, in August 1978, the first major conflict happened. The Police, encouraged by Major Rizzo to use their force and "drag them out by the backs of their necks", began a standoff that resulted in one Police officer dead and life sentences for nine MOVE members, accused of killing him. At this point, the documentary cleverly combines a news report describing Police work as adequate and nonviolent, while showing footage of three Police officers brutally kicking a defenseless John Africa in the head before arresting him. After that, the MOVE compound was destroyed. However, by 1984 the group moved into another house in the famous Osage Avenue, in West Philadelphia. By then, MOVE members had become more hostile. They continued to be nonviolent, but began to insult continuously their neighbors and city officers through loudspeakers. This led to continuous citizen complaints and, after months of neighborhood tensions, the City's case to evict MOVE from their house was backed by the judiciary.

That leads the film not only to the other major and final conflict, but also to the incident that inspired the subtitle for this fact sheet. On May 12, 1985, the Police began to evacuate Osage Avenue and its surrounding area. In order to inform MOVE about the eviction, the Police Commissioner prepared a message to be read out loud in front of the house that started like this: "Attention MOVE, this is America". What does America stand for, then, if not for all Americans? Were MOVE members not

Americans? Apparently, at least for the City of Philadelphia, they had become traitors to their own homeland.

The operation per se begun on May 13. In the morning, Policemen and firefighters threw tear gas and water inside and above the house, despite knowing that the pressure could cause the ramshackle house to collapse and that the official plan was to remove all members from the house safely. In the afternoon, however, the new Mayor, Wilson Goode, the first black mayor of Philadelphia, publicly stated that the eviction would be carried out by “any means necessary”. Oddly enough, at 5 PM a member of the Police bomb squad suggested dropping an explosive onto the house’s roof, where a bunker had been built. The suggestion became the plan and, 15 minutes after the bomb exploded, the house was on fire. It is likely for the fire to have been an accident, nevertheless, as Mayor Goode would later declare in the Commission, there was a decision to “let the fire burn”. The Police Commissioner’s main goal was to eliminate their roof bunker in order to gain tactical superiority; this is why, when he became aware of the fire, he ordered to let the fire burn. In the end, this decision led to sixty-one houses destroyed and eleven people dead, five of which were children, all MOVE members. Only two of them survived: Ramona Africa, who was sentenced to prison and not released until 1991 and a kid, Birdie Africa, whose testimony is crucial in the documentary.

In this regard, journalist Jason Fagone writes that Osder’s decision to keep coming back to Birdie Africa’s deposition to guide spectators through the events “works spectacularly” for two reasons. “One, Mike is honest. He seems guileless, incapable of lying. (...) Two, Mike is sympathetic. He’s the person we identify with” (2014). That is absolutely true. By putting Mike’s deposition as the footage that links the whole story together, Osder cleverly reminds the viewer that, no matter what personal interpretation you have of what happened, innocent children had to pay the price of adults’ misjudgements and prejudices. Also talking about Michael Ward, Ann Hornaday writes that his “quiet, level-eyed answers to a commissioner’s questions provide a wrenching reminder of the human costs of a conflict” (2013). Moreover, Michael’s narrative, including his rescue by a heroic Police officer after falling unconscious in front of the burning house, “also gives the audience a glimpse of the compassion and courage it might have taken to avoid that conflict altogether”. In addition, reporter Ronnie Scheib claims that “the brilliantly edited tapestry of actions and reactions exposes a pattern of prejudice and fear capable of infinitely repeating itself” (2013). To realise that is very important, for, as long as a conflict between two parts is approached from fear and irrational mistrust, terrible incidents like this one are bound to happen again.

In conclusion, what *Let the Fire Burn* (2013) shows about America is that it does not tolerate dissent well. The authorities’ response was prompted by something that goes beyond racism, and has more to do with powerful figures facing a voice that dared to challenge the establishment. Because of that, in order to silence that voice, the City was ruthless and their use of force and violence in many ways excessive and unjustifiable. Let no fires burn again in this way.

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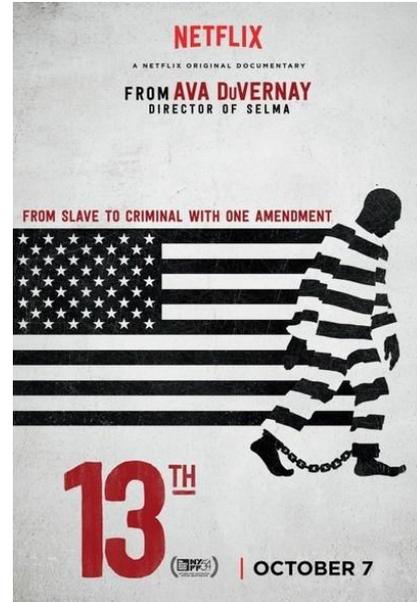
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Naiara López Alcázar

## 13<sup>th</sup> (2009): Legally Enslaved after Abolition

### CREDITS

**Directed by** Ava DuVernay  
**Written by** Spencer Averick, Ava DuVernay  
**Produced by** Ava DuVernay, Spencer Averick, Howard Barish, Tylane Jones  
**Music by** Jason Moran  
**Cinematography by** Jason Moran  
**Film editing by** Spencer Averick  
**Production companies:** Kandoo Films, Netflix and Forward Movement  
**Distributors:** Netflix  
**Runtime:** 1h 40'



### MAIN AWARDS

**Academy Award (Oscar) (2017):** Best Documentary (nominee)  
**BAFTA Awards (2017):** Best Documentary (winner)  
**International Documentary Association (2016):** Video Source Award (winner)  
**Primetime Emmy Awards (2017):** Outstanding Documentary or Nonfiction Special (winner), Outstanding Original Music and Lyrics (winner), Outstanding Writing for Nonfiction Programming (winner)

### OTHER NOTABLE DOCUMENTARY FILMS BY THE DIRECTOR

*This Is the Life* (2008), *My Mic Sounds Nice: A Truth About Women and Hip Hop* (2010)

### REASONS TO SEE 13<sup>th</sup>

- In this documentary film the audience will be able to see how the passing of the 13th Amendment in 1865 did not end slavery. Even though this amendment says that all American citizens are free there is an exception: condemned criminals. After watching the documentary the spectator will realize that inmates in American prisons can be considered slaves.
- The director Ava DuVernay shows how the news are manipulated in order to portray the black community as natural-born criminals, animals and dangerous people.
- After watching the documentary the audience will realize that the issue of post-slavery racism is still very present in the USA and that it is not eradicated.

## CONNECTED WITH...

- *Selma* (2014, fiction film), directed by Ava DuVernay. It is a historical film that deals with Martin Luther King and how he fought to give rights to African Americans. The film deals with the three-month period where Martin Luther King led a campaign to give equal voting rights to the black community by making a march from Selma to Montgomery. It ends with the signing of the Voting Rights Act, something that changed the world.
- *The Farm: Angola, USA* (1998), directed by Liz Garbus, Wilbert Rideau and Jonathan Stack. This film deals with the biggest American maximum-security prison known as Angola. It tells the story of six prison inmates. It is explained their life, death and survival. One of the interviewed inmates is one of the co-directors of the documentary, Rideau. There is a second part of this film, *The Farm: 10 Down* (2009), which deals with the lives of the survivors ten years later.
- *Serving Life* (2011), directed by Lisa R. Cohen. In *Serving Life* actor Forest Whitaker (also executive producers) voices Cohen's portrait of a group of inmate volunteers who staff a maximum security hospice centre in Louisiana where prisoners serve life sentences. Sick often due to the harsh conditions of imprisonment, these men, some of them hardened criminals, received care and compassion from their fellow inmates, valued hardly associated with prison.

## RE/PRESENTING AMERICA IN 13<sup>th</sup>

*13<sup>th</sup>* is a documentary film made from the point of view of the black community that shows the discrimination they have to suffer day by day. Director Ava DuVernay does not support any party: she shows how both sides, left wing and right wing, the Democrat and the Republican parties have mistreated the black community. African-Americans are just unprotected by all US Governments. Her film is very explicit about how the Police abuses their power and harasses for racist reasons most African-Americans. Their racism is part of the racism against the black community within the prison system in the United States of America. Supposedly, after the approval of the 13th Amendment in 1865 all American citizens were free except the condemned criminals. This meant that slaves had to be released, but the American economy, particularly in the South, faced important problems because of rising labor costs. To restore the economy of that part of the country the corrupt white authorities decided to imprison African Americans for committing minor crimes, invoking, precisely the 13th Amendment, so that they worked for free.

The black community has been suffering racist attacks always in post-slavery times. They were persecuted, killed and lynched by white supremacists such as the KKK (founded right after the 13th Amendment was passed). The Jim Crow Laws, enforced until 1965, established Segregation, by which black people were considered second-class citizens and were excluded from many public spaces and institutions enjoyed by whites. At that point, mainly in the 1950s, new waves of activists appeared in order to give rights to the black community, like Martin Luther King. Many of these activists

were sent to jail simply because of their demonstrations asking for rights already acknowledged by the US laws for decades if not a century.

Politicians also acted against the African-Americans in other ways since Nixon's Presidency in the 1970s, when the fight against crime and the war against drugs criminalized many of them. Then in the 1980s the Reagan Administration mistreated plenty of black poor people, imprisoning them in order to end crack trafficking, of which they were actually victims. In the 1990s, Bill Clinton created new laws against criminals, which added more Police to the city streets, armed with military weapons, and built more prisons. The number of inmates grew from 357,292 to 2,306,200 in 45 years. The news also showed African-Americans as anti-social persons that must be incarcerated because they are a serious danger to the community. Young black boys in particular were misrepresented as criminal super-predators to scare people and justify their frequent arrests.

A turn for the worse was taken with the establishment of ALEC (American Legislative Exchange Council) in 1973. Both politicians and corporations are part of this conservative NGO, devoted to supporting legal initiatives that connect them. CCA (Corrections Corporation of America), a private corporation that runs prisons, is part of ALEC. Thanks to this, CCA jails are full of inmates and the company is the leader of the private prison business sector. One of the laws supported by ALEC is Arizona's Support Our Law Enforcement and Safe Neighborhoods Act (or SB 1070 law), which allows the Police to stop people believed to be illegal immigrants. This law filled the immigration detention facilities benefiting the CCA.

Beyond this, prison industries have grown spectacularly since they use mostly African-American, Latino and Hispanic inmates to make products for free. This is the reason why prisons will keep on incarcerating non-white people massively, often with no trials. Most of them accept deals by which they plead guilty in order to serve a short period of time in prison because if they lose the trial, they might spend their life in prison. Some statistics indicate that one in three African American men will go to jail. There are more African Americans incarcerated than white people even though they are 12% of the USA populations. Because of the 13th Amendment, citizens may not be slaves, but if they are condemned criminals they may become the slaves of the state.

Reviewer Manohla Dargis writes that *13<sup>th</sup>* is "Powerful, infuriating and at times overwhelming" and that Ava DuVernay's documentary "will get your blood boiling and tear ducts leaking. It shakes you up, but it also challenges your ideas about the intersection of race, justice and mass incarceration in the United States, subject matter that could not sound less cinematic" (2016). When you watch the documentary you do feel angry. It is hard to see how some white people believe that they are better than black people, like for example President Donald Trump. There is a part of the documentary where images of black people being mistreated today and before are shown to prove that little has changed. It is sad and tragic to see how unfair the justice system is with African Americans.

Bethonie Butler writes that "Trump's Democratic rival isn't left unscathed in the documentary, which highlights Hillary Clinton's controversial 1996 remarks on [black boys as] 'superpredators', which she made while supporting Bill Clinton's 1994 crime bill" (2016). One of the best aspects of this documentary is that it does not support any party. It cannot be considered right of left winged because both sides are criticized. It just shows how all have ill-treated the black community, and the unfair laws all

legislators have made against them. Also, even though Hillary Clinton is criticized in the documentary for what happened during the presidency of Bill Clinton, it is also shown how years later she tried to fix her mistakes by supporting the 'Black Lives Matter' movement and wanting to reform the criminal justice System. Another politician is mentioned in the documentary, Barack Obama. He was the first US President to visit a prison. This shows that in the past Conservatives were seen as people who persecuted criminals massively, but today they embrace a justice reform brought on by the Democrats.

Reviewer Sonia Cerca complains that Du Vernay "blames whites for a few things they should not be blamed for. Whether it's drugs or guns, you can't blame another race for mistreating your race both in the past and the present as I believe is the way people were raised by their parents that truly matters" (2018). This is not completely true. DuVernay is blaming white people because they have been mistreating the black community for more than a century since the abolition of slavery. They used them as slaves, they persecuted and killed them, they considered them second-class citizens and criminals because of their skin color. When it comes to parenting, they should teach their children that we are all the same. Normally, kids tend to be like their parents. If they see that their parents are against the black community they will too be like that. Children should have their own opinion without being manipulated or indoctrinated by their parents.

After watching the documentary it is clear that the American society is still profoundly racist. There are too many whites who believe that the white race is superior. To stop this it is necessary that the justice system changes, it has to be equal for everybody. It is not fair that black people are seen as criminals and white people are not. The problem is that black behavior is criminalized. Since the approval of the 13th Amendment the white community has been trying to limit black people's freedom, and the way they are doing it is by criminalizing them. It is quite sad to see that little has changed since 1865 and non-white people are still mistreated and discriminated against. White politicians have always mistreated African-Americans and excluded them. In general terms, America is presented as a racist country that persecutes people who are not white. While the country has always been portrayed as the land of the free, Du Vernay's *13<sup>th</sup>* shows that freedom is only for white people. This means that if you are not white, you will not be free or safe in America.

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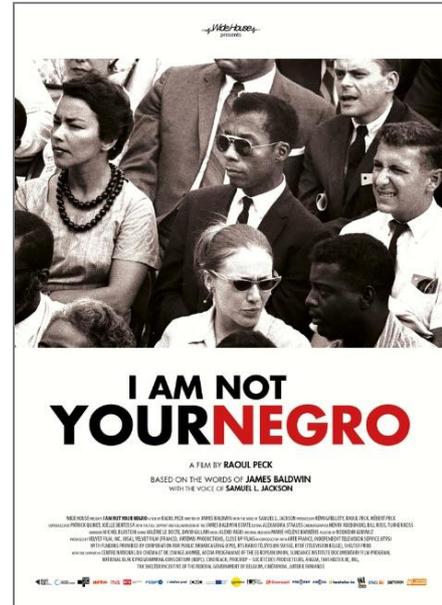
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Ainhoa López Caurel

# ***I Am Not Your Negro* (2016): Challenging White Supremacy in America**

## **CREDITS**

**Directed by** Raoul Peck  
**Written by** Raoul Peck, James Baldwin (writings)  
**Produced by** Rémi Grellety, Hébert Peck, Raoul Peck, Joëlle Bertossa, Patrick Quinet  
**Music by** Alexei Aigui  
**Cinematography by** Henry Adebonojo, Bill Ross IV, Turner Ross  
**Film editing by** Alexandre Strauss  
**Production companies** Velvet Films, ARTE, Independent Lens, RTBF, Radio Télévision Suisse, Shelter Prod  
**Distributors** Magnolia Pictures (theatrical)  
**Runtime** 1h 33'



## **MAIN AWARDS**

**Academy Awards, Oscar (2016):** Best Documentary (nominee)  
**BAFTA Awards (2017):** Best Documentary (winner)  
**Berlin International Film Festival (2017):** Panorama Audience Award -Documentary Film (winner), Prize of the Ecumenical Jury Special Mention – Panorama (winner), Teddy Best Documentary Film (nominee)  
**International Documentary Association (2016):** Creative Recognition Award -Best Writing (winner)

## **OTHER NOTABLE DOCUMENTARY FILMS BY THE DIRECTOR**

*Lumumba: La mort du prophète* (1990), *L'homme sur les quais* (1993), *Profit & Nothing But! Or Impolite Thoughts on the Class Struggle* (2001), *Assistance mortelle* (2013)

## **REASONS TO SEE *I Am Not Your Negro***

- *I Am Not Your Negro* deconstructs the American society by analyzing the issue of race and the need for white Americans to establish a distinction between the country's citizens based on their skin color and ethnicity.
- Baldwin's narration offers a very personal insight into the lives and assassinations of the great leaders of the Civil Rights movement, which increases empathy with the African American suffering.

- Peck's film contrasts the American Dream with reality; how America has tried to cover its crimes and violence by presenting itself as the 'land of opportunities', when, in fact, it stands upon the grounds of a racist and oppressive system.

### CONNECTED WITH...

- *Selma* (2014, fiction film), directed by Ava DuVernay. This film deals with the famous voting rights march from Selma to Montgomery in 1965, led by some of the greatest African American activists of the time: Hosea Williams, James Bevel and Martin Luther King. Despite the pacifist character of the mobilization, demonstrators were attacked by white segregationists in Marion, Alabama. The documentary presents how, notwithstanding the strong and violent opposition that activists had to endure, the march successfully achieved its main purpose; the signing of The Voting Rights Act by former President Lyndon B. Johnson in 1965.
- *King in the Wilderness* (2018), directed by Peter W. Kunhardt. This is a documentary film that deals with the final months of Martin Luther King's life before he was assassinated on April 4th, 1968. The film accounts for a set of rare interviews and historical archives about the great leader of the Civil Rights Movement, in which there can be seen the tensions that arose between King and the former President Lyndon, altogether with the FBI director J. Edgar Hoover. The documentary empathizes how, despite being aware that such confrontation would result in his death, King refused to remain silent and decided to advocate for African American welfare until the last of his days.
- *James Baldwin: The Price of the Ticket* (1990), directed by Karen Thorsen. This documentary film presents a strong resemblance to *I Am Not Your Negro*, for it is also based on a Baldwin's work *The Price of The Ticket*. The film reports Baldwin's migration to Paris during post-war, in 1948, and explores how his distancing from the American racial tensions allowed him to develop his role as a writer. It would not be until 1957 that Baldwin would return to the United States and become one of the most remarkable activists of the Civil Rights movement.

### RE/PRESENTING AMERICA IN *I Am Not Your Negro*

*I Am Not Your Negro* (2016) is a documentary film based on the unfinished memoirs of one of the greatest African American writers of the 20th Century: James Baldwin. In the script of *Remember the House*, Baldwin accounts for his experience as a member of the Civil Rights Movement and provides an intimate insight of his close relationship with some of the great activist leaders of the time, such as Martin Luther King, Medgar Evers and Malcolm X. Throughout the documentary, the author analyses the issue of race in the United States by going over the country's History and by providing an acute critique of the segregationist America of the 1960s. The film not only accounts for the struggle of the black community during the 20th Century, but also declares that racial tensions are still part of the present-day American society.

The film is divided into three main parts, following the chronological evolution of the Civil Rights Movement from its beginning in the mid-1950s to its end in the late

1960s. The first section of the documentary, named 'Paying my Dues', deals with Baldwin's return to the United States in 1957 after having lived in France for more than ten years, where he devoted his time to writing and studying the racial struggle in America. Nonetheless, while being in Paris, Baldwin felt uneasy for his passive role in the fight against racism, for, in the United States, African Americans were starting to protest for their rights and challenging racial segregation.

This would be the beginning of the awakening of the black America, the beginning of one of the most significant and transcendent mobilizations for human rights: the Civil Rights Movement. The first great rupture from the segregation system took place in 1955, when the Schools Integration Program was passed, allowing thus the mixing of African American and white students in public schools. The documentary presents one of the most significant figures to challenge segregation within the educational system: Dorothy Counts, the first African American student to attend a 'white school' in Charlotte, North Carolina. However, Count's presence was perceived as a menace by her classmates, who proceeded to harass and humiliate her. Baldwin tried to account for the violent reaction of white supremacists towards integration by analyzing what he believed to be one of the main instigators of the racial tension in the US: the industry of entertainment, which presents African Americans as the Other, suggesting that the *real* American can only be white.

Nonetheless, this perception of African Americans was challenged by those that the film labels as 'Heroes'. As the title very well indicates, in this chapter, Baldwin narrates the lives and assassinations of the most memorable icons of the Civil Rights Movement, Medgar Evers, Martin Luther King and Malcolm X. Although they all fought for the same cause, their approach towards the road to racial emancipation was significantly different. Martin Luther King advocated for non-violent resistance, whereas Malcolm X refused to adopt what he considered to be an ineffective way to fight for their rights. Apart from those prominent male activists, Baldwin introduces Lorraine Hansberry, an African American writer (known as a playwright) who attempted to apprise Bobby Kennedy of the importance to take measures against the racial conflict. Notwithstanding, her proposal was completely disregarded, and she died shortly after, at the age of thirty-four. Finally, the last section of the documentary, named 'Purity', accounts for a series of interviews and an outstanding speech carried out by James Baldwin at Cambridge University in which he examines the origins of the concepts of 'race' and 'negro'. The late instances of the film present how despite the exhaustive fight of the Civil Rights movement to achieve equality amongst American citizens, racism still present in the US.

The tone of the documentary is far from being unbiased. Based on the memoir of a great writer and one of the greatest African American activists of the Civil Rights Movement, *I Am Not Your Negro* presents itself as an activist documentary that blatantly condemns racial oppression in the United States. Reviewer Geoffrey Macnab claims that "Baldwin was writing more than 30 years ago. Not so much has changed since then. Even so, *I Am Not Your Negro* isn't as pessimistic as its downbeat tone suggests it should be. Baldwin's commentary is intended to provoke, not to induce despair" (2017). Rather than pitying African Americans for the suffering they have endured for centuries, in this film, Baldwin proceeds to analyze the root of such suffering by evaluating the concept of 'race'. He claims that African Americans are American citizens too and argues how ironic it is that after having them contribute to

the country's economy by being (tragically) enslaved for centuries, they are still regarded as outsiders within their own nation. The white Americans' attempt to build a fake reality to conceal the country's horrendous past, is represented through the idea of the so-called 'American Dream', which, at the same time, can only be enjoyed by the White American citizen.

Shawn Bernard writes in his review that "At moments, the tone and subject matter become overwhelming and risk losing the viewer in scenes of shock and brutality, but perhaps this is the point. We want to look away and have looked away, but should no longer" (2017). I do not agree with his statement. The film barely presents any instances of violence. Instead, it accompanies Baldwin's narration with a series of clips extracted from Old Hollywood films that serve as a support to the author's arguments on the issue of the American Dream or the way African Americans are represented in the entertainment industry. Far from being sensationalist, *I Am Not Your Negro* conveys its strong anti-racist message through the power of Baldwin's extremely eloquent discourse both in his interviews and in the script of *Remember the House*.

David Eldsetein claims that "This is Baldwin at his most polemical, but beneath his rage you can discern a groping for unity" (2017). This is certainly the essence of this documentary film. Baldwin does not merely intend to criticize the American system, but he aims to appeal to the audience's consciousness and elicit a reaction from them. Although in some instances Baldwin's discourse appears to be quite harsh and incriminatory, it provokes the desired effect of creating a sense of uneasiness on the spectator. It makes thus racism in the US appear to be an issue that involves not only African Americans, but the whole of the country's population, regardless of one's ethnicity or skin color.

As its very title indicates, *I Am Not Your Negro* intends to break with the idea of white supremacy and racial distinctions. Even though the documentary is mainly set in the Civil Rights movement period, it shows how, fifty years later, African Americans are still being oppressed by a white-ruling system. With the help of Baldwin's extremely eloquent narrative, the film challenges the audience to question the existence of 'race' and forces to face the heinous violent past (and present) of the country. The film ultimately suggests that, whether or not Americans want to acknowledge who they really are and what they have become, is let for them to decide.

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Mariona Llacuna Vidal

## RELIGION

Perhaps one of the greatest surprises of the 21st Century is the persistence of religion, despite the gradual process of laicization in the Western world. The attacks of 9/11 necessarily created a debate around the meaning of religious belief and how Islam needs to be understood as a cultural force of enormous importance actually in opposition to the violence invoked by a handful of radical jihadists. In Europe Christianity might even disappear in the near future given the low attendance of religious services and despite the popular fervor still much present in public religious celebrations. Yet, matters look very different in the USA, where the different Protestant denominations and Catholicism still keep their deep roots. These are no longer the 1980s dominated by the popular TV preachers but Christian fundamentalism and other fundamentalisms cannot really be discounted, nor can less committed religious belief.

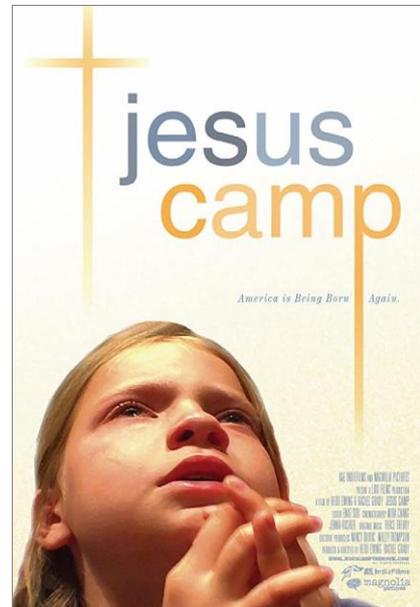
The five documentaries here presented cover religion from angles often connected with children and young people, and three of them do so in relation to sexuality. *Jesus Camp* (2006) created quite a stir by offering an apparently unbiased portrait of a Pentecostal camp aimed at recruiting believers among children with techniques that may seem very proper or very improper depending on your stance as a believer. There is no doubt in any case that the behavior of the Catholic priests condemned in Amy Berg's *Deliver Us from Evil* (2006) and Alex Gibney's *Mea Maxima Culpa: Silence in the House of God* (2012) is profoundly improper. Celibacy is connected in both films with the constant abuse of children by Catholic priests but what is above all denounced is the practice of covering up the crimes and preventing justice from being done. In *For the Bible Tells Me So* (2007) what appears to be improper is the interested misreading of the Bible that condemns Christian gays and lesbians to a life outside their chosen Church and even to seeking relief from harassment and homophobia in suicide.

Finally, Gibney's *Going Clear: Scientology & the Prison of Belief* (2015) is an inside look at one of the most dangerous yet most popular cults of recent decades, described here by those who managed to shake its hold on their lives.

## **Jesus Camp (2006): Making Little Soldiers of God**

### **CREDITS**

**Directed by** Heidi Ewing and Rachel Grady  
**Produced by** Heidi Ewing, Jannat Gargi, Rachel Grady  
**Music by** Force Theory, Sanford Livingston, Michael Furjanic (uncredited)  
**Cinematography by** Mira Chang, Jenna Rosher  
**Film editing by** Enat Sidi  
**Production company:** A&E IndieFilms, Loki Films  
**Distributors:** Magnolia Pictures (theatrical)  
**Runtime** 1h 27'



### **MAIN AWARDS**

**Academy Awards (Oscars) (2006):** Best Documentary, Features (nominee)  
**Alliance of Women Film Journalists (2006):** EDA Award, Best Documentary by or About Women (winner), EDA Special Mention Award, Don't Stick Your Head in the Sand (winner)  
**Silverdocs Documentary Festival (2006):** Grand Jury Award - Best Feature (winner)  
**Tribeca Film Festival (2006):** Special Jury Prize, Outstanding Achievement in Documentary (winner), Jury Prize, Best Documentary Feature (nominee)

### **OTHER NOTABLE DOCUMENTARY FILMS BY THE DIRECTORS**

**By Rachel Grady and Heidi Ewing:** *The Boys of Baraka* (2005), *12th & Delaware* (2010), *Detropia* (2012), *Norman Lear: Just Another Version of You* (2016) and *One of Us* (2017)

### **REASONS TO SEE *Jesus Camp***

- It portrays Protestant Christian beliefs in a way that helps audiences understand the reasoning behind the United States' main social issues. It shows the influence Christianity has on America and, therefore, how the fight against abortion, homosexuality or the theory of evolution, as well as the disregard of global warming, are perpetuated.
- It shows the way children are manipulated by the Pentecostal Church very clearly.

- The summer camp portrayed here had to be closed after the documentary was released because of the backlash and protests it received. This shows the impact of the documentary.

### CONNECTED WITH...

- *The Education of Mohammad Hussein* (2013), directed by Heidi Ewing and Rachel Grady. A documentary about the struggles of growing up Muslim in a post 9/11 society. It dives into the matter of the rise in Islamophobic hate crimes across America and how it isolates Muslim American communities from other groups in order to avoid conflict. This conflict is shown through the hateful sermons and public acts of a Floridian preacher who visits a majorly Muslim neighborhood to provoke them.
- *One of Us* (2017), directed by Heidi Ewing and Rachel Grady. This documentary deals with the experiences of three ex-members of the Hasidic community in Brooklyn after they decide to leave it. It exposes certain parts of this community that provoked the protagonists to question their faith and leave it, such as the cases of domestic abuse and childhood sexual abuse. Furthermore, it also deals with their struggles in getting accustomed to their new lives after they left behind everything they knew, including their families.
- *Kidnapped for Christ* (2014), directed by Kate S. Logan. This documentary tells the story of a group of teenagers who were sent to a Christian boarding school (Escuela Caribe in the Dominican Republic) against their will to be 'saved' by God. It centers on the experience of a young boy who was sent there after coming out as gay, a girl with anxiety disorder and another girl struggling with childhood trauma. This documentary started as a story about teenagers healing through Christianity but ended up being an exposé on the cruelty of their methods.

### RE/PRESENTING AMERICA IN *Jesus Camp*

*Jesus Camp* follows three children (Levi, Tory and Rachael) as they attend a Christian summer camp run by Becky Fischer, a Pentecostal children's Minister. The documentary shows both their life at home before the camp, where they are already devout Christians, and their experience in the camp, where they actively participate in the religious celebrations. These children have been already educated in the practice of Pentecostal Christianity by their families, especially since some of them are homeschooled. They are shown praying to a Christian flag, listening to Christian music and learning about Creationism. In the camp, the audience gets introduced to Fischer and follows her as she prepares to preach to the children. She is portrayed as a devout Christian who genuinely cares about the children and does not only sees them as, in her words, "little soldiers of God".

This seemingly nurturing woman has devoted her life to turning children into Christian believers verging on the fanatical, thanks to a theatrical sense of preaching used to persuade the children in manipulative ways. Mostly, *Jesus Camp* features the sermons in which Fischer (as well as other members of the Pentecostal Church) starts talking kindly to the children about the beauty of Christianity and, slowly, turns into an

enthusiastic ranting about the importance of following God at every moment, or else risk divine displeasure, which also features some undertones of Islamophobia. The documentary also narrates the daily life of the children, many of whom homeschooled because their extremely religious parents do not share the ideas which public schools teach, among them those about evolution.

The documentary does not have a specific point of view; judgement is left in the hands of the viewer. The film bases its narrative on portraying the events of the summer camp as they happened in a practically unbiased style. It features, however, commentary from Mike Papantonio, a radio-talk host, who gives an outsider's perspective against the indoctrination of children, as a counter opinion to the conservative/religious one defended by Fischer. The Pentecostal Christian lifestyle is portrayed through the candid footage of the camp and also through interviews with the children involved, their families and Becky Fischer, the main speaker on the Christian side.

Ewing and Grady juxtapose Fischer's and Papantonio's perspectives, presenting them as opposites but within Christianity, with Fischer expressing her more conservative views and Papantonio making sporadic interventions to offer a different opinion on her methods. *Jesus Camp* shows thus the contradictions of American society. Both Fischer and Papantonio claim that their values are intrinsically American but at the same time they complain that America does not represent them, but for different reasons. All in all, *Jesus Camp* portrays a series of values that are very much entrenched in American society and that have fused into the definition of what America is, a fundamentally religious nation. Seeing this film, it is really easy to understand, for example, why abortion is such a huge issue in the US or why Islamophobia is such a prevalent problem.

British newspaper *The Guardian* published in 2016 an article about some of the children appearing in the documentary and ten years after they attended Fischer's summer camp. Andrew Sommerkamp, who appears in the documentary struggling to believe in God, wondered: "Was it child abuse? Yes and no, I think they had the best of intentions, but I see it as sick people trying to treat sick people. It's their coping mechanism for figuring out why we're alive" (in Hesse 2016). I do not entirely agree with him. It is true that the people in charge of these camps are not aware of the psychological abuse and, probably, do not abuse children intentionally, but claiming that because they had their best intentions then it is not abuse, undermines the horror happening to these children who, at best, were bullied into believing in God. However, this is his experience and as someone who lived through it, he knows better. In the same article, they mention how Becky Fischer had to close the summer camp after the documentary was released because it kept getting vandalized.

Ken Fox, writing for *TV Guide*, says "Grady and Ewing's depiction of this modern-day children's crusade is remarkably unbiased, so the fact that Pastor Fischer would probably consider the film an accurate portrayal of her mission may be the most terrifying thing of all" (Fox 2006). Certainly, *Jesus Camp* allows its subjects to speak for themselves and to defend their acts to the point where nothing is censored, and everything rings true. It is real and raw and, depending on the viewer's point of view different, the film can be read in different ways. People like Fischer will say that it is an accurate portrayal, even a positive one, while people on the other side of the

spectrum, including moderate Christian and atheists, will be terrified by how children are manipulated.

Neva Chonin writes in *The San Francisco Chronicle*, that “minor flaws and all, *Jesus Camp* is among the year’s most important films, if only because it forces us to learn about an America we seldom see and seldom want to see. It stares into the face of faith run amok, and for those willing to follow its gaze, it provides sad revelations” (2006). Chonin is right: *Jesus Camp* portrays a part of America that no one really knows, even though we all suspect it might exist. Although Chonin does not explicitly mention it, in a way the documentary also portrays the aftermath of 9/11, when people lost and found their faith in unexpected ways. The loss of that many lives, the close encounter with death and what was perceived as an attack to America was followed by a massive wave of fear. The fear of death coupled with the fear of Islam, the religion behind the attacks, threw a huge part of American society straight into the arms of the most fanatic side of Christianity. This fear turned into hate, and thus, turned into a need to defend themselves from this big enemy who was threatening their beliefs. Hence, the indoctrination.

In conclusion, what *Jesus Camp* tells us about America is that there is a corruption at the heart of its society named fundamentalist Christianity which gives a specific group of people too much power over the rest of society. This documentary brings to light from a neutral point of view the methods that conservative sectors in America use to lure children into a fanatical type of Christianity and how normalized they are in these communities. From praying to inanimate objects like microphones or computers, to giving enthusiastic sermons that bring the children to tears, *Jesus Camp* shows a realistic and unbiased perspective of the indoctrination of children in the deeply conservative America.

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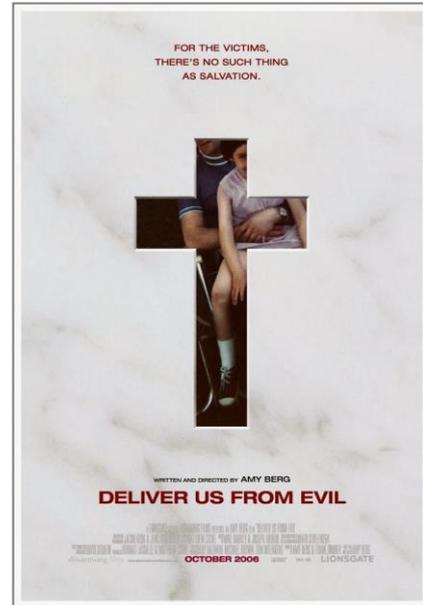
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Sara Nogueira Bermúdez

## ***Deliver Us From Evil* (2006): Putting Power and Glory Above Children**

### **CREDITS**

**Directed by** Amy Berg  
**Written by** Amy Berg  
**Produced by** Amy Berg, Matthew Cooke, Frank Donner, Hermas Lassalle  
**Music by** Joseph Arthur, Mick Harvey  
**Cinematography by** Jacob Kusk, Jens Schlosser  
**Film editing by** Matthew Cooke  
**Production companies** Disarming Films  
**Distributors** Lionsgate (USA) (theatrical)  
**Runtime** 1h 41'



### **MAIN AWARDS**

**Academy Awards (Oscars) (2007):** Best Documentary Feature (nominee)  
**Boston Society of Film Critics Awards (2006):** Best Documentary (tied with *Shut Up & Sing*) (winner)  
Los Angeles Film Festival (2006): Best Documentary Feature (winner)  
**Writers Guild of America, USA (2007):** Documentary Screenplay Award (winner)

### **OTHER NOTABLE DOCUMENTARY FILMS BY THE DIRECTOR**

*West of Memphis* (2012), *An Open Secret* (2014), *Prophet's Prey* (2015), *Janice: Little Girl Blues* (2015), *This is Personal* (2019)

### **REASONS TO SEE *Deliver Us From Evil***

- Father O'Grady, the abuser, accepted appearing in the documentary to give his first-hand testimony and his own vision of the facts.
- The presentation of the events and the testimonies of those in connection to the Church, helps to unmask the Catholic Church and show the hierarchy within the religious system protected the abusers.
- The striking and detailed testimonies make the story of abuse even more outrageous.

## CONNECTED WITH...

- *Revelation* (2020, mini-series), directed by Sarah Ferguson and Nial Fulton. It is a documentary series on the criminal priests of the Catholic Church where for the first time the crimes laid bare in their own words. The compelling interviews show the system of protection that allowed its members to get away with the crimes. Sara Ferguson goes into a maximum-security prison to meet the most notorious member of the religious orders. Senior Church figures are also interviewed to explain the evil in their midst.
- *Sex Crimes and the Vatican* (2006), directed by Sarah Macdonald. The film argued that the Vatican used a secret document known as *Crimen Sollicitationis*, enforced by Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger before he became the Pope, to silence allegations of sexual abuse by priests within the Catholic Church. The documentary outlines several cases of child sexual abuse by Catholic priests, however, it shows how the Church's overall method for solving the problem has been to move offending priests from parish to parish, and marginalize the victims.
- *The Keepers* (2017, mini-series), directed by Ryan White. This seven-episode Netflix series deals with the unsolved murder of nun Sister Cathy Cesnik, a teacher of English and drama at Baltimore's Catholic all-girls Archbishop Keough High School. According to her former students, Cesnik was the victim of a cover-up by the Church authorities involving another priest at the high school, A. Joseph Maskell, supposedly guilty of sexually abusing students.

## RE/PRESENTING AMERICA IN *Deliver Us From Evil*

*Deliver Us From Evil* narrates the story of Father O'Grady, a Catholic priest who was relocated to various parishes around the USA during the 1970s in an attempt by the Catholic Church to cover up his sexual abuse of children, often including rape. The story revolves around the testimonies of four adults –Anne Jyono, Nancy Sloan, the Howards, and Adam– who suffered sexual abuse by O'Grady during their childhood. The documentary follows a mix of the victims' stories, the disturbing interview with O'Grady and some experts' point of view, including theologians, attorneys and psychologists.

In the opening scene Father O'Grady talks about his life as a priest, including his failures in that role, that is, the sexual abuses of children. Little by little, the stories of the four children are exposed –how they met Father O'Grady, how the priest became involved with the children and sexually abused them and why the ashamed children decided not to tell anything to their families at that time. Both the victims and their parents were devastated when everything came into light. Families were told that Father O'Grady had been sent to a monastery away from children but this was far from the truth; the Bishop keep moving Oliver to other parishes where he keep molesting other children; the youngest one was just nine months old. 'Ollie', as he was known, admitted that he spent as much time grooming victims as he did being a priest.

The Church knew all about Father O'Grady's abuses; there was plenty of evidence because Father O'Grady himself confessed what he had been doing to those

children. Nevertheless, Bishop Mahony stated in his deposition that he knew nothing, invoking the secrecy of the confessional. The point implicitly defended is that the power and glory of the Church were above the protection of the children. No action was taken. Some experts highlight in the film that the whole problem about that inaction is “the system, the monarchical hierarchical Governmental system of the Catholic Church” in which people in charge believed themselves to be more relevant, even better than the children. Father Ollie’s case was not an isolated one –pedophilia in the priesthood is a major crisis for the Catholic Church which might cost many millions in reparations (the priests are hardly ever judged outside the Church). In this case, the Church did nothing but make sure that Father Ollie’s crimes would not be exposed. At the end of the documentary, Berg notes that the Vatican did not answer her request for a representative to appear in the documentary. Father Ollie is still free, in Ireland, and the high members of the Church involved in the case declined to be interviewed.

Anthony Oliver Scott writes in his review that “Pedophilia is not a subject most are eager to think about, but these days it seems impossible to avoid. Neither sensationalistic nor sentimental, Ms. Berg’s film is clear-sighted, tough-minded and devastating, a portrait of individual criminality and institutional indifference, a study in the betrayal of trust and the irresponsibility of authority” (2006). I totally agree with Scott; it is impossible to avoid something that has been existing since the 4th century when the Church decreed that priests could not marry (so that their properties would remain in the Church). Father O’Grady’s case is not an isolated case but part of a massive crisis in the Catholic Church almost since its beginning. People blindly trust the Church; as one of the victims’ parents states in the documentary, they had always trusted Father Ollie and they never “saw that side of him”. It was very hard for them to accept that their blind trust could end up with such a betrayal.

Dana Stevens states that “*Deliver Us From Evil*, the first feature-length documentary from director Amy Berg, is not one of your pass-the-popcorn date movies. It’s a howl of rage and a keen-eyed study of a subject that, unfortunately, never stops being news: the way institutional power acts as a shield under whose cover the strong can abuse the weak” (2006). Stevens’ description of “the way institutional power acts” as “a shield” summarizes the whole point of the documentary. For instance, Mahony (one of the Bishops close to Father O’Grady) did not take any action against Father Ollie in order to preserve his own reputation because, at that time, he was waiting to be appointed Archbishop. At the end of the documentary, we get the feeling that the interests of the Church are placed above children and humanity.

One user of the IMBD website mentions the following in his review: “The disturbing part was the institutional course of action and lack of action taken when high leaders were made aware of the problem and asked for help by BOTH sexual victims AND sexual offenders. As with many parts of systematic human intervention, the easiest thing to do was to ignore or divert and continue. This film is an eye opener” (Dedrac 3, 2006). Just as happens with pedophilia in the documentary, there are plenty of problems that we tend to ignore expecting them to be resolved by themselves. In the documentary we see that there is plenty of information that never reaches the Police and is left without attention. Furthermore, the most disturbing thing is “the lack of action taken when high leaders were made aware of the problem”, as pointed out in

the review. The Church justified these actions by saying that they “have solved the problem”. Unlike the high leaders of the Church that looked away, Father O’Grady told everything he did and asked for help, even though he continued acting the same way. In his depositions he did not deny anything about his crimes and this fact shows a willingness to overcome and truly ‘solve the problem’.

Given the supremacy of the power and glory of the Catholic Church above the children exposed in the documentary, there is something to be questioned within the whole religious institution, especially in relation to the Catholic hierarchy. Religion in the United States is remarkable in its high followship; faith plays a very important role in the life of Americans and could easily blind such devout people to the foibles of the priests –the betrayal these people suffer by the Church is felt enormously, due to the fact that religion is such an important factor in their lives. In *Deliver Us From Evil*, celibacy is one of the major issues raised. Although the Catholic Church is widely spread in Europe, it has to be taken into account that Catholics are only 22% of believers in the United States and Protestantism is nearly 50%. The fact that Protestant priests are married would significantly reduce the crimes committed by those priests. With this idea in mind, the documentary leaves the Catholic Church in a very bad position and one can think that it somehow pushes American society to support other options such as the Protestantism.

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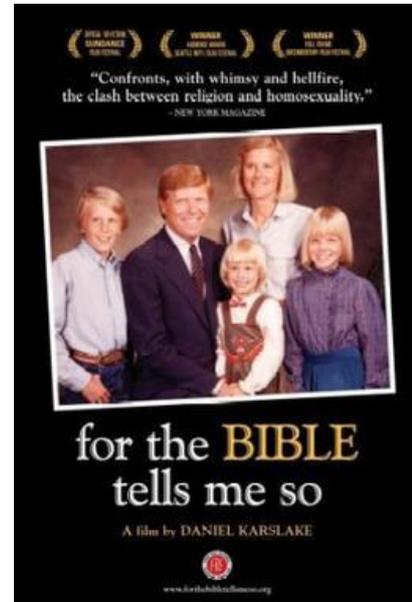
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Paula Pérez Martín

## ***For the Bible Tells Me So* (2007): A Homophobic Misreading of Scripture**

### **CREDITS**

**Directed by** Daniel Karlake  
**Written by** Daniel G. Karlake, Helen R. Mendoza  
**Produced by** Daniel Karlake, Nancy Kennedy, Helen Mendoza  
**Music by** Scott Anderson & Mark Suozzo  
**Film editing by** Nancy Kennedy  
Production companies  
**Production Companies** Atticus Group, VisionQuest Productions  
**Distributor** First Run Features (theatrical)  
**Runtime** 1h 38'



### **MAIN AWARDS**

**GLAAD Media Awards (2008):** Outstanding Documentary (winner)  
**Sundance Film Festival (2007):** Grand Jury Prize (nominee)

### **OTHER NOTABLE DOCUMENTARY FILMS BY THE DIRECTOR**

*Every Three Seconds* (2014), *For They Know Not What They Do* (2019), *Lost in Translations* (2020), *The Radical* (2020)

### **REASONS TO SEE *For the Bible Tells Me So***

- It is a highly informative and educational documentary. Historical information is provided about the verses written in the Bible that mention homosexual conduct. This information helps the viewer understand the historical context in which the text was written.
- It also offers all kinds of perspectives on religion and morality, which allows us as a viewer to reach our own conclusions. Thanks to the historical context provided during the film, as well as the stories about each family, most people will be able to leave behind their prejudices and stereotypes about homosexuality, which otherwise would prevent them from knowing what the Bible actually says.
- It is eye-opening. Although it is very inspiring and overall sends a message of hope, it still shows the struggles that people from the LGBTQ+ community go through,

and how much they have to fight to be accepted. It also shows graphic images and suicide statistics that remind the viewer of the cruel reality.

### CONNECTED WITH...

- *God Loves Uganda* (2013), directed by Roger Ross Williams. This documentary explores the influence of a North American evangelical campaign in Uganda by following a group of missionaries. The intention of this campaign is essentially to change the African culture and indoctrinate their Christian Right beliefs, as well as to make homosexuality punishable by death in that country. Just like *For the Bible Tells Me So*, this documentary shows yet another case of a misreading of the Bible and how it is being used as an excuse to harm the community.
- *A Jihad for Love* (2007), directed by Parvez Sharma. It deals with homosexuality within the Islamic faith. It was filmed in 12 countries and in 9 different languages in order to interview people across the Muslim and Western worlds who are trying to reconcile their faith with their sexuality. Again, it is yet another example of how religion is misused to support prejudice.
- *Trembling before G-d* (2001), directed by Sandi Simcha DuBowski. It tells the stories of various gay and lesbian Orthodox Jews worldwide who try to find a balance between their sexual orientation and their faith. The film is built around a series of interviews with mostly American Jewish homosexuals who talk about all the difficulties they have had to face, as well as psychologists and rabbis, who share their views on Orthodox Jewish attitudes towards homosexuality

### RE/PRESENTING AMERICA IN *For the Bible Tells Me So*

*For the Bible Tells Me So* deals with various interpretations of what the Bible says about homosexuality. It demonstrates how the Bible has been misused as a weapon to support and promote prejudice, and how over the years, religious people have been conditioned to hold the belief that homosexuality is both a choice and a sin only because the Bible allegedly says so. The documentary offers different perspectives on religion and deals with moral issues experienced by people of faith. Additionally, topics such as the possible origin of homophobia and the historical context in which the Scripture was written are dealt with.

The narration follows the story of five religious families and how they deal with their children's coming out as being a part of the LGBTIQ+ community. As each family is introduced through interviews, they explain the preconceptions that they had about homosexuality and how they reacted when their children came out to them. Among these families, we are introduced to well-known people in America such as Gene Robinson, who is the first openly gay bishop to be consecrated by the Episcopal Church, Chrissy Gephardt, the daughter of the Presidential candidate and representative Dick Gephardt, and Jacob Reitan, an LGBTIQ+ activist. What these three families have in common is their supportive response to their children's coming out. The other two families, on the other hand, find it more difficult to accept the fact that their children are homosexual. Though it is hard for them at first to accept the news,

the Poteat family end up accepting their daughter Tonia for who she is. Unfortunately, this is not the case for Mary Lou Wallner, who is not willing to accept her daughter Ana, which leads to her committing suicide.

In between these interviews with the family members, interviews with several religious scholars, including Reverend Peter Gomes and Bishop Desmond Tutu are presented, in which they discuss the historical background of the Scripture and explain a number of topics regarding homosexuality and what the Bible really says about it, as well as people's interpretation of it. They all mention that people fail to read the Bible within the historical context in which it was written, which leads to a misinterpretation of the text. The idea that homophobia stems from the patriarchy's fear of the other and of the feminine is also considered. Additionally, the audience is introduced to one of the most powerful Christian organizations in the country, "Focus on the Family", and their reparative therapies programmed to prevent or treat homosexuality. The consequences of such therapies are also discussed in the film. This documentary film is rather objective in the sense that all the information that is provided about the Bible and the statistics given about the LGBTQ+ community are based on facts. However, it has not been made from an impartial point of view. While there is no prejudice shown against religion and people of faith, the intention of *For the Bible Tells Me So* is to spread awareness and demonstrate why homophobia or any other kind of discrimination should not be justified based on what the Bible purportedly says.

Amy Biancolli writes in her review that the film's "main surprise is the compassion shown toward everyone, on all sides of the debate. It does not vilify those who vilify gays" (2007). This is certainly the case: it is an objective and non-judgmental documentary that presents all kinds of points of view and facts; this allows the viewer to come up with their own conclusions. Numerous reactions could possibly arise from people that hold onto their religious beliefs. This is probably why the film got such polarized ratings, as they reflect people's attitudes towards the LGBTQ+ community. While most reviews rated this film positively, it is true that some others showed a negative reaction from the viewers. These were often written by Christians who were offended by homosexuality, and they mostly coincided when they said that this documentary film twists the words of God and the Bible.

Moira MacDonald notes that "Daniel Karlake's remarkable documentary boldly takes on a loaded topic - Christianity and homosexuality - and examines it both intellectually and emotionally; the result may well leave you blinking away a few tears". (2007). This is partially true. The fact that we get to watch interviews with reverends and scholars as well as actual Christian families that had to educate themselves on the topics makes this documentary a very educational and emotional one at the same time. However, not everyone who watches this film will have the same emotional reaction or agree with the facts provided by the scholars. The reliability of this documentary film will mostly depend on people's beliefs, as well as their willingness to keep an open mind while watching it. While it can be a very educational documentary, it is true that one must decide to be open to hearing new ideas before watching it, as it may challenge the audience's previous opinions.

Reviewer Jessica Reaves writes "this is a compelling, thought-provoking portrait of a quiet challenge rising within America's churches" (2007). In fact, at the beginning of the documentary, it is suggested that the Catholic church is the place where prejudice is born and promoted, as it has forced people to believe that homosexuality

is a sin by misusing the Bible and misreading its text. Historically, the Catholic church has used passages from the Bible in public speech to encourage such misreading, such as the one in the book of Genesis, which deals with God's destruction of the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, and verses from Leviticus, which describe homosexual conduct as an abomination. This is but a translation of the Hebrew text, in which the term "abomination" is used to refer to a violation of a ritual.

Overall, *For the Bible Tells Me So* shows an existing division in the American society by exploring the conflicting relationship between people's moral and religious values and the LGBTQ+ community in the country. It is a portrayal of how the Scripture has been misused by the Church and by many religious people in the country over the years to promote and support homophobic prejudice. Nevertheless, the documentary film offers a message of hope through the interviews with these Christian families, as they are able to embrace their children's sexual orientation despite their beliefs. Their children, at the same time, were able to reconcile their faith with their sexuality. This shows that, although they have faced discrimination from the religious organization, they still feel loved and accepted by God. All in all, if we were to find an answer to the question "is it possible to still be a believer after having faced discrimination?", we possibly could not find a right answer, as it is a very complicated and personal subject that each individual has to deal with, taking into consideration their own beliefs and experiences.

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Aitana Pérez Morenilla

## ***Mea Maxima Culpa: Silence in the House of Good* (2012): When Deaf Power Entered the Holy See**

### **CREDITS**

**Directed by** Alex Gibney

**Written by** Alex Gibney

**Produced by** Alex Gibney, Alexandra Johnes, Kristen Vaurio, Jedd Wider, Todd Wider, Nicoletta Billi, Trevor Birney, Sloane Klevin, Ruth O'Reilly, Maureen A. Ryan, Kristen Vaurio

**Music by** Ivor Guest, Robert Logan

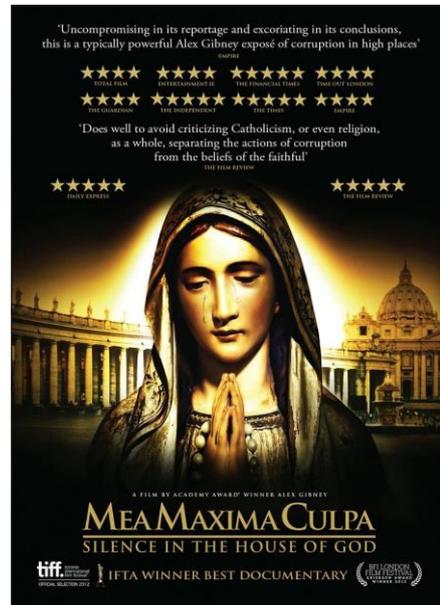
**Cinematography by** Lisa Rinzler

**Film editing by** Sloane Klevin

**Production companies** Jigsaw Production, Wider Film Projects, Below the Radar Entertainment, HBO Documentary Films, Screen Ireland, British Broadcasting Corporation

**Distributors** HBO Films (TV)

**Runtime** 1h 47'



### **MAIN AWARDS**

**Irish Film and Television Awards (2013):** Best Feature Documentary (winner)

**London Film Festival (2012):** Grierson Award (winner)

**Peabody Awards (2014):** Peabody Award (winner): HBO Documentary Films, Jigsaw Productions, Wider Film Projects

**Primetime Emmy Awards (2013):** Exceptional Merit in Documentary Filmmaking (winner); Outstanding Picture Editing for Nonfiction Programming (winner); Outstanding Writing for Nonfiction Programming (winner); Outstanding Cinematography for Nonfiction Programming (nominee); Outstanding Music Composition for a Miniseries, Movie or a Special (Original Dramatic Score) (nominee); Outstanding Directing for Nonfiction Programming (nominee)

### **OTHER NOTABLE DOCUMENTARY FILMS BY THE DIRECTOR**

*Enron: The Smartest Guys in the Room* (2005, Oscar Award nominee), *Taxi to the Dark Side* (2007, Oscar Award winner), *Client 9: The Rise and Fall of Eliot Spitzer* (2010), *Going Clear: Scientology and the Prison of Belief* (2015), *The Inventor: Out for Blood in Silicon Valley* (2019)

## REASONS TO SEE *Mea Maxima Culpa: Silence in the House of Good*

- It gives voice to the victims and to disabled people, presenting a group of men who are truly inspirational for the victims of sexual abuse and for the Disability Rights movement.
- It is a reflection on power and manipulation. It provides a psychological study of the abusers that pervert Christian values to justify horrendous acts. Also, it shows how heterosexual patriarchy can deeply hurt other men.
- It rejects the hierarchical and allegedly perfect Catholic Church that protected sexual predators but presents an alternative one for common Christians. Thus, it also appeals to Christians that are not willing to follow the Church if it still hides these cases.

### CONNECTED WITH...

- *In the Land of the Deaf* (1992), directed by Nicolas Philibert. This French documentary film focus on the deaf community. It portrays deafness in a multitude of environments. One instance is the marginalization of a deaf woman, who was even locked up in a psychiatric hospital. Deafness inside the family, inside a school—it focuses on both deaf students' learning and the teacher—and inside a couple's life are other examples used in this documentary to show how deafness is lived in different ranges of age.
- *Prey* (2019), directed by Matt Gallagher. This Canadian documentary focus on Rod MacLeod, a victim of sexual abuse. During his infancy, he was molested by a priest named William Hodgson Marshall. McLeod was not the only one who suffered Marshall's abuses since this documentary gives voice to other victims. Thus, McLeod decides to confront the abuser in court, disclosing another sexual scandal protected by the Catholic Church.
- *By the Grace of God/ Grâce à Dieu* (original title) (2018, fiction film), directed by François Ozon. In this French film based on real facts, Ozon narrates how three abuse survivors resident in Lyon got together to denounce not only their abuser, Father Bernard Preynat, but also the man who covered his crimes, Cardinal Philippe Barbarin. Ozon's very controversial film was released in the middle of Barbarin's trial. The title quotes his exclamation before the press when he commented that the crimes had prescribed: 'Thank God for that!'

### RE/PRESENTING AMERICA IN *Mea Maxima Culpa: Silence in the House of Good*

*Mea Maxima Culpa* presents one of the worst sides of the Catholic Church: child sexual abuse. It unveils the extension of Catholic sexual abuses and analyzes how the Vatican has faced (not) the situation. This film documents how the See of Rome, one of the most powerful institutions on Earth, has hidden the most macabre secret of their history and maintained an image of pulchritude that is far from reality. Nevertheless, the silence of this apparently omnipotent institution was broken by a

group of students of St John, an American school for deaf children, where many cases of sexual abuse, known since the 1950s, took place. Additionally, Gibney's *Mea Maxima Culpa* also depicts the strength of deaf people and their fight for their safety. In short, it shows what happened when deaf power irrupted into the Vatican.

This documentary film depicts how a group of deaf men—Gary Smith, Pat Kuehn, Arthur Budzinski, Bob Bolger and Terry Kohut—disclosed the most abhorrent secret of the Catholic Church, something that had never been done before in US history. The film starts with a letter written by Terry in 1995 to the Vatican, but the story goes back to the 1950s and 1960s in Milwaukee (Wisconsin). Gary, Pat, Arthur and Terry were students of the St John's School, directed by Father Murphy. At first, Murphy was adored by the students, with whom he could communicate well despite not being deaf. However, Murphy turned out to be a pedophile. He used the intimacy of confession to assault the students, who, befuddled as they were, did not question the will of a priest. Richard Sipe, an ex-priest, psychotherapist and expert in sex inside the Catholic Church, claims that half of the American priesthood has sex (consensual or not). Sipe's words reveal the manipulative nature of the acts of these priests, who distorted sexual abuse and made them look like sacred rituals.

Unable to communicate with their hearing families, St John's students suffered during decades the abuses of Murphy, who is believed to have molested around two hundred children. The Church was perfectly aware of this. It is particularly remarkable that Fitzgerald's Congregation of the Servants of the Paraclete even suggested buying an island where all abusers could be isolated to end pedophilia. In the 1970s, Bob, another victim of Murphy, encouraged Arthur and Gary to face their abuser. They even handed out flyers with Murphy's face stating that he was a sexual predator, but no one was willing to help them. Defeating Murphy was extremely complex since he was protected by the Vatican. Similar to Murphy's case, other scandals came out in Ireland and inside the See of Rome itself. As a response, the Vatican silenced all this and insisted on tackling the problem inside their institution by protecting the abusers and forcing victims to occult their experiences. Pope Benedict XVI, perfectly acquainted with the history of clerical pedophilia, condemned the abuses but his actions against the perpetrators were far from enough. Finally, Murphy died without being tried and similar scandals continued emerging. Victims still demand that abusers' names are made public. Since the Vatican is legally a state and the Pope is not subject to law, the solution to end this injustice is taking legal action against the inviolability of the Vatican, which is terribly complex. However, St John's students, helped by the lawyer Jeffrey Anderson, have become unstoppable in the fight for children's safety.

One of the main aims of the documentary is clear since the very beginning: disclosing one of the Catholic Church's biggest secrets and forcing the Vatican to acknowledge its role in the perpetuation of abuses in the name of God. Marsha McCreddie claims that "the film is one-sided, of course—church officials ignored interview requests, but their version has been around for a couple of millennia anyway" (2012). Certainly, in the film the Vatican's perspective is taken into account only indirectly (citing by interviews on TV channels, for example) because they rejected participating in it. However, this documentary is not anti-Christian or anti-religious. It strongly denounces the action of the Catholic Church as an institution concerning sexual abuse, but a much kinder view of Christianity is also depicted in this documentary. It offers a terrifying psychological study of sexual predators such as

Murphy, who affirmed that his only aim was to stop homosexuality in the school. On the contrary, Archbishop Weakland, who confronted Murphy and voluntarily declared himself gay, appears as an antithesis of this abuser. Nevertheless, it must be noted that Weakland was not celibate either and even though it is said that he always had consensual sex, this is not entirely clear. What is clear is that this documentary is an attempt to protect everyone who could suffer clerical abuse including parishioners, who are said to form the real Church in this documentary, against the Church as an institution that has so many times distanced from the idea loving of the neighbor.

Reviewer Justin Chang writes “*Mea Maxima Culpa* will play not as a revelatory exposé so much as a dispiriting reiteration of known truths. Yet it remains a powerful, necessary contribution to a chilling body of reportage that, one senses by film’s end, has just begun to take stock of the human costs of a monstrous conspiracy” (2012). Similar scandals have emerged all around the world. Thus, what this film narrates may not seem new. Nonetheless, I do not think it is meant to be hopeless. It leaves nobody indifferent, encouraging viewers to take action, which is precisely why it is so valuable. Testimonies, studies and experts are included in this documentary thus enabling the audience to understand what is happening inside the Vatican.

This tremendously powerful—and equally mysterious—institution is constituted by a hierarchy that still tries to keep sexual abuse occult. They fight to maintain their status as a perfect, self-enclosed institution, the representation of God on Earth. These sexual abuses can bring down this image of the Holy See. As a result, excommunicating an abuser is tremendously complicated because he is protected by the majority of the inviolable state that the Vatican forms. The reasoning behind abuse in the Church is explored in the film, which shows how Murphy, for example, distorted his alleged superiority above his parishioners to justify his acts. However, I agree with the fact that the insistence of the Vatican on hiding such a problem since the 4th century and protecting such gruesome justifications gives the viewer the sense that it is all part of the most “monstrous conspiracy” in human history. Even if Christianity is not attacked, the distrust and disappointment with the hierarchy of the Church are almost inevitable after watching this documentary.

As A. O. Scott rightly points out, “much as it is a grim chronicle of violation and denial, *Mea Maxima Culpa* is also, less overtly but no less importantly, a chapter in the history of the disability rights movement” (2012). Murphy molested deaf children that could barely communicate with their families, who were unable to use sign language. Moreover, he acted as the translator between them. This isolated children, who found it difficult to ask for help. Murphy was sure that they could not save themselves. However, this documentary gives hope to the whole disabled community, so marginalized in the American society of the past. Gary, Pat, Arthur, Bob and Terry were capable of facing such a powerful entity as the Vatican. They endured one of the most disconcerting, solitary and painful situations a child can endure, blindly trusting someone who was hurting them and facing the difficulty to communicate with the hearing, speaking persons in their circles what was happening to them. However, they brought to light with great courage what the Church has covered through centuries, triggering a movement against sexual abuse in the Church and saving the following generations. Not even the Holy See could stop them.

*Mea Maxima Culpa* shows how those who are convinced of their own superiority treat those who they conceived as their subjects inhumanly, not only

abusing people, in this case children, but also denying help to the victims. Their only goal was maintaining the status quo and their immense power. However, this film is also an homage to what common people can do. In this sense, it encourages common people to take action and end with injustices, even if they face immense obstacles. Additionally, it gives the most painful example of how religion can be distorted to achieve something totally opposite to the charitable values present in the Bible. Since religion still plays an important role in the USA, bigger than in most Western countries, this documentary is crucial. Moreover, its study of power, perversion, and manipulation but also of the humanization of the deaf community and the encouragement to fight against the most powerful institutions makes it a crucial film not only for America but for the whole world.

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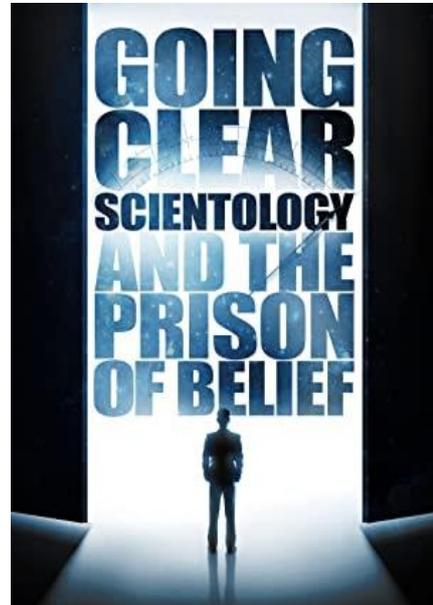
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Andrea Delgado López

## **Going Clear: Scientology and the Prison of Belief (2015): Trapped by the Cult**

### **CREDITS**

**Directed by** Alex Gibney  
**Written by** Alex Gibney, Lawrence Wright (book)  
**Produced by** Alex Gibney, Lawrence Wright, Kristen Vaurio, Matthew Slater  
**Cinematography by** Samuel Painter  
**Film editing by** Andy Grieve  
**Music by** Will Bates  
**Production companies:** HBO Documentary Films, Jigsaw Productions, Sky Atlantic  
**Distributors:** Home Box Office (HBO)  
**Runtime:** 1h 59'



### **MAIN AWARDS**

**Directors Guild of America, USA (2016):** Outstanding Directorial Achievement in Documentary (nominee)  
**Las Vegas Film Critics Society Awards (2015):** Best Documentary (winner)  
Outstanding Documentary or Nonfiction Special (winner)  
**Primetime Emmy Awards (2015):** Outstanding Documentary for Nonfiction Programming (winner), Outstanding Writing for Nonfiction Programming (winner)  
**Writers Guild of America, USA (2016):** Best Documentary Screenplay (winner)

### **OTHER NOTABLE DOCUMENTARIES BY THE FILM DIRECTOR(S)**

*Enron: The Smartest Guys in the Room* (2005, Oscar Award nominee), *Taxi to the Dark Side* (2007, Oscar Award winner), *Gonzo: The Life and Work of Dr. Hunter S. Thompson* (2008), *Mea Maxima Culpa: Silence in the House of God* (2012), *We Steal Secrets: The Story of WikiLeaks* (2013)

### **REASONS TO SEE *Going Clear: Scientology and the Prison of Belief***

- It is a revealing film that tries to unveil one of the most powerful and obscure world organizations, the Church of Scientology, by investigating it in all its aspects.
- It goes deep into the origin of Scientology's so-called religion, through the biography of its founder, Ron L. Hubbard, by taking into consideration the most controversial passages of his rise.

- The director, Alex Gibney, uses the investigative material with skillful care, despite the highly thorny topic, creating an objective documentary, which, however, does not hide its critique.

### CONNECTED WITH...

- *Religulous* (2008), directed by Larry Charles. This film offers a journey into the world of religious superstitions seen through the irreverent gaze of the American comedian Bill Maher, who has always directed most of his monologues, towards a total demythologization of the dogmas of the various religions of the world, demystified through the instrument of irony. The philosophy that embraces the protagonist, who wishes to spread it to the public, is that of doubt.
- *Until Nothing Remains* (2010), directed by Niki Stein. A documentary that deals directly with the Church of Scientology and its tragic consequences, through the testimonial of a young couple's real experience, whose life was manipulated by the practices of this 'religion'. As reaction to it, Scientology recorded a 40-minute interview, which was screened on the Internet the next day after Stein's documentary publication.
- *My Scientology Movie* (2015), directed by John Dower. This is a documentary film which used actors to unveil the mysteries behind Scientology's headquarters and reveal the most macabre and kept hidden aspects of the 'church'. It digs into the long list of abuses made by Scientology, before showing several interviews of former members who remind how they started to believe in this 'cult' and what they suffered once they decided to leave the organization.

### RE/PRESENTING AMERICA IN *Going Clear: Scientology and the Prison of Belief*

Alex Gibney's documentary film, based on the investigative book by acclaimed journalist Lawrence Wright, tells the story of eight former members of the 'Church' of Scientology, the pseudo-religious organization that boasts millions of members, among them Hollywood stars John Travolta and Tom Cruise. The film is presented as a journey back into the origins of the 'religion' founded by SF novelist Ron L. Hubbard in 1954, which is explored in its adventurous and crazy genesis, in its growing popularity and in its mass diffusion.

There are moments 'far from mystical inspiration', according to Gibney, recalled by archive images and vintage photographs in which Hubbard is seen to plot his way out of his rambling science fiction, full of aliens and military plots, and soul reincarnations, motivated by his substantial attachment to money. So then, after making us aware of the adventures of Hubbard, a fierce capitalist of the faith, visionary seducer of souls as well as an aspirant science fiction stars, Gibney starts a sort of countdown in reverse, alternating the different witnesses of stories of abuse and psychological and physical violence, which led the interviewees to abandon the cult, from the first to the last in order of time.

*Going Clear: Scientology and the prison of belief* (2015) relies, among others, on the confession of director and screenwriter Paul Haggis, a passionate Scientologist for

thirty-five years until 2009. Then he first doubted the daring theories of the organization, relaunched by David Miscavige, the new leader after the death of Hubbard in 1986. Together with Haggis, some of the top executives who have moved away from the cult after a long militancy, describe Miscavige's strong mental conditioning of his many followers, tell of his insatiable thirst for power, underline the exploitation of the members' labour, and illustrate the coercion and the beatings suffered. They also describe in all detail the espionage and stalking methods and confess to collaborating in the collection of personal data for intimidating purposes.

During his career, David Miscavige has worked tirelessly to expand and protect the Scientology religion. In the early 1980s, he directed the reorganization of the Church's membership and administrative structure, creating a new and stronger leadership system that was able to guide the rapid expansion of the Church and provide it with stability. In 1993, he played an important role in the conclusion of the 40-year war between the Scientology religion and the American tax authorities (Internal Revenue Service, IRS). It has similarly assumed a very effective role in ending disputes before courts and Government agencies, both in the United States and abroad.

Gibney is also concerned, from the beginning, to provide the viewer with the answer to his main question. This is not how can anyone in their right mind possibly join Scientology but how can a person possibly avoid falling into the net of a cult like Scientology? How can anyone reject a current of thought with the goal of cleaning the world of wars, crime, madness and which has joy as an operational tool? This attractive program extends to the 'audits', those sessions in which the faithful recalls their previous traumas to purify themselves from any fear and to become, gradually 'clear', that is, free from pain and its sources. Under this 'therapy', it is impossible to resist a cult that promises to set in motion the development of personal superpowers and the crossing of the 'bridge' separating human from superhuman with a quantum leap that leads straight to the next stop: the infinite.

All of this, as Gibney tells us through archive footage including the captivating promotional films aimed at capturing new followers, was born from the diabolical mind of a quite popular science-fiction writer suddenly turned guru: the founder of Scientology L. Ron Hubbard. His goal was clear enough: creating a cult capable of generating economic income and which, as a recognized religion, is exempt from paying taxes. Therefore, it is not a surprise that Hubbard encountered tax problems on his way. Later on, Miscavige has managed to turn the USA persecution of Hubbard for tax fraud into a blatant favoritism for the Church by claiming to be a religion acting mainly as a for-profit corporation, which was serving the private interests of its members, rather than the public ones.

The most interesting aspect of *Going Clear: Scientology and the prison of belief* (2015) is the revelation of how closely the cult founded by Hubbard is intimately connected with Hollywood cinema. This church even has a special branch dedicated to the recruitment of Hollywood stars, among them Travolta and Cruise as noted. Even more shockingly, Miscavige allegedly manipulated Tom Cruise into divorcing his second wife, Nicole Kidman, because she was unwilling to accept the interference of this invasive faith in their family. A former Scientologist, interviewed throughout the documentary, tells that he was the one with the task to make Cruise leave his wife through dozens of 'auditing sessions', the installation of bugs in their home, days spent

in stalking her on the streets, and much more. At the end everything went according to their plans, and Kidman was even estranged from her adopted children, both church members. What also came out from the interviews is the way Hubbard used personal problems to get closer to his future associates in order to convince them of the power and benefits of the Church of Scientology. For example, Cruise was introduced to Scientology in 1990 by his first wife, because he had struggles with dyslexia from an early age and has said that the L. Ron Hubbard Study Tech, helped him overcome it. This gives evidence of the manipulative use of the members' traumas, with the aim to attract more people and then subjugated them. Hubbard's logic consisted of obtaining consensus when people, who are weak or perhaps in a dark period of their existence, ask for help, because they may find comfort in organizations like this - but just initially.

Peter Bradshaw from *The Guardian* states that "Gibney shows how this aggressively paranoid organization evolved from a post-war evangelical racket by pulp sci-fi author L. Ron Hubbard: a cosmic worldview based on his own imaginings, but with Barnumesque genius marketed through quasi-scientific 'auditing'" (2015). Effectively, the first half of the documentary film is all about L. Ron Hubbard, the founder of Scientology. It goes into detail about his life and beliefs and how he formed and developed the "church". This quote made me think how deceptive the human mind can be, to the point of being manipulated by a doctrine born from the manipulative mind of an aspiring science fiction writer but justified by explanations believed to be "scientific".

Actually, the principles of the cult were written in his best seller *Dianetics* (1950), in which he explained that memories were the cause of all psychological pain and that people could become "clear" and achieving an ideal state of clarity and mental liberation, by exorcising their traumas to an "auditor" (a listener), acting as therapist. Even though his theory, which pretended to explain how to transform a 'normal brain' into an 'optimum brain', has been discredited by the medical and scientific establishment, over 100 000 copies of the book were sold in the first two years of publication. Thus, after the enormous success obtained with *Dianetics*, it was easier for Hubbard to obtain consensus among the American society.

Another reviewer of *The Guardian*, Brian Moylan, says that: "Cruise is one of those who emerges from this the worst; Gibney's film makes the claim that the actor's reluctance to distance himself from the faith was the key factor in his split with Nicole Kidman" (2015). I agree with that, but he was not the only one. John Travolta also became a sort of 'poster boy' of the Church and contributed to sponsor the 'religion' and open it to new members. Borys Kit from *The Hollywood Reporter* comments that "during the Sundance Film Festival (2015) [...] the director publicly thanked his subjects for their bravery in speaking out: 'For a film like this to get made, people have to come forward', he said 'That is the only way to encourage the end of abuses'" (2015). This was also the final appeal of the eight former Scientology victims, with touching tears in their eyes: silence should not prevail. It is important to let people know the truth about this harmful doctrine and how it has negatively changed their essences and personal welfare, literally subjugating their actions, thoughts, relationships and thus, their lives.

In conclusion, Alex Gibney's documentary, goes straight into the deep roots of American culture and into its rampant individualism. In this sense, *Going Clear: Scientology and the Prison of Belief* (2015) unveils an important pedagogical principle, which makes its vision desirable for adults and especially teenagers. But above all,

Gibney's film contributes to wondering how much evil hides within human beings, in their ego, and in an unscrupulous entrepreneur ready for anything in the name of money. By having Scientology acknowledged as a religious cult, privileges and protection are assured. Thus, being considered as a religion, their criminal and abusive activities are legitimated by the 'freedom of belief', typical of every religious expression, as well as the right at the basis of the American society. In this sense, the contradiction which lays behind the concept of freedom and the concept of religion cannot be explained but as a paradox.

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Francesca Panico

## SOCIAL ISSUES AND PERSONAL STORIES

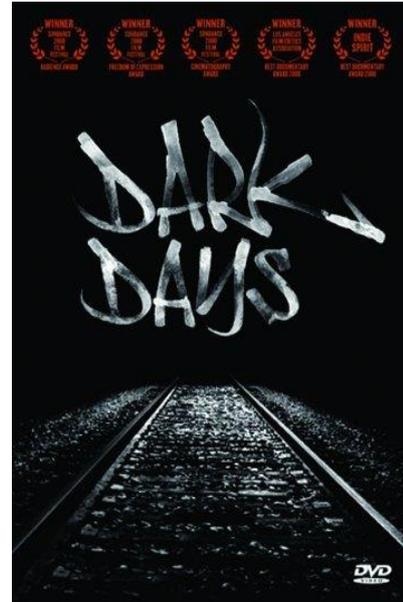
The films in this section are, to be honest, a mix bag that might perhaps fail to cohere. They do have, however, one thing in common: they all deal with social and cultural issues that are discussed through the experience of specific individuals. None is a cold lesson in anthropology or sociology. Some fit other segments (*20 Feet from Stardom* (2013) is a film about race as much as it is a film about back-up singers) but all tell very personal stories that resonate with many other American persons in the audience. *Catfish* (2010), for instance, has generated new vocabulary to describe the shifty individuals that hide behind the screen and pretend to be someone else in our times dominated by social media.

Three of the films can be said to connect with health issues, most obviously *Sicko* (2007) by the love-him-or-hate-him, restless Michael Moore. *Marwencol* (2010) deals with PTSD after a horrific assault, though it's also a film about the healing power of photography (and of toys!). *Life, Animated* (2016) deals with autism, from the point of view of a young autistic man more articulated than most so-called 'normal' people. Other social issues covered here are homelessness in the hopeful *Dark Days* (2000), education in *Waiting for Superman* (2010) and the strange abuses of science in *Three Identical Strangers* (2018). The more frivolous side of social life is represented by fashion in *The September Issue* (2009). *Grizzly Man* (2005) has a little bit of everything: mental health issues, the need to commune with nature, and a stark portrait of urban American masculinity's search for lost roots.

## **Dark Days (2000): Beneath Wealthy Ground**

### **CREDITS**

**Directed by** Marc Singer  
**Produced by** Marc Singer, Ben Freedman  
**Music by** DJ Shadow  
**Cinematography by** Marc Singer  
**Film editing by** Melissa Neidich  
**Production company** Picture Farm  
**Distributors** Sundance TV, Topic Studios, Wide Angle Pictures  
**Runtime** 1h 22'



### **MAIN AWARDS**

**Film Independent Spirit Awards (2001):** Best Documentary: Marc Singer (winner)  
**Online Film & Television Association (2001):** Best Documentary Picture (winner)  
**Sundance Film Festival (2000):** Audience Award: Marc Singer, Cinematography Award: Marc Singer, Freedom of Expression Award (winner)  
**SXSW Film Festival (2000):** Competitor Award – Honorable Mention: Marc Singer (winner)

### **OTHER NOTABLE DOCUMENTARY FILMS BY THE DIRECTOR**

*Dark Days (2000)* is the first and only documentary by the director. Marc Singer participated as a collaborator in TV series *50 Documentaries to See Before you Die* (2011).

### **REASONS TO SEE *Dark Days***

- To witness the raw reality of the homeless community beneath the surface of New York City.
- To understand the effects that drug-addiction can have on people; many of the homeless are drug addicts.
- To comprehend the personal background of the homeless persons in the film and their alternative way of surviving.

## CONNECTED WITH...

- *It Was a Wonderful Life* (1993), directed by Michèle Ohayon. This film, narrated by Jodie Foster, shares the story of six homeless women who were once middle class. It explores the causes of their current situation, mostly related to divorce or misfortune, and their struggles living under the harsh social circumstances of the United States.
- *Love & Diane* (2002), directed by Jennifer Dworkin. This documentary is a real-life drama that follows the story of a mother and daughter struggling to overcome their past. The mother, who once succumbed to crack addiction during the 1980s, is now recovering. Shot in ten years, the film is centered on both Love and Diane after their reunion. Also, it focuses on the obstacles of living and surviving the struggles of finding a job, parenthood, welfare and public housing.
- *Lost in America* (2017), directed by Rotimi Rainwater. After Barack Obama's plan to end youth homelessness in 2010, Rainwater started filming for three years to share the stories of the homeless. The documentary investigates the causes and the challenges found on the street and explores the possible ways of finding a house and food once a person becomes homeless. The film includes the participation of the singer Jon Bon Jovi and actress Halle Berry, among others.

## RE/PRESENTING AMERICA IN *Dark Days*

*Dark Days* takes an absorbing look at the so far undocumented underground life. The film narrates the story of a homeless community living beneath the surface of New York City, inside the Amtrak tunnels under Penn Station. Through the testimonies of the residents located in the tunnel, rookie director Marc Singer, a British man appalled by what he saw in the USA, offers an eye-opening documentary that portrays the heartbreaking stories of the homeless community. The peak of the film occurs when Amtrak, the railroad corporation, warns that the tunnels need to be evacuated voluntarily in the following days, otherwise they will force an eviction. Luckily, through Singer's efforts, the community is relocated to a real home, and given the opportunity to start again.

The documentary provides an inside perspective into drug abuse. With a few exceptions, most of the homeless found underground were crack-addicts or had a shady past connected with drugs. The community, which became Singer's film crew as the documentary was made on a shoestring budget, is open to tell their stories on camera, sharing gloomy backgrounds and narrating how a person's life can change dramatically. Focused predominantly on drug addiction, the film instances shocking situations such as that of a man selling a jacket in a freezing day to get his daily fix. The power of drugs is very much the power of making people lose their lives, searching for highs that only lead to lows. Even though the community's pasts are dreary, the documentary provides a psychological look into their feelings and humanizes their situation and decisions.

Through a bleak atmosphere, aided by the stark black-and-white photography, and a remarkable soundtrack by DJ Shadow, Marc Singer also captures the survival methods of the community, focusing on the details of their underground world in their 'Freedom Tunnel' as they call it. They have built their own one-room shacks and tapped into the city's power supply, so as to watch television or cook. However, due to the lack of running water, sometimes they use broken pipes for personal hygiene. The community improved their lifestyle as much as they could, owning pets and several objects, but they still lived surrounded by rats and filth.

Jonathan Foreman writes in his review for the *New York Post* that the documentary is a "fascinating, beautifully photographed portrait of a vanished community: a group of homeless people who built a shanty town in the train tunnels beneath Penn Station" (2000). His terminology "vanished community" is, indeed, proper but somewhat ambiguous. The community that used to live inside the tunnels were later moved to homes on the surface so literally, they "vanished" from the Amtrak construction. However, homelessness continues and has by no means vanished. As Foreman states, Singer's photography is unique; the use of black and white compliments the rare and raw stories of the characters, and most importantly, the whole dark tone of the film's topic.

John Hartl, from *The Seattle Times*, comments that "some of these hardy souls have lived this way for years, decades even, and they've lived not just to tell the tale but to suggest that they've created a viable alternative existence. At times, *Dark Days* almost makes you envious. But only almost" (2000). Indeed, these persons created a viable way of existence, surviving for a long time in the concrete jungle. In relation to their community, they created a special bond, so that they refer eventually to themselves as "family". However, their quality of life is very far from being in any way enviable or even decent: they are surrounded by rats, dirt and ruins. Many factors affect and can cause severe health damage, for instance the darkness and humidity can injure the bones or the dust can easily get into the lungs.

M.K. Terrel notes that "as we come to know the residents, we find their lives, and yearning for home and safety, as tragic, funny, and involving as anything in a scripted movie" (2000). The vast majority of the personal backgrounds appear to be tragic, dramatic and even surreal to the audience. Their pasts shaped the characters and carried them to a difficult situation, which during the documentary (shot along three years) they aim at overcoming, and they do. Similar to a fiction film, Singer's film gives importance to the intimate personal stories of the characters. To illustrate this idea, the film narrates the most humane side of the characters: a woman whose two sons lost their lives to a fire while she was in jail. Another instance is a man whose daughter was raped at the early age of five and burnt afterwards. The film makes the audience sympathize with the community, portraying their darkest and most humane side.

Homelessness is still an issue not only in the United States, but also around the world, and the circumstances presented in Marc Singer's film could easily be extrapolated to any urban community dealing with homelessness. *Dark Days* narrates the hard reality of misfortune, bad choices and drug-addiction, crack to be more precise. The subjects presented on the film are victims of "The Crack Epidemic" that took place in the United States during the 1980s. The availability of drugs in most states led to numerous crack and cocaine addicts, consequently, many neighborhoods

were impoverished. This caused a higher income disparity –both in New York City and USA– which has been growing steadily since the 80s. Part of the level inequality is inherent to the economic system (including lack of affordable housing and unemployment), such disparity has been dismissed by the city’s economic elite for a long time.

The documentary, then, depicts an adjacent subculture existing underneath the wealthy and overcrowded New York City. Furthermore, most individuals who form the tunnel community are male and African-American, in fact, in New York City today 57% of homeless are black, 32% are Latino and Hispanic and only 7% are white. On the other hand, the Amtrak eviction helped the community find a home, in part thanks to the documentarians and a specific federal program. Among many NGOs that aim to help people pay their rent or find a home, the United States’ Government is elaborating programs to provide help to homeless. For instance, the right-to-counsel program was designed to establish a right to free legal counsel in case of eviction. Therefore, in 2018, the number of evictions in the city fell below 20,000. In other words, even though American society has made progress in ending homelessness, this situation is far from over and the film narrates a series of events that are not given much visibility.

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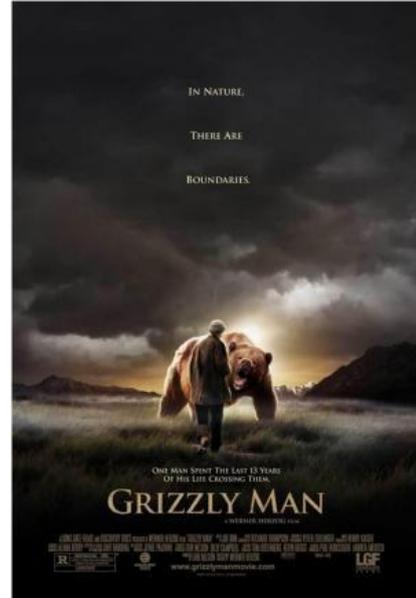
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Laura Ramírez Egea

## Grizzly Man (2005): Misreading Nature

### CREDITS

**Directed by** Werner Herzog  
**Written by** Werner Herzog  
**Produced by** Erik Nelson  
**Music by** Richard Thompson  
**Cinematography by** Peter Zeitlinger  
**Film editing by** Joe Bini  
**Production companies** Real Big Production, Lions Gate Films, Discovery Docs  
**Distributors** Lions Gate Films (theatrical)  
**Runtime** 1h 43'



### MAIN AWARDS

**Cinema Eye Honors Awards (2005):** The Influentials (winner)  
**Directors Guild of America (2006):** Outstanding Directorial Achievement in Documentary (winner)  
**International Cinephile Society Awards (2006):** Best Documentary (winner)  
**National Society of Film Critics Awards (2006):** Best Non-Fiction Film (winner)

### OTHER NOTABLE DOCUMENTARY FILMS BY THE DIRECTOR(S)

*Little Dieter Needs to Fly* (1997), *The White Diamond* (2004), *Encounters at the End of the World* (2007, Oscar Award nominee), *Cave of Forgotten Dreams* (2011), *Meeting Gorbachev* (2018)

### REASONS TO SEE *Grizzly Man*

- It focuses on the life of Timothy Treadwell, a man who had alcohol- and drug-related problems and who reinvented himself by traveling to Alaska. There he started giving his life meaning for himself but also for science as he observed and protected the local grizzly bears.
- The conflict that exists between Treadwell's and Herzog's points of view. Timothy believed that the bears loved him back, but Herzog does not see any affection in the animals' faces after analyzing Timothy's footage.

- The amazing and breathtaking views of the Alaskan national park where the film was shot, though this is much more than a nature documentary. The music also helps to give it a more dramatic feel.

### CONNECTED WITH...

- *The Call of the Wild* (2007), directed by Ron Lamothe. It is a documentary film based on the death of Christopher McCandless shown in Sean Penn's film *Into the Wild* (2007) and Jon Krakauer's book *Into the Wild* (1997). The documentary director decided to take a road trip across North America, visiting the places McCandless visited in order to give meaning to his death. He concludes by contradicting both the book by Krakauer and the movie by Penn about McCandless's early death.
- *Bears* (2014), directed by Keith Scholey and Adam Chapman. A documentary produced by Disney in which we can see how a family of bears raises their cubs. In its footage we can see amazing Alaskan landscapes and how the cubs learn their life's most important lessons. Some of these lessons are learning how to catch food, how to fight predators, how to survive natural disasters and how to protect themselves from winter.
- *Surviving a Vicious Grizzly Bear Attack* (1998), produced by Animal Planet. Part of the documentary series *Human Prey*, in this episode, we find a father and daughter who were hiking in a national park in Alaska when they were attacked by a furious grizzly bear wanting to protect her cubs. During this episode, both father and daughter explain how the attack took place and how they acted. Fortunately, his father survived after several surgeries.

### RE/PRESENTING AMERICA IN *Grizzly Man*

Herzog's *Grizzly Man* is not a documentary just about the life of Timothy Treadwell and his mission to protect nature but also an insight into the life of a narcissistic man who played a deadly game. What makes this documentary special is the clash between the astonishing landscapes of Alaska, which seem taken from a fairy tale, and the harsh reality of the tragedy that Treadwell suffered. All these, combined with a great soundtrack, makes the viewer feel inevitably sad for the story of Timothy Treadwell and his girlfriend Amie and their end.

To begin with, you must ask yourselves: what was a man from Long Island, with no previous experience of nature, doing in Alaska? As Timothy explains in one of his video tapes, he had problems with alcohol and drugs. After trying to stop his addictions several times, the remedy he came up with was the discovery of this land of bears in need of protection: "the miracle was animals" he states. Further in the documentary, his parents are interviewed and they suggest that he started drinking because Timothy, an actor, did not pass an audition. His ex-girlfriend also explains that he went to the doctor to treat his depression but he stopped: "he needed his high and lows as a part of his personality". They went regularly to see how people were executed, which she thinks was intended to remind Timothy that if he had continued down that dark path, he might have ended there. Also, a friend recalls that Treadwell

pretended to be an Australian orphan but when he found out the truth, he was not scared because Timothy would never hurt anyone. On the other hand, Aimi's character remains unknown. Her family do not appear in the documentary, few scenes of her are shown in Treadwell's tapes and the only thing we know is that she was scared of bears since it is written in one of her diaries.

Treadwell's video tapes include his many ups and downs, alone in the wilderness of Alaska. The ups are the tapes in which he analyses the grizzlies and their behavior and how he learned to defend his territory among these dangerous animals. The downs are striking and odd. Timothy explains how cruel the natural cycle is by showing the death of a fox and himself crying next to it; when he says "I am very troubled, I am so in love with animals" we can see that he was not in touch with reality, and that his behavior was often childish and foolish. His delusions, and how he lost sight of the real world trying to abandon his humanity to merge with nature, is what got him killed. An Alaskan native states in the documentary that Treadwell crossed a line he should never have crossed. The natives have been living long enough with the bears to know that the best thing to do is to avoid each other. Some think that Timothy disrespected the bears and he did more damage than helped them.

Even though we might think Treadwell's life and story is the central point of the documentary, it is not. For Herzog, the key of his documentary is the death of Timothy and Amie, which supplies tragedy and moral questions to the film. Throughout the documentary, Timothy filmed himself showing he was totally aware of how dangerous it was to be there, even saying several times that he might be killed by a bear. At one point he claims that "I have lived long enough with bears and I survived but I am aware that I can get killed". The testimony of the doctor who did the autopsy along with the existence of an audio tape of the grisly scene, gives all the poignancy the film needs. In this audio tape, according to the director who had the chance to listen to it, you can hear Timothy and Amie groaning and screaming while being devoured by a bear for six long minutes. It has never been released and I think it is the best for all. Thus, this documentary achieves the aim of Treadwell's mission but tragically: to teach the world about these animals, their amazing identity but also their destructive nature. The sad irony in his mission to protect bears is that the Alaskan authorities killed the grizzly bear that attacked Treadwell and Amie. Timothy wouldn't have liked that. As one of his friends in Alaska says: "he told me that if he never came back, it is the way he wanted to go, and it is fine!"

A review from Zadie Smith for *The Daily Telegraph* notes that "Herzog has his documentary in hand, explaining that what we have here 'iz on astone-ishing story of beauty and depth'. He's not wrong" (2006). The director not only shows the beauty of these incredible animals and of the landscapes where the documentary is set but also explores the depth of Timothy's strange psychology. Peter Debruge, writing for the *Miami Herald* states that this is "A rich, well-crafted documentary that offers a rare glimpse at someone who respected Mother Nature but refused to live by her rules" (2005). Another review to take into account is that by Peter Bradshaw for *The Guardian*: "Herzog didn't even have much work to do, what's more, because Treadwell –gifted, untrained film-maker that he was– had done almost everything himself" (2006). Treadwell left behind hundreds of hours of video tapes which show tragedy, comedy and risk. However, Herzog's creation and the final product mixing the original tapes and the interviews is stunning.

To sum up, *Grizzly Man* is a documentary which might seem to have a simple meaning at first sight but once you analyze it, it carries deep and meaningful messages. Treadwell not only protected nature but also fought against civilization: “animals rule”, he repeats several times in his tapes. As he states in one of his letters, he wants his message to be spread after his death, and in some way, he was right. There is also a very American tradition of men expressing how they feel in connection with nature. The classic example is Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden*, an account of his stay in the woods near his village. This attracted men’s sense of adventure and so the “call of the wild” became a tradition. Many, like Treadwell, were not trained to live in such wild environment. We can conclude that an American sense of masculinity combined with a lack of knowledge about nature are deadly. The director’s German skepticism and pragmatic sense of reality deconstructs here Timothy’s American manhood and the illusory call of the wild.

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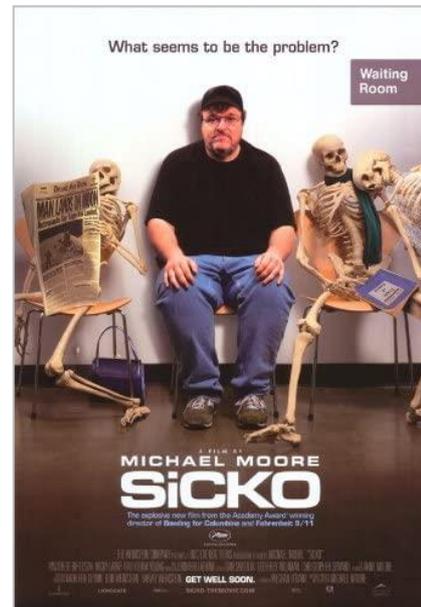
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Alba Ruiz Simón

## Sicko (2007): Healthcare, a Murderer in Disguise

### CREDITS

**Directed by** Michael Moore  
**Written by** Michael Moore  
**Produced by** Michael Moore, Anne Moore, Meghan O'Hara, Susannah Price  
**Music by** Erin O'Hara  
**Cinematography by** Andrew Black, Jayme Roy  
**Film editing by** Geoffrey Richman, Christopher Seward, Dan Swietlik  
**Production Companies** Dog Eat Dog Films, The Weinstein Company  
**Distributors** Lionsgate (theatrical)  
**Runtime** 1 h 58'



### MAIN AWARDS

**Academy Awards (Oscars) (2008):** Best Documentary Feature (nominee)  
**International Cinephile Society Awards (ICS Award) (2008):** Best Documentary (winner)  
**Producers' Guild of America Awards (2008):** Outstanding Producer of Documentary  
**Satellite Awards (2007):** Best Motion Picture, Documentary (winner)

### OTHER NOTABLE DOCUMENTARY FILMS BY THE DIRECTOR

*Michael Moore in TrumpLand* (2016), *Where to Invade Next* (2015), *Capitalism: a Love Story* (2009), *Captain Mike Across America* (2007, a.k.a. *Slacker Uprising*), *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004).

### REASONS TO SEE *Sicko*

- It shows that America is not that great by focusing on the United States' private health care system with some personal examples of mistreatment, some of them volunteer first responders in the country's catastrophes.
- It also portrays the scams that some health insurance companies carry out in order to win/not lose money, by disregarding patients' lives and deaths.
- The discussion of other countries' free universal health care, such as Canada, France, and Cuba, helps you to realize the big differences with the US system. This can be linked to the Government's power over their citizens, which may be bigger

than we all think and, as Moore explains, is in collusion with the health care corporations.

### CONNECTED WITH...

- *The Chicago Maternity Center Story* (1976), directed by Gordon Quinn and Jerry Blumenthal. This documentary deals with the high bills that were charged to mothers for giving birth, which made some decide to have their children at home as it was far cheaper. The hospital had to close its doors because of the steep private health care prices and the general lack of resources. This is also the start of the precariousness of the private healthcare in the USA which is exposed in *Sicko*.
- *John Q* (2002, fiction film), directed by Nick Cassavetes. The film tells the story of an African-American boy who is dying because his heart does not work properly and the waiting list for a donor is too long. Desperate because their insurance does not cover a transplant his father (played by Denzel Washington) decides to hold the whole hospital hostage. This movie shows the level of stress that US citizens, especially the black community and the middle and low classes, have to face when it comes to important medical treatments such as the one the boy needs.
- *Dust to Dust: The Health Effects of 9/11* (2006), directed by Heidi Dehncke Fisher. This documentary shows that the US Government is not only acting irresponsibly towards immigrants and poor people, but also harming the people that helped in the 9/11 catastrophe, who have been left on their own. The Government did not pay for the treatments necessary for the volunteers and their own employees (such as firefighters, Police officers, emergency technicians, etc.), made sick by the deadly materials they breathed in at that moment.

### RE/PRESENTING AMERICA IN *Sicko*

In this documentary, it is stated that approximately 50 million US citizens do not have health insurance, and approximately 18000 people die every year for that reason. Nevertheless, the documentary deals with how the other 250 million people that have insurance are also at risk because of the precarious organization of the US healthcare system. The title *Sicko*, which is an informal word whose meaning is a person mentally ill or perverted, especially one who is sadistic, suggests that the health system is both 'sick' and cruel.

Michael Moore, director and producer of the documentary, meets a few persons that were denied treatment for their diseases because they had no money to pay for it and basically their health insurance companies did not want to cover all the expenses. One of them is Adam, a man that cut his knee and had to take care of the injury himself. Rick had to choose which finger he wanted to save since he could not pay for the treatment for both injured fingers. Married couple Larry and Dona, both with good jobs, lost their house because of his having diverse heart attacks and her getting cancer. Moore also talks to elderly people who cannot pay for all their medicines and decide not to take some of the pills. They suspect that they do not need as many as the doctors prescribe them and actually think doctors do this in order to win extra money.

Moore is faced with many stories that sound even ridiculous. One is that of a woman who was charged a high amount of money because after having a car collision, she was taken to hospital by ambulance. Since she did not ask for this service because she was unconscious, the company claimed that it was not approved and she had to pay for that “trip”. In other cases the treatments were denied because of the height, weight, or BMI (body mass index) of the patient. Having seen this, Moore decided to check online if all these situations were something habitual; soon he started hearing about lots of different incidents. One of the most relevant ones was that of a man whose deaf daughter was only allowed to receive an implant for one of her ears since the insurance company claimed that having both was experimental. The condition of four girls that contacted Moore, all with cancer, was made worse (one even died) because of the excuses of their insurance companies when it came to funding their treatment.

Besides getting the patient’s part of the story, Moore was also contacted by a worker in one of these health insurance companies. Becky explained she had to ward off sick people when they asked to get insurance. Workers like her use a long list of illnesses, such as diabetes, heart problems, cancer, etc. to turn down the possible customers. Most of the times, employees like her already know if the insurance will be approved or not, and that is why they decide to be unpleasant and obnoxious towards unwanted clients. Finally, Moore meets a few 9/11 volunteers who suffered from terrible health complaints after helping to rescue people, without receiving any Government help. Moore took them to Guantanamo where the prisoners have free healthcare unlike ordinary US citizens. Turned off the prison with no help, in Cuba they received a warm welcome and totally free treatment for their health problems, including some of their expensive medication. Moore travelled later to other countries to investigate how Americans live outside their homeland under a different healthcare system. They all agree that a social healthcare system is not only better than private insurance but totally affordable for every single person.

Caryn James from *The New York Times* writes in her review that “a documentary’s greatest impact comes from the media attention it generates and if they can have any real political impact” (2008). Focusing on this documentary James states that “Mr. Moore’s *Sicko* is wildly comic while tearing apart the country’s healthcare system”. She also remarks that “his film turned a giant spotlight on its healthcare system problems achieving the accomplishment of reaching to a large audience including people of power”. This is quite true since after the release of this documentary, President Barack Obama set in motion a plan to help the 9/11 volunteers. On her side, Lisa Schwarzbaum from *Entertainment Weekly* declares that “The American healthcare system is a mess, and only Moore, among popular filmmakers, is doing anything to explain the situation, using his patented carnival storytelling tools to blur advocacy and entertainment. From the title on *Sicko* is outspoken in its dismay that a country as rich and powerful as the United States should force so many of its citizens to gamble on the odds of sustained good health” (2007).

British reviewers make a point of comparing their NHS healthcare system to the American private systems. Peter Bradshaw from *The Guardian* states “this magnificent new film from Michael Moore is a timely reminder of the grotesque mess that Americans have made for themselves with healthcare, and how insidiously easy it would be for the same thing to happen to us (UK), little by little” (2007). Wendy Ide,

writing for *The Times* states that “While we all have our grumbles about the NHS, it’s hard not to be caught up in Moore’s righteous indignation on behalf of his countrymen, or not to feel a twitch of pride in our own” (2007). Both of them clearly think that a social healthcare system based on a comprehensive welfare system works much better and is fairer to everyone.

Moore states that the US Government prefers ill people who are stressed and afraid to fight so they are more controllable, which sounds probable having seen the situations that sick people have to endure because of their Government’s neglect. Instead of being worried about what is going on around them, US citizens are more preoccupied with being able to keep breathing or helping others to do so than battle to improve their average lives. Thirteen years after this documentary has been released, little of this has changed at all. The US Government has priorities and its citizens are not one of them. In situations of extreme danger for the humankind, such as the pandemic of the Covid-19 we are living now, their Government still acts egoistically. Their President does not wear a mask because he does not want to give a weak image to the press, lockdown is not fully established across the country and their preference to protect their economy rather than their citizens’ health is quite obvious. Sicko indeed.

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Aurora Ruiz Cano

## ***The September Issue* (2009): Fashion Trend-setters**

### **CREDITS**

**Directed by** R.J. Cutler  
**Produced by** Eliza Hindmarch, Mary Lisio, Sadia Shepard  
**Music by** Craig Richey  
**Cinematography by** Robert Rickman  
**Film editing by** Azin Samari, Jessica Schilling  
**Production companies** A&E IndieFilms, Actual Reality Pictures  
**Distributors** Roadside Attractions (theatrical)  
**Runtime** 1h 30'



### **MAIN AWARDS**

**Cinema Eye Honors Awards (2009):** Cinema Eye Audience Choice Prize (winner), Outstanding Achievement in Production (nominee)  
**International Cinephile Society Awards (2009):** ICS Award (nominee)  
**Satellite Awards (2009):** Best Motion Picture, Documentary (nominee)  
**Sundance Film Festival (2009):** Cinematography Award (winner), Grand Jury Prize (nominee)

### **OTHER NOTABLE DOCUMENTARY FILMS BY THE DIRECTOR**

*A Perfect Candidate* (1996, with David Van Taylor), *Shays' Rebellion: America's First Civil War* (2006), *The Met Ball* (2010, short documentary), *The World According to Dick Cheney* (2013, with Greg Finton), *Belushi* (2020)

### **REASONS TO SEE *The September Issue***

- Its insight into the fashion world, focusing on iconic *Vogue* editor Anna Wintour.
- The documentary shows the fascinating process of production of fashion magazines before they are distributed. In this case the focus is *Vogue's* main issue
- It showcases how influential women in positions of power can be.

## CONNECTED WITH...

- *Iris* (2014), by Albert Maysles. This documentary showcases the life of the New York fashion icon Iris Apfel, born in 1921. The documentary focuses on how even at her advanced age, 93 when the documentary was released, she is still working and inspiring others. The documentary shows a different view of Iris, who is often viewed as an eccentric due to her colorful and bold choices in fashion as a down-to-earth passionate individual.
- *The First Monday in May* (2016) by Andrew Rossi deals about the opening of the most popular fashion exhibition of all time, “China: Through The Looking Glass”, which was held in the Metropolitan Museum of Art Gala, most commonly known as the Met Gala. The documentary also features some aspects of Anna Wintour’s life as well as the behind the scenes of the making of the event and the exhibition.
- *The Devil Wears Prada* (2006, fiction film), by David Frankel, this film showcases the story of Andrea, a young woman who has recently finished a degree in journalism. Her first job is as the editor-in-chief’s assistant in a fashion magazine. Her chief, Miranda is portrayed as a merciless, posh and cruel woman. This film was based on a book with the same name written by Lauren Weisberger, a former assistant of the Vogue’s editor-in-chief Anna Wintour.

## RE/PRESENTING AMERICA IN *The September Issue*

*The September Issue* follows the production of a key issue of the American edition of fashion magazine *Vogue*. September is the most important month in fashion because it marks the start of a new season. The documentary follows closely Anna Wintour, the editor in chief of *Vogue* magazine and Grace Codington, creative director and former model. The focus of the documentary is the development of the September issue of 2007, the largest up to that date.

This documentary was filmed in the pre-economic crisis fashion world. Thus, we can see lushness and affluence all throughout the documentary. There is the slight impression that money would not run out. The documentary shows how a select group of people determine the future of the fashion industry for the upcoming year. There is an emphasis on Wintour’s final word on all choices. Her word is law when it comes to what makes it to the issue and she is incredibly influential amongst designers, brands and the whole fashion world overall. The representation of beauty standards is, thus, created by a hegemonic group and imposed upon the rest of society. The documentary shows on a few occasions how the pictures appearing in the magazine need to be “perfect”. The pictures appearing in the magazine undergo a high production to meet the beauty standards imposed by the magazine.

Manohla Dargis in the *New York Times* argued that “this entertaining, glib movie is about the maintenance of a brand that Ms. Wintour has brilliantly cultivated since she assumed her place at the top of the editorial masthead in 1988 and which the documentary’s director, R. J. Cutler, has helped polish with a take so flattering he might as well work there. (...) the truly ugly stuff in fashion –the models starving themselves, the exploited Chinese workers cranking out couture fakes and the animals

inhumanely slaughtered for their fur— remains unnoted in *The September Issue* much as it often does in *Vogue*” (2009). I agree that the documentary wants you to like Anna Wintour, it makes her seem someone truly impressive. However, these ugly issues of fashion are left in the background and ignored. There is mention in the documentary that Wintour contributed to the repolarization of fur in fashion a few decades ago. Additionally, she appears in the documentary complaining about the lack of fur pieces in one of the collections for the magazine. Her preference for fur has even earned her a few comparisons with Cruella de Vil.

Wintour is an incredibly successful woman who is at the top of her field, and because of that she has received a lot of backlash from the media. Her comparisons with Cruella de Vil and the characterization of Miranda in *The Devil Wears Prada* show a clear prejudice against women in positions of power in the fashion world. There is a stereotype of a successful woman in the fashion world, someone who is rich, cruel and, in most films, evil. Anna Wintour is not perfect, but it seems clear that she has received harsher critiques than those she would have received if she were a man. The lack of criticism in the documentary might be an effort to redeem and humanize a woman that has been criticked and scrutinized by the media.

In his review, Peter Bradshaw explains that “The reality may look a little muted after the wacky fictional treatments in *The Devil Wears Prada* and *Ugly Betty*. But it’s an intriguing study of office politics, and we do get to see a flash of that famous *froideur*. A lowly assistant is sharply told ‘excuse me’, as the editor wishes to get past her to look at a photo spread. The poor young woman looks as if Wintour has struck her across the face with a riding crop” (2009). There are claims that *The Devil Wears Prada* was indeed based on Anna Wintour since the author of the book, Lauren Weisberger, worked as Wintour’s assistant before publishing her best seller. However, even if the story could have been based on real experiences there are, as expected, narrative licenses which do not always correspond with the documentary’s portrayal. Moreover, in the documentary we can see how there is a real competitive and oppressive office environment behind all the glamour. Instances like the one Bradshaw describes in his review do resemble in any case the editor-in-chief of *The Devil Wears Prada*.

In *Empire* Damon Wise expresses that “Ostensibly a fly-on-the-wall study of the making of the biggest annual issue of the famous fashion bible, it doesn’t have so much to say about magazine production as it does about the passion that feeds into it, and it will be a rare individual who doesn’t emerge from this film with newfound respect for *Vogue*’s editorial staff” (2009). Indeed, all the hard work and effort that goes into making the magazine is admirable and it is quite interesting to know about the lives of the people who drive the fashion world. These people are the figurehead of an industry that amasses incredible amounts of money. In the documentary we can see how the market affects the magazine. The conflict between Grace and Anna is usually the balance between artistry and wearable clothing. Grace is more concerned with making fashion an art while Anna is more pragmatic and tends to lean towards more marketable and wearable clothing.

This documentary shows, perhaps without meaning to, the fact that people’s bodies have started to belong to corporations. A select group of people determine how we dress and how we should look. Additionally, in 2007 there was still a distinct lack of diversity in fashion, but nowadays that is starting to change. The documentary

shows very well how the editorial process in *Vogue* works. However, it appears that *Vogue*, at least in 2007 was mostly aimed at people with a higher income, since many of the brands and products were out of the regular consumer's reach. There has been a lot of change in the industry since 2007, perhaps as a direct consequence of the economic crisis of 2008. Nowadays, there is a bigger diversity and more concern about the working conditions of models and manufacturers. Consumer's demands have changed significantly in the past thirteen years. Materials like fur or leather are often rejected and ethically produced products have become more popular. What *Vogue* and Wintour decide are not necessarily what is in fashion.

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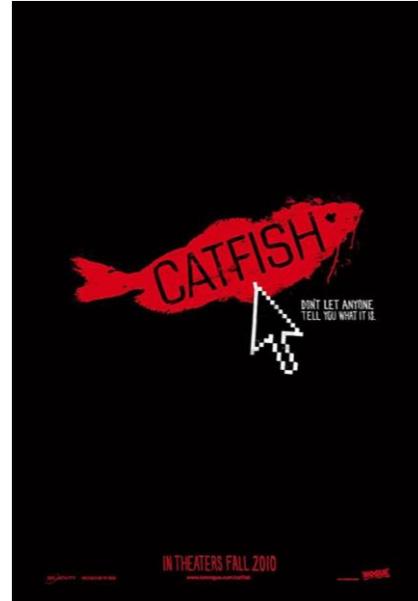
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Xènia Rivera Fusalba

## **Catfish (2010): The Lies Behind the Screens**

### **CREDITS**

**Directed by** Henry Joost, Ariel Schulmann  
**Produced by** Andree Jarecki, Henry Joost, Ariel Schulman, Marc Smerling, Zachary Stuart-Pontier  
**Music by** Mark Mothersbaugh  
**Cinematography by** Henry Joost, Ariel Schulman, Nev Schulman  
**Film editing by** Zachary Stuart-Pontier  
**Production companies** Supermarché, Hit The Ground Running Films  
**Distributors** Universal Pictures (theatrical), Rogue (theatrical)  
**Runtime** 1 hr 27'



### **MAIN AWARDS**

**Cinema Eye Honors Awards (2011):** Outstanding Achievement in a Debut Feature Film (nominee)  
**GALECA: The Society of LGBTQ Entertainment Critics (2011):** Best Documentary (nominee)  
**Online Film Critics Society Awards (2011):** Best Documentary (nominee)  
**Women's Film Critics Circle Awards (2010):** WFCC Award (winner)

### **OTHER NOTABLE DOCUMENTARY FILMS BY THE DIRECTOR(S)**

**By Henry Joost and Ariel Schulmann** *Metropolis II* (2011, short documentary), *A Brief History of John Baldessari* (2012, short documentary)

### **REASONS TO SEE *Catfish***

- It introduced the concept of “catfishing”, that is to say, of seeking human affection and support on internet pretending you are someone else.
- It shows how the internet impacts people’s lives, in ways that while having benefits, can also be threatening.
- It reflects how our present day society is tied to social media, mobile devices and electronic communication replacing personal contact.

## CONNECTED WITH ...

- *Catfish: The TV Show* (2012-present), produced by Nev Schulman and Max Joseph. It is an adaptation of the documentary made into a reality show. Schulman was a victim of a catfish as shown in the documentary, and in this series, he helps out other incidents of catfishing throughout the United States along with Joseph. With their help, they unravel whether a couple's relationship that started online is accurate, or just a hoax.
- *Connected* (2011), directed by Tiffany Shlain. The documentary deals with the idea of being connected virtually. Today, in the 21st century, we live in a digital era which eases communication, but in this documentary, Shlain shows that technology can bring both benefits and threats. In other words, the documentary points out that humans are missing out what is most important in life: an appreciation of personal contact face-to-face.
- *Imposter* (2012), directed by Bart Layton. Relates how French con man Frederic Bourdain persuaded a family in Texas into believing that he was their thirteen year old son Nicholas Barclay, who apparently went missing in 1994 (no body was ever found), despite the apparent differences. The family gave up on his search, but they received a call three years later from the Spanish Police reporting that they might have found the real Nicholas.

## RE/PRESENTING AMERICA IN *Catfish*

*Catfish* initially captures the growing connection between New York photographer Yaniv 'Nev' Schulman and Abby, an eight-year old painter from Michigan who started to paint the photographs he posted online, then sent these paintings to him. This unexpected friendship flourished slowly, from exchanging e-mails then adding each other as friends on Facebook, involving her mom Angela and her father Vic, and Megan Faccio –Abby's attractive older sister, a singer and dancer of whom Nev grew fond. When Nev's feelings towards Megan gradually deepened and became much more serious, he started to have a hunch that something was not right and began suspecting her strange acts as well as her peculiar behavior, including constant excuses to avoid meeting. Eventually, Nev discovers that Megan is not who she claims to be. She turns out to be a 'catfish', a person who misrepresents themselves online with a fake identity.

The two young filmmakers, Nev's brother Ariel Schulman and Henry Joost, decided that their first documentary should be about Nev and the building friendship with Abby. Yet, while on a trip, Nev, Ariel and Henry learned some shocking discoveries related to Megan's authenticity which led them to set out for Ishpeming, Michigan, where Abby's family lives, in search for answers for their rising suspicions. Because of these suspicions, the purpose of the documentary radically changed: once in Ishpeming, Nev, Ariel and Henry decided to meet Abby and her mom Angela, and confront Megan, who continually ignored Nev's texts and calls even once he was there.

They spent time with the family picking up the pieces of the puzzle, and slowly solved it.

Finally, we learn several revelations related to the family, which confirm that Megan Faccio was a fabricated identity all along, a catfish designed to keep Nev interested. Towards the end of the documentary, Abby's dad Vince explains the origins of the term "catfish". When he worked as a fisherman, he learned that live cod exported in tanks from North America to Asia become tasteless by the time they reach its destination. Apparently, if you put catfish to keep the cod active its meat maintains its quality. Therefore, Vince says, there are people in our lives that play the same role as these catfish: someone that keeps us moving and motivated, someone mysterious to keep us fresh.

The directors used various Internet websites as a form of narrating the documentary. For example, the leading figures' lives are shown in the film through Facebook profile pages. This reflects how people have been gradually using social media to stay connected with family and friends and gain new connections. With the help of their photos, the documentary explores the backgrounds of each person involved and gives us a closer look at one of the Internet's main threats: the use of false personalities, for romantic or even for criminal purposes. It also shows that even though virtual relationships are on the rise, humans also need to know the importance of a face-to-face interaction and affection.

Reviewer A.O Scott from *The New York Times* states that whereas *The Social Network*, the film by David Fincher, is about origins, "*Catfish*, at once narrower and more universal in implication, is about consequences. Mr. Zuckerberg may be the genius who invented Facebook and cashed in on its success, but many of the rest of us live, at least some of the time, in the world he made, and on the evidence of *Catfish*, it can be a pretty creepy place" (2010). *Catfish* focuses on how Facebook is full of threats despite having its own benefits such as facilitating communication and social marketing. Facebook is by far the largest social networking site up to date with billions of users, however many profile pages are manipulated or handled by identity thieves that are capable of invading our privacy. The documentary helps us be more aware of the situation: the dangers of social media and the importance of having a safe social media usage.

Simon Crook reviewed *Catfish* as "a word-of-mouth movie you're supposed to keep quiet about, but that's just the start of its slippery contradictions. The credits come loaded with gravitas (*Capturing The Friedman's* director Andrew Jarecki is on producing duties), and yet Morgan Spurlock loudly insists it's 'the best fake documentary' I've ever seen" (2010). *Catfish* is a "word-of-mouth" documentary, worth telling others about, because many people can feel related and be conscious of the threats involving Facebook, whether they have suffered them or not. Many can learn from Nev's experience to use internet and the social media in a healthy way and how to spot a catfish profile. Crook also mentioned how Morgan Spurlock, director of *Super-Size Me*, insists *Catfish* is "the best fake documentary I've ever seen". Spurlock speculated that the documentary was fully scripted, however he is not the only one who has the same idea.

Peter Bradshaw from *The Guardian*, repeats the rumors suggesting that *Catfish* is "faked or semi-faked" and argues that "it really is an intriguing modern tale of communication, intimacy, self-knowledge and the web" (2010). Considering the fact

that catfishing was unfamiliar and very recent back then, may have led its viewers to claim that *Catfish* is “fake”, scripted and even questioned its editing. Many films and documentaries have to be obviously edited in order to clear out what is crucial and relevant to what is not. Catfishing may not have been explored nor talked about before, not until they remarked Nev experiences. Thus, the TV series may have helped others change their opinions towards the idea of *Catfish* being fake because it shows thousands of incidents in the United States, proving that Nev is not the only victim and can easily happen to anybody.

*Catfish* reflects, then, one of the many threats we can encounter when it comes to social media and the Internet, and the complexity of relationships in the 21st century. These incidents happen not only in the United States, but worldwide. People should also educate themselves into a proper and safe use of the Internet, especially children and young adults. Nevertheless, we live in a very judgmental or perfectionist society where people try to hide behind these profiles or screens, creating another version of themselves. People should be honest with who they are and be more confident. We are all tied up into technology nowadays that we forget others’ feelings, which should be considered as well, and we ignore what is more important to us: physical interaction. However, the United States has one of the highest social network bases in the world, the majority of these leading sites such as Twitter, Instagram and even Facebook, were created by American computer programmers. In the case of Mark Zuckerberg, he created Facebook in order to connect Harvard University students with one another, which slowly grew on a large scale eventually making him a billionaire. Social media may have helped transform interaction and ease communications throughout the world, however it also brought negative outcomes: people manipulating profile pages, cyberbullying, mental health damages and the list goes on, from phishing to catfishing.

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Samantha Mae Praxidio Latumbo

## Marwencol (2010): The Healing Town

### CREDITS

**Directed by** Jeff Malmberg

**Produced by** Jeff Malmberg, Tom Putnam, Matt Radecki, Chris Shellen, Kevin W. Walsh

**Music by** Ash Black Buffalo

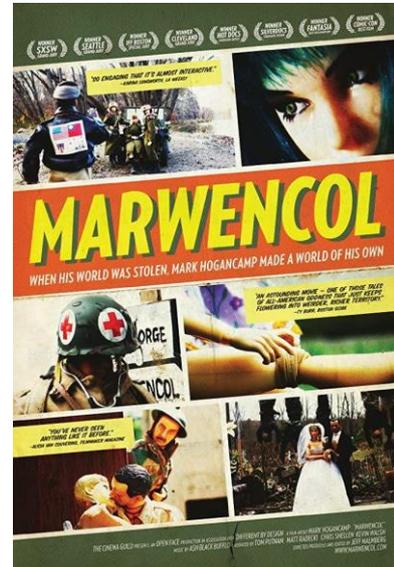
**Cinematography by** Jeff Malmberg, Tom Putnam, Matt Radecki, Kevin W. Walsh

**Film editing by** Jeff Malmberg

**Production company** Open Face

**Distributors** The Cinema Guild

**Runtime** 1h 23'



### MAIN AWARDS

**Boston Society of Film Critics Awards (2010):** Best Documentary (winner), Best New Filmmaker (winner)

**Docville (2011):** Jury Award - Best International Documentary (winner)

**Film Independent Spirit Awards (2011):** FIND your Audience Award (winner), Truer Than Fiction Award (winner).

**International Documentary Association (2010):** Emerging Documentary Filmmaker Award (winner).

### OTHER NOTABLE DOCUMENTARY FILMS BY THE DIRECTOR

*Spettacolo* (2017), *Won't You Be my Neighbor?* (2018), *Shangri-La* (2019-, mini-series)

### REASONS TO SEE MARWENCOL

- To understand the importance of the imagination in the process of healing from deep trauma.
- To witness the terrible effects that hate crimes have on victims like Mark Hogancamp.
- To enjoy the thoughts and feelings of individuals who are different because of mental health issues.

## CONNECTED WITH...

- *Welcome to Marwen* (2018, fiction film), directed by Robert Zemeckis. The film, which was inspired by the 2010 documentary, narrates the story of Mark Hogancamp. After suffering the vicious attack that changed his life, on the path to recovery he shelters himself in his imaginary world. The creation of a town based on World War II events includes dolls with faces known to the protagonist. The director previously adapted the documentary *Man on Wire* (2008) to a film: *The Walk* (2015).
- *Magical Universe* (2013), directed by Jeremy Workman. This documentary narrates the story of Al Carbee, an 88-year-old who spends his days alone in his Maine home creating works of art. His projects are based mostly on collages of Barbie dolls. The film, which took over a decade to film, portrays the power of creativity in a very eccentric manner, as well as the power of friendship.
- *Almost There* (2014), directed by Dan Rybicky and Aaron Wickenden. The film portrays the story of an elder man called Peter Anton, an artist and a very peculiar character. After being discovered by the filmmakers, he starts recollecting the old art he created during his life-time from his deteriorating and almost ruined house. Anton's journey leads him to prepare his first art exhibition. The documentary offers insights into mental illness and the power of art.

## RE/PRESENTING AMERICA IN *Marwencol*

*Marwencol* (2010) presents the story of Mark Hogancamp, a man who was violently assaulted by a group of five men outside a bar in his hometown, following his comments about his passion for crossdressing. They beat up Hogancamp who, as a consequence, was left in a coma and got severe physical and psychological damage, including amnesia. Hogancamp, who had forgotten all about his early life, learnt about his identity through diaries, old photographs and video recordings. His past as a former alcoholic came to light, which led Hogancamp to become a teetotaler after the tragic event.

Hogancamp resorted to the creation in his backyard of the miniature town Marwencol as a method of rehabilitation, using not only his skills to make buildings, characters (using Barbie dolls and action figures) and objects but also his imagination to create stories, which he photographs beautifully. The location is supposed to be somewhere in Belgium during the times of World War II. The most significant character is an alter ego of himself, surrounded by friendly and unfriendly soldiers from Germany, Britain and America. Mark's alter ego enjoys the company of his wife Anna, a character that impacts his imaginary self as well as his real-life self, for he expects to encounter a similar love in his personal life. Marwencol goes through cheerful moments while the soldiers and the population enjoy drinking and witnessing staged catfights in the bar, but the SS constantly make evil plans against the town. The place is a reflection of Hogancamp's real-life events at a distance: he reenacts his own beating, for instance, by having his alter ego be beaten up by five SS soldiers. This strange therapeutic activity is reflected through photography. At the end of the documentary,

his artwork is exhibited, with great success, at a New York gallery

Reviewer John Hartl wrote for *The Seattle Times* that “Simultaneously hypnotic and unnerving,” Malmberg’s film “asks some rather uncomfortable questions about the nature of art and the potential and limits of self-healing” (2010). The documentary reflects on essential questions to comprehend Hogancamp’s motivations and persona. Our society tends to avoid topics related to mental health, such as post-traumatic stress disorder. Malmberg digs into the nature of his trauma and his inner world comes to light. The lack of information and quietness regarding psychological disorders might trigger the audience’s feeling awkwardness. Yet, the themes dealt on the film are not especially bothersome, and the publication of *Marwencol* and its meaning, helps to normalize the topic. In other words, even if some parts may appear to be uncomfortable for the audience, the film speaks up about fundamental topics in order to understand the positive psychological consequences of self-healing.

In relation to this, Roger Moore states that *Marwencol* is a “Quirky documentary about an eccentric dolls-diorama artist with a seriously sad personal history inspiring his art –the inspiration for [Zemecki’s movie] *Welcome to Marwen*” (2018) Hogancamp channeled the sorrow originated from the attack through an artistic scenario. It can be considered that any creation built from emotion is an artistic piece, in this case both the diorama and the photographs are art. The diorama contains highly detailed constructions of both buildings and dolls, as well as representations of stories. Hogancamp was a photographer and he still captures carefully every performance made with the dolls. The exhibition at the end of the documentary, confirms the importance of his photography. Keeping that in mind, his art style is unique and peculiar, and most importantly: it comforts Hogancamp to escape his demons and loneliness.

Bruce DeMara notes that “Director Jeff Malmberg sees something in Hogancamp that he wants all of us to see, an imperfect human scarred by horrific trauma who nonetheless finds a reason to live” (2010). Hogancamp’s memory loss and trauma is successfully portrayed by Malmberg. His “imperfections”, as DeMara states, let the viewer witness the recovery of a person who does not lose hope and finds peace through an unusual creation. The consequences of his attack are not exclusively psychological, he also has physical difficulties. His ability to manipulate objects has been severely damaged, but moving or playing with dolls and his part-time job helped him improve this skill. Therefore, the *Marwencol* town has helped Hogancamp immensely, both psychologically and physically. In short, the character finds an extraordinary reason to live that gives something more than a purpose and trauma alleviation: an artistic occupation.

Hogancamp’s case is not an isolated one. He was the victim of a hate crime, precisely a gender-related crime. The patriarchal society not only implements pressure on the female population, it also creates masculine stereotypes. Hogancamp did not follow the average male convention, and mentioning his passion for cross-dressing in the bar triggered and threatened the other men’s standards. The lack of tolerance towards people who like cross-dressing, are transgender or queer is still a current issue. Improvements to dismantle the patriarchy have been made by the LGBTIQ+ community and feminism, but similar crimes still take place around the world today. On the other hand, the trauma that Hogancamp suffered after the attack can be found in survivors of a similar crime, mass shootings or even 9/11 (2001). After these

traumatic events, the subjects try to overcome adversities relying on art or hobbies that offer hope. In short, Malmberg portrays a survivor of a crime against tolerance who took shelter, for lack of other help, in a fantasy world searching for inner peace and company.

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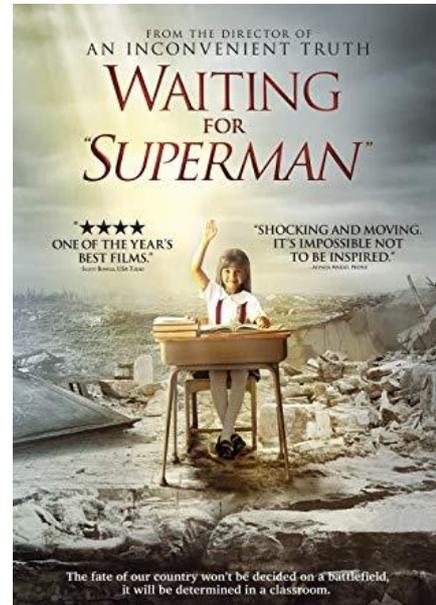
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Laura Ramírez Egea

## Waiting for 'Superman' (2010): The Challenging Path of Education

### CREDITS

**Directed by** Davis Guggenheim  
**Written by** David Guggenheim, Billy Kimball  
**Produced by** Lesley Chilcott, Michael Birtel, Eliza Hindmarch  
**Music by** Christophe Beck  
**Cinematography by** Robert Richman, Erich Roland  
**Film editing by** Jay Cassidy, Greg Finton, Kim Roberts  
**Production companies** Electric Kinney Films, Walden Media, Participant Media  
**Distributors** Paramount Vantage (theatrical)  
**Runtime** 1h 51'



### MAIN AWARDS

**African-American Film Critics Association (AAFCA) (2010):** Best Documentary (winner)  
**American Film Institute Awards (2011):** Special Award (winner)  
**San Diego Film Festival (2010):** Best Documentary (winner), Audience Award for Best Documentary (winner)  
**Sundance Film Festival (2010):** Best Documentary (winner)

### OTHER NOTABLE DOCUMENTARY FILMS BY THE DIRECTOR

*The First Year* (2001), *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006, Oscar Award winner), *It Might Get Loud* (2008), *From the Sky Down* (2011), *He Named Me Malala* (2015)

### REASONS TO SEE *Waiting for 'Superman'*

- It is an opportunity to learn more about the educational system in the US and to be aware about some of its weaknesses.
- The documentary includes personal circumstances from five students and their families and the reasons why they apply for a charter school. Spectators may feel identified as well, especially in relation to the pressure they have to handle with in the process of being accepted in a school.
- The end of the documentary is innovative and worth to see it since the protagonists' reactions amongst the lottery's results are real, and the spectators have been following their stories throughout the documentary.

## CONNECTED WITH...

- *The Providence Effect* (2009), directed by Rollin Binzer. It presents the transformation of an unsettled standard public school called Providence Saint Mel, in an inner city neighborhood of Chicago, into a higher-level educational establishment. Although the school was to be closed at first, in the end it developed into a successful preparatory school. The school director Paul Adams III, who introduced an effective model for his students to obtain the same opportunities as other students, is also presented.
- *American Teacher* (2011), directed by Vanessa Roth. This documentary is a compilation of interviews and testimonies from teachers, education experts, families and students about the educational system and the teaching profession. It also portrays the personal stories of four characters over a few years along with collected recordings from numerous American teachers. Its structure is similar to the one presented in the book *Teachers Have It Easy: The Big Sacrifices and Small Salaries of America's Teachers*.
- *Race to Nowhere* (2009), directed by Vicki Abeles and Jessica Congdon. This documentary was created as a consequence of Abele's issues with school pressure and similar situations from other people she discovered. It includes stories from students across the US and shows the challenges they have to deal with in relation to their academic life, such as stress-related illnesses and pressure as well as interviews with educators and parents.

## RE/PRESENTING AMERICA IN *Waiting for 'Superman'*

*Waiting for 'Superman'* presents five stories about different American children and their families focused on their respective processes of application to primary schools, a preparatory school and an academy. The end of the documentary shows the lottery which determines the future of these five children, having spectators directly witness whether the protagonists are accepted or not and their corresponding reactions. Furthermore, it is an emotional part due to the fact that the majority of these children are not accepted and their main reaction is sadness. Apart from this personal drama, Guggenheim's film also includes opinions from educational experts such as Geoffrey Canada or Michelle Rhee, in addition to reliable data, depicted with plenty of graphics, connected with the topics of education in the United States of America.

The US school system is plagued by issues associated with the fact that its regulations are to some extent confusing. According to the documentary, the federal Government ratifies laws and provides financial support to states, at the same time that states provide financial support to schools as well as implementing their own criteria, which may even oppose the central Government's instructions. These state laws are what Michelle Rhee, the chancellor of Columbia District in Public Schools, is attempting to change during the documentary. Her initial intention is to reconstruct the district's whole educational system, which at first led to controversy and protests because Rhee fired a large number of teachers with low performance scores. By the

middle of the documentary some progress is shown in the improved Columbia District students' results. Geoffrey Canada, an African-American educator from New York, is also introduced as an inspirational figure in relation to the school system. He believes that it is possible to change the educational system in order to change underprivileged neighborhoods. Canada works in an organization called Harlem Children's Zone, where his main task as a president is to help students from Harlem to reach their maximum achievement level, at the same time they improve their marks. He also created a new educational system, Baby College, based on monitoring every student's steps amongst their respective development periods.

Other topics connected with the failure of the school system discussed in *Waiting for 'Superman'* are how education connects with criminality, and tenured teachers and how their jobs are regulated. Concerning criminality, in Pennsylvania 68% of prisoners are drop-outs from low-quality preparatory schools. The lower the school quality, the more chances there are that students drop out with no employable skills and become condemned criminals. Guggenheim notes that the US Government is willing to invest a greater amount of money to maintain a prisoner during four years, than it takes to educate a child in private schools during thirteen years.

In relation to teachers, the documentary provides controversial information. In the first place, it is suggested that tenured teachers are the main problem with the US public school education. Tenure constitutes a series of contractual entitlements that attribute teachers a permanent job position. As the contract clauses are provided with legal protection, schools are obliged to retain teachers even when they are not performing their jobs adequately, so that this is the reason why it is a difficult task to dismiss a teacher. Only 1 in 2,500 teachers are fired during the academic year, an alarming fact if it is compared with 1 in 57 doctors, and 1 in 97 lawyers. Additionally, re-training incompetent tenured teachers or teachers who have breached the rules is expensive because they still earn their regular salary, while being replaced by someone else, a procedure which costs \$100,000,000 annually.

The documentary also presents the charter schools, which receive funds from the Government but are administrated independently from the state schools. One of its main differences from state schools is that charter schools are given more autonomy in terms of regulations and rules, but students are demanded to obtain the required results. An additional characteristic is that admitted students are selected by a lottery, a fact that has led to criticism and controversies. At this point is where five children (Anthony, Francisco, Emily, Daisy and Bianca) are introduced and interviewed along with their families. They describe their personal situations and the reason why it is important for them to be accepted to their corresponding charter school.

Every family except Emily's (the only white child), earn low incomes and belong to impoverished neighborhoods. She applies for the Summit Preparatory Charter High School since students are not classified by grades and are able to attend to the same subjects. This preparatory charter school is very successful as 96 out of 100 students will graduate and all of them will be prepared to obtain a bachelor's degree. Anthony lives in Washington DC with his grandmother due to the fact that his father died from drug addiction and his mother abandoned him at the time he was a baby. He applies for the Seed School of Washington (which is similar to a boarding school) in order to receive a higher-quality education. Francisco lives in the Bronx (New York) with his mother, who cannot afford paying for a private school. He applies to the Harlem

Success Academy, which has a great number of applicants and few spaces available. Bianca lives in Harlem (New York) with her mother, and at the beginning she studies in a Catholic school. However, in the middle of the documentary it transpires that her mother can no longer afford to pay for it, so she also applies to the Harlem Success Academy. Daisy lives in Los Angeles with her parents and wants to take a college degree when she grows up. She applies to Kipp LA, an academy located in low income neighborhoods which is compared to Canada's system due to the fact that one of its fundamental objectives is to improve its students' results.

Reviewer Richard Corliss writes that "*Waiting for 'Superman'*, Davis Guggenheim's edifying and heart-breaking new documentary, says that our future depends on good teachers—and that the coddling of bad teachers by their powerful unions virtually ensures mediocrity, at best, in both teachers and the students in their care" (2010). That is true, the effect of teachers amongst students is portrayed. Their job is essential due to the fact that bad teachers provide students with the wrong education, and they can even be one of the reasons why do they drop school. It is not possible to achieve a high-quality educational system if they do not perform their jobs appropriately. Guggenheim also criticizes that as tenured teachers' unions are too powerful, they continue permitting mediocre fellow workers to do their job, a biased view for which the director has been attacked. Stephen Holden writes in his review that "'*Waiting for 'Superman'*" doesn't explore the deeper changes in American society that have led to this crisis (...). By showing how fiercely dedicated idealists are making a difference, it is a call to arms" (2010). The documentary examines different aspects of the educational system which have been previously mentioned. However, Guggenheim's main purpose is to take action and to raise awareness about the school system and the situation that numerous students have to deal with every day.

Cath Clarke notes that *Waiting for 'Superman'* is "An impassioned documentary about US schools. Anyone with an interest in the coalition's education reforms will be watching closely" (2010). The second sentence refers to people who belong to teacher's associations and who therefore are interested in the coalition's education reforms. Guggenheim criticizes tenured teachers, so he is exposed to judgement from members belonging to these associations. It is also important to comment that the documentary provides information through graphics and statistics as well as opinions by the families and the educational experts. On the one hand, it claims that there is a problem with the worse teachers, who are one of the reasons why the school system fails. On the other hand, educators such as Geoffrey Canada are interviewed, so that his passion is transmitted at the same time that he shares a message of hope.

Improving the American educational system is a hard task to accomplish, something which is illustrated along the documentary. The perfect idea of schools and high-schools shown in movies or TV series is far from reality. In fact, the truth is a challenging reality where the future of thousands of children is decided by chance through a lottery. The popular conception about the American Dream's education fades little by little through reliable facts, testimonies from educators and from real people who struggle every day to give their children a better education in a failed system.

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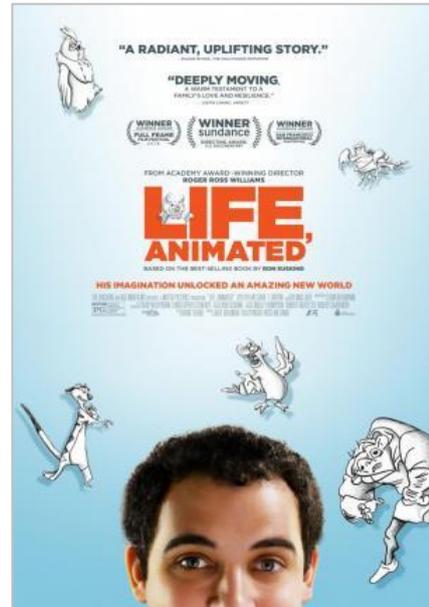
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Sandra Ruiz Ramírez

## ***Life, Animated* (2016): Autism and the Disney Miracle**

### **CREDITS**

**Directed by** Roger Ross Williams  
**Written by** Ron Suskind (from his book *Life, Animated: A Story of Sidekicks, Heroes, and Autism*), Emily Hubley (animation writer)  
**Produced by** Christopher Clements, Julie Goldman, Carolyn Hepburn, Roger Ross Williams  
**Music by** T. Griffin, Dylan Stark  
**Cinematography by** Tom Bergmann  
**Film editing by** David Teague  
**Animation by** Mac Guff  
**Production companies** A&E IndieFilms, Motto Pictures and Roger Ross Williams Productions  
**Distributors** The Orchard (all media), Sony Pictures Home Entertainment (DVD)  
**Runtime** 1h 32'



### **MAIN AWARDS**

**Academy Awards, USA (2017):** Best Documentary (nominee)  
**Docville (2016):** Audience Award (winner), Jury Award – Best International Documentary (winner)  
**News & Documentary Emmy Awards (2018):** Outstanding Arts & Culture Documentary (winner), Best Documentary (winner), Outstanding Editing: Documentary (winner)  
**Sundance Film Festival (2016):** Directing Award – Documentary (winner)

### **OTHER NOTABLE DOCUMENTARY FILMS BY THE DIRECTOR**

*Music by Prudence* (2010, short documentary, Oscar Award winner), *God Loves Uganda* (2013), *American Jail* (2018), *The Apollo* (2019), *Traveling While Black* (2019, short documentary)

### **REASONS TO SEE *Life, Animated***

- Not only is this a beautiful story about a joyful kid overcoming adversities and becoming a young adult, but also an inside look into the life of an autistic child. Thanks to this documentary we can look inside a mind with this complex neurological condition, and even if it is too hard to transmit and understand what autism is, we can at least get an idea. An idea of what it supposes, for both the

subject and his family, and an idea of the long and brave fight that he will face for the rest of his life.

- It is a truly endearing documentary film because the protagonist, Owen Suskind, is just lovely. His innocence and way to understand the world inevitably makes you adore him; this is refreshing but at the same time, somehow, heart-breaking.
- Another important reason to see this film are the amazing animations made to capture the stories which Owen creates in his mind, they are wonderful. If you're a Disney fan, you will also enjoy Owen's story.

### CONNECTED WITH...

- *Autism: The Musical* (2007), directed by Tricia Regan. The documentary film narrates several different stories of kids with some form of autism. Henry connects with the world by a near encyclopedic knowledge of dinosaurs; pre-adolescent Lexy has a growing interest in boys; Wyatt, a kid terrified by bullies and with precarious verbal skills, is passionate about orchids; and finally Adam, a music prodigy, has taken up cello. The director follows five different families participating in The Miracle Project.
- *The Horse Boy* (2009), directed by Michel Orion Scott. This documentary, like *Life, Animated*, follows the life of a family with a child who has autism. The difference is that he uses horses to communicate and express himself instead of animated films. Another remarkable story of a loving family and a brave, fighting kid. Hope is transmitted through the documented journey this family takes to Mongolia; to consult with nomadic shamans about the healing of their autistic son.
- *Running From Crazy* (2013), directed by Barbara Kopple. Three granddaughters of Ernest Hemingway and their mother work, individually, to understand how mental illness and history with suicide affects their family. This documentary is a bit different because they are adults trying to understand their own heritage but still, it is a story about family overcoming adversities a person is born with. Through this process, the heart-breaking Hemingway legacy is explored.

### RE/PRESENTING AMERICA IN *Life, Animated*

*Life, Animated* is based on a 2014 book written by Pulitzer Prize award-winning journalist Ron Suskind, the protagonist's father. Book and film follow Owen Suskind's life since he was diagnosed at the age of three with Pervasive Developmental Disorder, in other words autism, up to his mid-twenties. The documentary shows a little kid, later a young man, who fights the adversities of his condition in order to lead a life as normal as possible, and portrays a loving family who would do anything for their son.

Owen changed drastically at the age of three, when his motor skills deteriorated and his language processing broke down. After seeing a specialist his parents were devastated but one thing was clear to them: they would do everything in their power to help their child. People with autism tend to be easily overstimulated, the world is too intense for their brains and they hear a constant noise. This is why

Owen was silent for a year until he repeated three words from Disney's *The Little Mermaid*; sadly, four years had to pass before he started to speak.

His surprised parents realized that Owen had memorized all the animated Disney movies (they were easier for him to interpret since expressions and emotions were highly exaggerated), and so, they began to speak to him using Disney dialog. School was hard for him because everyone advanced to a rhythm he could not follow and he suffered bullying but with his parents' guidance and better teachers he made progress. We see him in the film graduating, moving to an apartment of his own (for people with special necessities), getting a job at a movie theatre and even breaking up with his girlfriend of three years.

Later in the film, he is called to give a speech in a French academic convention on autism. There he explains that persons on the autistic spectrum want what everyone wants but that they are sometimes misguided and do not know how to connect with others. He even compares himself to the hunchback of Notre Dame, but he concludes by saying that in the mirror he sees a proud autistic man ready to meet a bright future full of wonder.

A feature that makes this film very interesting is that it enables you to see the contrast of how life is viewed through the eyes of an autistic person and a non-autistic one. A series of interviews narrate his life and we see his parents' perspective, they are his protectors but at the same time they want him to fend for himself. We also meet his elder brother, who tries to provide him with the more "adult" information missing in Disney's movies. And Owen himself, whose articulate testimony permits us to see what autism is like from the inside. Non-autistic people will never be able to fully comprehend the reality of living with this disorder. However, the perspective of persons like Owen allows us to attempt to understand how they think and feel; and it also makes us acknowledge how hard they try to overcome their limitations, and the effort they invest in living a life as normal as possible.

Sheila O'Malley, writing for *RogerEbert.com*, stresses how Owen's parents tried everything to get him back from his sudden silence. Their hope never faded and when they discovered how he connected to Disney's animated movies, their world lighted up. She writes that Disney movies "allowed Owen to access his emotions and put those emotions into words" and that they "helped Owen relate to whatever he was going through in his life, and it helped his parents and his older brother communicate" (2016). She celebrates the idea that Disney movies are Owen's salvation, as if they could solve all his adversities. Her view is too positive and it seems she does not fully acknowledge all the difficulties Owen must face outside the comfort of the world of Disney.

In opposition to O'Malley's standpoint, Ewan Cameron's vision in his review for *Little White Lies* is darker. His point is that Owen struggles with the complexity of life due to the fact that Disney's animations "are limited as tools for personal development". He continues by stating that "Disney has given him a fantastic lease of life, but his grasp of reality is warped" and this can be perceived when his brother Walt tries to talk with him about sex. Unsurprisingly, Owen finds the topic incredibly hard to compute. Finally, Cameron concludes by declaring that "full of ups and downs, *Life, Animated* is a thoroughly absorbing, evocative story about a mind that has been both freed and trapped by an art form" (2016).

Peter Bradshaw in *The Guardian* chooses to adopt an intermediate position between O'Malley and Cameron. Bradshaw recognizes how genuinely helpful Disney has been for Owen's development, since, amazingly, Owen was "an autistic child who used the Disney classics he watched over and over on VHS to learn how to speak, think and understand the world". Bradshaw also defends this view acknowledging Owen's deep passion: "It was a breakthrough. Disney movies became his new alphabet, his building blocks for making sense of the world, and he wrote his own comic-book fan fiction about Disney sidekicks". Despite this, Bradshaw also accepts that "the poignancy of the movie resides in the fact that Disney films can go only so far: they can't teach Owen about kissing with tongues, or sustained adult relationships". He finishes with the message conveyed in the end of the documentary: "Disney films launched this young man into the world as best they could. And now it is up to him" (2016).

America has a place in the film in terms of privilege. The United States is a country designed as a huge corporation, a place in which the economy is prioritized over people. This is the story of a young boy who was diagnosed with autism at the age of three and who used Disney movies to communicate and understand the world. However, he was not a regular child: Owen Suskind is the son of Ron Suskind, the American journalist, author and filmmaker. Ron had won a Pulitzer Prize for feature writing in 1995 and he wrote *Life, Animated: A Story of Sidekicks, Heroes, and Autism* (2014), the book on which this documentary is based. Owen's story is still remarkable and inspiring but it would not have happened without two things. First, his father is a well-known personality in the country and he could spread his amazing story. Sadly, there are uncountable beautiful and special stories that will remain unknown because most people have no public voice. Second, the moment Owen began to show certain changes, his parents could enlist the expertise of doctors and specialists to aid. He has received attention, education and support since the beginning, many American people are not so lucky. Thanks to his parents' economic position as middle-class Americans, Owen has had particular privileges and means to work on his disorder. Owen's story is incredible and beautiful, but without money and the unconditional support of his family (which is another privilege), the story probably would have been different.

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Clara Sánchez Artero

## **Three Identical Strangers (2018): Seeking the Sensational Truth**

### **CREDITS**

**Directed by** Tim Wardle  
**Written by** Grace Hughes-Hallett  
**Produced by** Tara Elwood, Grace Hughes-Hallett, Becky Read  
**Music by** Paul Saunderson  
**Cinematography by** Tim Cragg  
**Film editing by** Michael Harte  
**Production companies** RAW  
**Distributors** Neon USA (all media), CNN Films USA (TV)  
**Runtime** 1h 36'



### **MAIN AWARDS**

**BAFTA (2019):** Best Documentary (nominee)  
**Directors Guild of America, USA (2019):** Outstanding Directorial Achievement in Documentary (winner)  
**Primetime Emmy Awards (2019):** Outstanding Directing for a Documentary/Nonfiction Program (nominee), Outstanding Picture Editing for a Nonfiction Program (nominee), Exceptional Merit in Documentary Filmmaking (nominee)  
**Sundance Film Festival (2018):** Special Jury Prize Documentary Storytelling (winner), Grand Jury Prize Documentary (nominee)

### **OTHER NOTABLE DOCUMENTARY FILMS BY THE DIRECTOR**

*One Killer Punch* (2016), *Lifers: Channel 4 Cutting Edge* (2012), *First Cut: In Search of Mr. Average* (2007)

### **REASONS TO SEE Three Identical Strangers**

- To question the ethical limits of psychological studies carried out with the endorsement of top US universities.
- To question the involvement of the media in personal lives, and the sensationalized treatment given to the case of the secret triplets.
- To consider how many sets of brothers and sisters might not know each other because of circumstances concealed to them.

## CONNECTED WITH...

- *Twinsters* (2015), directed by Samantha Futerman and Ryan Miyamoto. In 2013, two identical strangers from the United States and France, Samantha Futerman and Anaïs Bordier respectively, connected through Facebook and then in real life. Afterwards, a DNA test confirmed they are related. Their separation is a mystery which they try to resolve in the documentary.
- *The Dark Matter of Love* (2013), directed by Sarah McCarthy. The film narrates how the Diaz family, who already have a daughter of their own, adopts three Russian children (Masha and the twins Marcel and Vaidm), and how they cope with their new life. The family is aided by top psychologist Dr Robert Marvin because their children need to deal with their ill-treatment in the orphanage they come from.
- *Tell Me Who I Am* (2019), directed by Ed Perkins. This documentary is about one English twin from a wealthy family, Alex Lewis, who loses his memory after an accident and how his brother Marcus helps him to remember his childhood. Marcus, however, he decides not to tell Alex about how both were sexually abused until their aggressor dies. Eventually, Marcus comes clean about their past after a long time, aware that Alex is missing something in his narrative of their childhood.

## RE/PRESENTING AMERICA IN *Three Identical Strangers*

*Three Identical Strangers* is the story about how triplets were separated at birth without their families knowing the existence of each other. The answer to this mystery is that they were part of a psychological study to compare nature v. nurture. However, they never get to know the results, nor have they access to the abundant documentation connected with their adoptions. The film is, rather, about their lives and the shock of knowing each other than about the study itself. In any case, Wardle's film raises questions about the ethics of academic scientific studies and their means.

The documentary goes back at 1980 when Robert 'Bobby/Bob' Shafran is nineteen. While attending community college for the first time and being greeted by people he does not know, a student tells him he is physically very similar to his friend, Edward 'Eddy' Galland. Eventually, Bobby and Eddy meet and through a DNA test they confirm they are biologically related. David Kellman realized he was the third sibling when he read the story of how Bobby met Eddy in a national newspaper. The adopting agency which placed the three brothers, Louise Wise, with the help of the Jewish Board of Family and Children's Services were responsible for their split, initially claiming no family would have adopted triplets.

In fact, the Board had funded a study of nature vs. nurture by psychiatrist Peter B. Neubauer, backed by the University of Yale. The objective was to contrast the lives of siblings in different environments. Neubauer's team also researched if mental illness was heritable. The method for contrasting the boys' upbringing was placing them in families of different social classes in which an adoptive daughter had already been placed. Little is known about the data and results of the study; they are under seal until 2066 in Yale University's data base. As a result of the film, the Board granted the siblings some access to the study but the papers contain no formal conclusions and the

results of the specific issues tested are not clear. David Kellman, states in the film that genes determined some factors, but the environment was fundamental.

The point of view of the documentary is extremely manipulative, and much is felt to be missing. Director Tim Wardle builds tension throughout the documentary to reveal ultimately that much information about this strange case is missing. David Kellman and Bobby Shafran are the main voices of the narrative and it is not until much further on that the public knows about Eddy Galland's passing. The producer chose who to make a villain in the story. Eddy's strict adoptive father is singled out as a factor in his son's suicide. The researchers that participated in the experiment are presented as cold, distant individuals. The brothers' adopted sisters are given no voice. Some parents are allowed to give their opinion, but not others. There is no mention why all of this is so.

Cultural critic Rokhl Kafrissen has strong opinions about the documentary. She mentions that this is a story about the power to create families and destroy them, as well as using human beings for scientific purposes (2019). By the same token, she was disappointed about how the film ignores the Jewish issues in the story: "Social service agency, scientists, parents, babies, even the newspaper editor who broke the story—were themselves Jewish, makes the whole thing even more disturbing" (2019). There is an inevitable comparison to former Nazi experiments, even though Neubauer was himself a Jewish Austrian refugee. Kafrissen believes that the director should have been more active in clarifying that the experiment was an antisemitic act run by Jews against their own people and this is certainly a glaring gap in the film.

As Dargis points out, "There are instances in some of the fictional re-creations when [Wardle] seems more invested in delivering an entertaining documentary than an informative one" (2018). Definitely, one of the elements of the documentary is the lack of answers, which generates a constant sense of frustration. The audience may expect revelations at the end, yet this is not the case: even more gaps in the narrative appear. Another pivotal angle of the documentary is the approach to the research team. Dargis claims that they are depicted as cold, immoral individuals who would do anything in the name of science. Clearly, the interviews were edited to give that impression. The two research assistants interviewed later confessed that the production cherry-picked which parts to show and, thus, we do not even see the actual perspective of the team.

Dahl complains that Eddy Galland's suicide "deserves more than the shallow treatment it got" (2018). The passing of one of the brothers is mentioned swiftly in connection with his mental health struggles. However, this sensitive issue is handled very unethically with, as noted, the suggestion that Eddy's father was partly to blame for his son's suicide. It is also hinted that the triplets inherited mental health issues from their mother. Galland's suicide, however, might have nothing to do with childhood. It seems that Wardle wanted to offer some conclusions of his own because the study offered none but his position ends up being ethically repulsive.

Dr. Neubauer's study not only examined nature vs. nurture, but class. Each brother was placed in a different type of family: affluent, middle and working-class. Shafran's parents were a doctor and an attorney; Galland's father was a teacher and his mother a housewife; Kellman's parents were immigrants and modest store owners. However, in the end the key factor in their story is neither bad science nor class but celebrity of a very American kind. After the publication of their story, the triplets

appeared in newspapers and magazines, and on many television talk-shows. They confessed to purposefully emphasizing their similarities in looks and behavior: they had the same favorite color, smoked the same cigarette brand, dated the same type of women, had wrestled in high school, enjoyed the same food, etc.. Celebrity secured them passes for top 1980s nightclubs like Studio 54 and Copacabana; they even appeared briefly in Susan Seideman's *Desperately Seeking Susan*, a film with Madonna. All this was useful to promote their Jewish-food restaurant, the Triplets Rumanian Steakhouse in New York's Soho. Ultimately, the documentary hints that American-style celebrity may have been as harmful as the shady connection between the Board, the adoption agency and Yale University. Wardle cannot explain their dark power to create and destroy the triplets' families but, then, his film appears to be part of the celebrity circus still haunting the brothers.

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Ayelén Valverde

## SPACE EXPLORATION

The United States of America are the only nation in the world to have landed crewed missions on the Moon, though it is no longer the only country dreaming of sending humans to Mars. Space exploration is the subject of many PBS-style documentaries but, perhaps because it is not as exciting for the general public as it used to be, it has generated so far few outstanding non-fiction films. There is really no equivalent of movies *The Right Stuff* (1983, Phillip Kaufman, based on Tom Wolfe's book) or *Apollo XIII* (1995, Ron Howard) though the two documentaries featured here *In the Shadow of the Moon* (2007) and *Apollo XI* (2019) come close in quality and interest.

Do two documentaries deserve a separate section? In my view they do, for space exploration cannot be reduced to just a social issue, a personal story, or a sportive stunt. It is much, much more. It's about the human attempt to understand our place in the universe and try to come to grips with either our solitary existence in it or our eventual discovery of fellow dwellers near some distant star. The pity is that both documentaries look back to the past. The Apollo program only ran for a few years, and the last man left the Moon in 1972, almost 50 years ago. If they could manage the feat of travelling there with less computer power than our laptops work on, just imagine how far humankind could go today with just a little bit of the collective enthusiasm lost with the end of the Cold War.

## ***In The Shadow of the Moon* (2007): In Their Own Words**

### **CREDITS**

**Directed by** David Sington

**Produced by** Duncan Copp, Christopher Riley, Belinda Blacklock

**Music by** Philip Sheppard

**Cinematography by** Clive North

**Film editing by** David Fairhead

**Production companies** Discovery Films, FilmFour, Passion Pictures

**Distributors** Discovery Communications, Spectra Filmworks, THINKFilm (all media)

**Runtime** 1h 40'



### **MAIN AWARDS**

**Boulder International Film Festival (2007):** Grand Prize (winner)

**Florida Film Festival (2007):** Audience Award – International Competition (winner)

**National Board of Review, USA (2007):** Top Five Documentaries (winner)

**Sundance Film Festival (2007):** World Cinema – Documentary, Audience Award (winner); World Cinema – Documentary, Grand Jury Price (nominee)

### **OTHER NOTABLE DOCUMENTARY FILMS BY THE DIRECTOR**

*The Flaw* (2011), *The Fear of 13* (2015), *Licence to Krill* (2015), *Thin Ice: The Inside Story of Climate Science* (2015) *Mercury 13* (2018)

### **REASONS TO SEE *In the Shadow of the Moon***

- This documentary provides us with the stories of the different American flights to the Moon from a first-hand perspective. The astronauts themselves narrate their experience, ensuring that we get the most real and accurate version of what really went down, as well as giving us an insight into details that no one else would have had access to.
- The film also offers plenty of never-before seen archival footage from NASA, together with some of the most iconic shots: scenes of the astronauts working in the space capsule and them moving around on the Moon, a close look of the launching of the spacecraft, etc.

- This documentary has a very refreshing feel about it because of the director's choice to not have any other narrator besides the astronauts themselves. The story is entirely conveyed through these aged men's recollection of the facts, with no one else as an intermediate. All we hear is them speak and some of the audio of the archival footage.

### CONNECTED WITH...

- *Apollo XIII* (1995, fiction film). Directed by Ron Howard, this movie tells the story of the flight of the Apollo 13 in America's third Moon landing mission. It is based on the true events which happened when the spacecraft underwent important internal damage due to a small fire onboard and the prospects of a safe return faded. Astronaut Jack Swigert famously announced "Okay, Houston, *we've had* a problem *here*", often misquoted as 'Houston, we have a problem'. NASA had to work out a strategy to bring the astronauts back home.
- *For All Mankind* (1989), directed by Al Reinert. The most direct predecessor of *In the Shadow of the Moon*, this documentary film is the story of all the men who travelled to the Moon, in their own words, with the images of their experience. Apparently, director Al Reinert saw all the footage recording it. The film concentrates on the beauty of the Earth as they saw and lived it from their unique perspective. It has a beautiful score by British musician Brian Eno.
- *Mercury 13* (2018), directed by David Sington and Heather Walsh. This documentary narrates the story of the privately funded program Mercury 13 which trained thirteen American women to be astronauts in 1959. However, their dreams were cut short when NASA only allowed men to be chosen for the job. Some subsequently lobbied for women to be included in NASA's programs. Sally Ride was the first American woman in space (in 1983).

### RE/PRESENTING AMERICA IN *In the Shadow of the Moon*

David Sington's *In the Shadow of the Moon* follows the story of the United States' crewed mission to the Moon in the late 1960s and early 1970s, after President John F. Kennedy proposed (in 1962) to meet this challenge before the decade was over. The documentary, which is British, makes use of the original footage and media items that the public had access to at the time, as well as never-before seen archival footage provided by NASA. It relies only on the astronauts themselves to narrate the story, occasionally providing supplementary textual information on the screen. The documentary follows a chronological order, showing the astronauts getting chosen to fly the Apollo 11, training for it, setting off and coming back, with input here and there from other astronauts that flew other Apollo missions. Sington offers a rich journey into the tragedy and the triumph of one of the greatest achievements of Humanity.

At the beginning of the 1960s the United States was racing with the Soviet Union to put a man in space, and in the documentary we see President John F. Kennedy speaking to Congress about how it was about time for the nation to take a leading role in space exploration. Some complained that this seemed more of a political effort to beat the Russians rather than an effort to make science and

knowledge advance. However the astronauts themselves explain how Kennedy's speech still prompted them to work hard to achieve by the end of the decade the goals which the President himself had set.

The film brings us then back to the astronauts' first contact with the aeronautical world, since for most of them their initial interest was flying planes for the military. Some went on to become Navy aviators until one day everything changed with the introduction of the Mercury program (1958-1963) and Project Gemini (1961-1966). They had become astronauts who were perceived as American heroes without having done anything yet and, as they described it, that evoked a feeling of immortality which convinced them that they could achieve any feat.

However, no one knew how to go to the Moon, so it was a matter of trial and error, sometimes with tragic consequences. For instance, in 1967 the crew of Apollo 1 was killed because none had considered that the 100% oxygen environment inside the spacecraft might easily ignite if a spark or a flame was to erupt inside. Former astronaut Alan Bean recalls his horror at the phone call in which he was informed that the three astronauts had died due to a fire in a simulated countdown, trapped inside the spacecraft. So, especially in the early stages, there was sense of uncertainty, danger and worry because what they were attempting was a first for everyone. In another incident Neil Armstrong had to bail out with an emergency parachute of a flying contraption used to practice the Moon landing. He had been seconds away from dying but, as a fellow astronaut explained, there was nothing else he could do. The program had to go on.

By 1969 NASA announced that the crew of Apollo 11 would conduct the first attempt to land on the Moon. All the astronauts recall with excitement that the night before they could barely sleep, hoping to be the chosen ones. The documentary then shows footage of how they were getting ready, as well as a CBS news report in color, oddly sponsored by Kellogg's. As Neil Armstrong, Buzz Aldrin and Michael Collins travel to the launch pad, we see big crowds of expectant people waiting for their departure; the pressure was palpable as the astronauts felt the whole world was watching. The personnel in Mission Control looks as expectant and tense as the astronauts, hoping that this time everything would go smoothly. As the rocket takes off, the music creates a sense of anticipation, achievement and grandiosity, which enhances the close-up shot of the aircraft with the big bold letters *USA* on its side leaving Earth.

Suddenly, the astronauts were able to see the whole circle of Earth through the window. That is when Alan Bean, who travelled in Apollo 12, recalled how looking through that window he became extremely aware that death was just an inch away: each mission was filled with joy and pride, but also with fear or worry that things could go very wrong. It took Apollo 11 three days to reach the Moon, which did not appear particularly welcoming, but rather hostile and forbidding. Armstrong had a hard time finding a suitable area to land, and the three worried about the tight gas supply. They might have to abort the mission if they did not manage to land within sixty seconds. However Armstrong finally managed the feat and the whole world released a sigh of relief. And that is exactly what the film shows: a compilation of reactions to this event from around the world accompanied, yet again, by an emotion-evoking soundtrack. This was an American adventure but a common sense of pride was felt all over the planet.

When Armstrong finally started to descend those stairs, the whole world stopped. Later, after his famous “One small step for man, a giant leap for mankind”, he and Aldrin planted the American flag; as the astronauts revealed, they were told to do so only a month before leaving. However, Mike Collins, who stayed in the command module of the Apollo 11, admits that he did not have a feeling of ‘we did it’ until they were safely returned home. Once they arrived, the journey wasn’t still over. After the two-week quarantine, they went on a trip around the world; in the footage we can even see them meet a young Elizabeth II. From this experience they got to see the common, world-wide sense of pride everyone felt. Yet, the documentary does not end there. It actually ends with an odd, short call to preserving the planet which, although well intentioned, comes a bit out of the blue. Why not call for further space exploration instead?

Peter Travers writes in his review for *Rolling Stones* that “OK, the rah-rah gets a bit thick at times, especially a soundtrack that won’t stop at rousing. But the insipid soon becomes inspiring as the astronauts recall raw details, and we watch in amazement at the wonder and tragedy on view” (2007, online.) I don’t fully agree with Travers’s initial statement. I can understand that not everyone will perceive every step of the major event that travelling to the Moon was with the excitement the documentary projects. However, all this is told through the astronauts’ personal perspective, for whom it must have been one of the most exiting events in their lives. So, the director’s choice to create this constant feeling of excitement and enthusiasm, with the help of the soundtrack by Philip Sheppard, seems a wise choice because it stays true to what the astronauts and the world really felt at the time.

Stephen Holden notes in his review for *The New York Times* that, apart from Aldrin and Collins, “Threaded through the film are fragments of taped interviews with eight other Apollo astronauts: Alan Bean, Gene Cernan, Charlie Duke, Jim Lovell, Edgar Mitchell, Harrison Schmitt, Dave Scott and John Young. These snippets appear almost randomly, in no particular order, and it is impossible to keep track of who’s who” (2007). I agree with Holden in that at some points of the documentary the testimonies seem somewhat scattered and that references to one mission are often swiftly and confusingly followed by references to another. However, as he goes on to point out, they jointly create a great collective depiction of what the space program was like and the emotions that the trip to the Moon evoked in them.

In his review for BBC, Paul Arendt writes: “The heart of Sington’s film, though, is the dry humour and boundless humility of his interviewees. In their wise and withered faces (...), the camera finds something almost ineffable –a spirit of adventure that transcends both politics and patriotism” (2007). I completely agree with Arendt. There is something about how the now aged astronauts tell the story and how they felt that makes the audience connect with them. None speaks with an air of superiority or arrogance, quite the opposite. Instead you just hear the genuine pride and joy of having been part of such a significant historical event.

That this British documentary intends to celebrate the men behind the American space programs can be seen very easily from the beginning. The whole reason for the strong presidential encouragement to reach the Moon was beating the Russians, for these were the years of the Cold War. The astronauts themselves say so, yet they stress that one cared for politics but for their desire to acquire knowledge and make science advance. And that is what the film pays homage to. American *pride* and

*America first* are well known notions in the USA, but Sington's documentary suggests that the effort put in by the astronauts was for humanity as a whole, favoring the 'we did it' with which so many outside American cheered them when they toured the world, against the narrowly parochial 'America did it first'.

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Carlota Villoro Castillo

# Apollo XI (2019): The Space Frontier and American Imperialism

## CREDITS

**Directed by** Todd Douglas Miller  
**Produced by** Evan Krauss, Todd Douglas Miller, Thomas Petersen  
**Music by** Matt Morton  
**Cinematography by** Buzz Aldrin, Bob Bird, Jerry Bray, Michael Collins, Adam Holender  
**Film editing by** Todd Douglas Miller  
**Production companies** CNN Films, Statement Pictures  
**Distributors** Neon (theatrical)  
**Runtime** 1h 33'



## MAIN AWARDS

**Critics' Choice Documentary Awards (2019):** Best Documentary (winner), Best Archival Documentary (winner), Best Science/Nature Documentary (winner), Best Score (winner), Best Director (nominee)

**National Board of Review, USA (2019):** NBR Award - Top Five Documentaries (winner)

**Producers Guild of America Awards (2020):** Outstanding Producer of Documentary Theatrical Motion Pictures (winner)

**Sundance Film Festival (2019):** Editing Award Documentary (winner); Grand Jury Prize Documentary (nominee)

## OTHER NOTABLE DOCUMENTARY FILMS BY THE DIRECTOR

*Gahanna Bill* (2001), *Dinosaur 13* (2014)

## REASONS TO SEE *Apollo 11*

- This documentary film brings to the public the Apollo 11 mission seen from the inside: from the more technical explanation of the maneuvers taking place during the mission to the feelings that the astronauts and the mission control team experienced.
- The Apollo mission is famous worldwide; however, it is shocking how little it is known about it. This is a key documentary is in order to know what exactly the

astronauts did and how they managed to do it, taking into account that it is also a film about how imperialistic and competitive the United States can be.

- The stunning footage, mostly from NASA's archives, both the well-known grainy black-and-white images and the ones in glorious color.

### CONNECTED WITH...

- *First Man* (2018, fiction film), directed by Damien Chazelle. This film is based on the book *First Man: The Life of Neil A. Armstrong* written by James R. Hansen. It explores the life of Neil Armstrong (Ryan Gosling) and the events that led to the first Moon landing. It had a major positive response especially because of its good direction by Chazelle. It has a connection with *Apollo 11* because they talk about the same event from extremely different perspectives.
- *Mission Control: The Unsung Heroes of Apollo* (2017), directed by David Fairhead. This documentary film shows the experiences of the scientists in the Mission Control Team which made the landing on the Moon possible. Even though the astronauts took almost all the merit, this film reminds us that this landing could have not been possible without the team operating from Earth which is also highly present in *Apollo 11* (2019).
- *The Last Man on the Moon* (2014), directed by Mark Craig. This documentary film shares with us the story of American astronaut Eugene Cernan (1934-2017), the last man who stepped on the Moon (in December 1972) in the Apollo 17 mission. Eugene Cernan himself tells us his private life story and the personal and emotional cost for him and his family of his epic trip to the Moon and his homecoming. Apparently his wife famously remarked that "if you think going to the moon is hard, try staying at home".

### RE/PRESENTING AMERICA IN *Apollo 11*

Miller's documentary film goes through all the events, in chronological order, that led humankind to the Moon for the first time. The Apollo 11 mission was launched on 16 July 1969 from Cape Canaveral, in Florida. The action of the documentary film is based on the Mission Control Team and the astronauts. The filmmakers decided to use the original voice recordings of the Mission Control Team (the team of scientists who control the mission from the ground) as a narrative voice. This can be both an advantage but also a downside. It is true that, with the resource of this narration, the film takes a turn towards authenticity and a higher level of expertise; however, it can be often difficult to understand the fifty-year-old recordings.

This documentary film starts with images and recordings prior to the launch. It is also the only moment in which we have a close insight on Neil Armstrong's personal life, thanks to pictures of him and his family, portraying him as a committed father and husband. We are also presented with a large crowd of spectators (it becomes larger throughout the film) camping outside the site where the rocket is placed to see it being launched. Meanwhile, the astronauts are getting ready and, next, transported to the launch pad while mission control communicates with them and other technicians. Once a leak in the launch vehicle is fixed, the rocket Saturn V takes off. In order to get

out of Earth and reach the Moon safely, after a 300,000 km trip lasting a few days, scientists have planned different maneuvers. Firstly, the rocket had to orbit around Earth in order to take advantage of gravity. At the most advantageous moment they augmented the velocity of the spaceship performing the 'Trans-lunar Insertion Maneuver'. After that, they would perform the 'Transposition and docking Maneuver' which consisted of detaching the Saturn V from the Lunar Module and re-attaching it to the Command Module. Later, they put the spacecraft in 'Passive thermal control Mode' which, through rotation, maintained balance within the spacecraft. The documentary provides NASA's footage of the following days (day 2 and 3) until day 4, when we can see the astronauts' first impressions of seeing the Moon so close (and seeing its dark side for the first time). One of them says that "it's coming out" but this turns out to be an allusion not to the Moon but to Earth.

Finally, on July 20, 1969 (day 5) the astronauts undocked the Lunar Module and landed on the Moon. Here the filmmakers add a tense music to accompany the great moment. Armstrong is the first to go out and step on the Moon famously saying "That's one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind"; he is followed by Aldrin. They describe what the bare lunar landscape they see, plant the USA flag on the ground, and start taking rock samples. At this point Mission Control reports that the mission is "progressing beautifully" and next President Nixon addresses the heroes. The following day (day 6) we get a description of how solitary the Moon is by Michael Collins, the astronaut who waited for Armstrong and Aldrin in the Command Module. Even though the communication is "scratchy" they start the liftoff, the docking (Mirror Image Maneuver), and the Trans-Earth Injection Maneuver to return to Earth. The following days they are focused on returning to Earth and they air the final TV broadcast from space. During the re-entry, Earth's atmosphere creates such resistance and the gravity such speed that inevitably contact with the three astronauts is momentarily lost. After a really tense moment, contact resumes, the module lands in the sea and soon and the celebration begins. At the end, Neil Armstrong, Buzz Aldrin, and Michael Collins are received with great honors and celebrated throughout the country. The documentary ends when the astronauts are free to go home after their fifteen-day quarantine.

The point of view of this documentary is strongly pro-American. On the one hand, it is obvious that this is an American achievement and, therefore, the merit is theirs, but, on the other hand, this event also affects the entire human species, and this is never considered. This documentary shows the speeches of two American presidents: Kennedy and Nixon. Kennedy, in his 1962 speech, talks about the need for Americans to land on the Moon and "do it first". Nixon, seven years later, talks to the astronauts from the White House right after landing: "for every American, this has to be the proudest day of our lives", he says, and "it inspires us to redouble our efforts to bring peace and tranquility to Earth". Both speeches are highly patriotic and paternalistic regarding the rest of the world. We see over and over again the Americans proclaim their intention to colonize space and how they are the "chosen ones" (a conviction that goes back to the first 13 colonies). The space race was about being the first country to achieve a number of goals in competition with Russia than about seeking knowledge for knowledge's sake. Towards the end, when they succeed in bringing the astronauts back, "Mother Country" by John Stewart plays in the

background. This small detail makes a huge impact on the atmosphere of the film and turns the success of the mission into the biggest American accomplishment.

Kathleen Sachs writes in her review for the *Chicago Reader* that “As a testament to the wonders of science and space, it’s extraordinary; as a testament to the triumph of cinema and mankind, it’s more a small step than a giant leap” (2019 online). I agree with her statement because, regarding its scientific approach, this is a truly interesting documentary, but when it comes to the human point of view it is not as enticing; there is, for instance, a noticeable lack of women and colored people among the mission staff. Sandra Hall says that “And as you watch, you realise that Miller and his team have made their own excursion along the space time continuum. They have gone back to July, 1969, and brought the past into the present” (2019 online). Due to the fact that Miller relied on original footage and recordings of the time, he managed to put everything together recreating the moment as faithfully as it could be, without extra dramatic exaggerations. As a result, we could think that this documentary is plain with no emotional highs and lows, but this is not the case at all. As Glenn Kenny writes in his review “*Apollo 11* is not entirely devoid of romance. Although we know how the mission turns out, the movie generates and maintains suspense. And it rekindles a crazy sense of wonder at, among other things, what one can do practically with trigonometry” (2019). At first, the documentary feels slow and emotionless but later, once the paused tone the documentary becomes familiar, there are evident peaks of tension and excitement.

This documentary film explores the first time when the human species set foot on the Moon but, as the subtitle I have chosen suggests, the reasons behind this adventure had much to do with the imperialistic and colonialist attitude Americans have towards the world. The historical context needs to be regarded since it was probably one of the most important factors that led the Americans to progress and advance faster in the 20<sup>th</sup> century: the Cold War. The objective of the United States was to be better than the Communists of the USSR in every possible way to prove that Capitalism worked better. As mentioned before, Kennedy’s speech serves as the perfect example of this: “Do it right and do it first”. This concept can be quickly paralleled with the image of the USA flag that the astronauts stuck on the surface of the moon. In the film we also have another exaltation of American values in Nixon’s speech: one must feel the pride of being American and, therefore, do one’s duty to bring peace to Earth (which sounds ironic due to the wars the USA were involved in at the time, including Vietnam). On the other hand, throughout the whole documentary we are bombarded with footage of the overwhelmingly white crowd holding little American flags that gathered in Florida to witness the launch and the return of the astronauts, a clear image of white privileged dominance in the United States. The ultimate ecstasy of all this American exaltation comes at the end of the film with the tune “Oh, mother country, I do love you”.

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Kenny, Glenn. "Apollo 11 Review: The 1969 Moon Mission Still Has the Power to Thrill". *The New York Times*, 27 February 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/27/movies/apollo-11-review.html>

Sachs, Kathleen. "Apollo 11" (Review). *Chicago Reader*, 21 December 2019, <https://www.chicagoreader.com/chicago/apollo-11/Film?oid=68829800>

Nausicaa Vicens Salomon

## SPORTS AND E-SPORTS

Although the UK rather than the USA can be said to be the cradle of modern sports, these cannot be understood today without the national American passion for them. Funnily, two of the USA's best-loved sports, baseball and American football, are only relatively popular outside its borders; for most earthlings, football is what Americans call soccer...

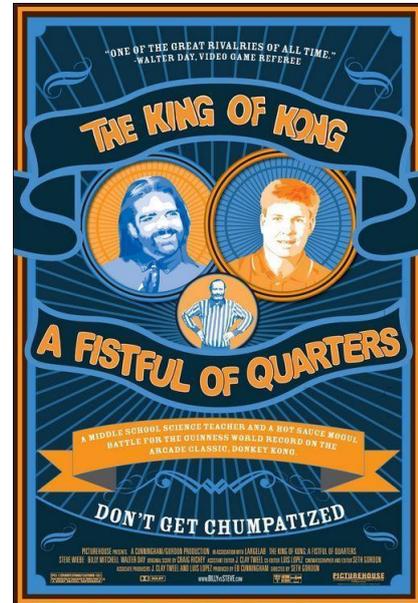
The selection here offered (with apologies for not including *Murderball* (2006, Henry-Alex Rubin, Dana Adam Shapiro) looks at sports from many different angles. The *King of Kong* (2007) is an insightful look at the early stages of e-sports which also tells plenty about the competitiveness of American men, an issue featured in the other four films. In *The Art of Flight* (2011), a highly acclaimed sports film ignored by critics, snowboarder Travis Rice uses awesome world nature as the particular backyard where he and his friends have fun. Quite different is *The Undefeated* in which a high school football team, the Manassas Tigers of Memphis, struggle to win after being known all-round as losers. *Icarus* (2017) moves from doping in amateur cycling to a major international doping scandal focused on Grigory Rodchenkov, head of the Russian anti-doping laboratory. Finally, *Free Solo* (2018) portrays in loving detail solo rock climber Alex Honnold as he attempts to climb El Capitan.

It is sad and telling that American sportswomen are not the focus of any major documentary so far and that they are represented in this e-book only through the story of their abuse in *At the Heart of Gold: Inside the U.S.A. Gymnastic Scandal* (2019). Hopefully, this tide will soon change.

## **The King of Kong: A Fistful of Quarters (2007): Arcade Drama**

### **CREDITS**

**Directed by** Seth Gordon  
**Written by** Seth Gordon  
**Produced by** Ed Cunningham  
**Music by** Craig Richey  
**Cinematography by** Seth Gordon  
**Film editing by** Seth Gordon  
**Production companies** LargeLab  
**Distributors** Picturehouse (theatrical)  
**Runtime** 1h 19'



### **MAIN AWARDS**

**Austin Film Critics Association (2007):** Best Documentary (winner)  
**Cinema Eye Honors Awards, US (2008):** Audience Choice Prize (winner)  
**Dallas-Fort Worth Film Critics Association Awards (2007):** Best Documentary (winner)  
**Online Film Critics Society Awards (2008):** Best documentary (winner)

### **OTHER NOTABLE DOCUMENTARY FILMS BY THE DIRECTOR**

*Freakonomics* (2010, intro and transitional segments). Seth Gordon has not directed any other documentary film.

### **REASONS TO SEE *The King of Kong***

- Although *The King of Kong* is not a fictional movie it feels like the great first blockbuster movie based on videogames, especially now that movies such as *Sonic the Hedgehog*, *Pokémon Detective Pikachu* and *Pixels* have become trendy.
- This documentary film provides an inside view of a primitive form of what today we call e-sports.
- *The King of Kong* is a nice walk down the memory lane for those who once played arcade games.

## CONNECTED WITH...

- *Ecstasy of Order: The Tetris Masters* (2011), directed by Adam Cornelius. In this documentary film Robin Mihara traces the greatest Tetris players through Twin Galaxies, the same website that appears in *The King of Kong*, which keeps the records of the high scores of the 1980s most famous videogames. The documentary focuses on the best Tetris players while they are preparing for the first Classic Tetris World Championship.
- *The King of Arcades* (2014), directed by Sean Tiedeman. In this film, arcade collector Richie Knucklez goes from collecting machines to opening his own arcade business in New Jersey. Unfortunately, the business did not succeed due to economic difficulties. Moreover, we can see more of Walter Day, and Greg Bond and Billy Mitchell, stars in *The King of Kong*.
- *Man Vs Snake: The Long and Twisted Tale of Nibbler* (2015), directed by Andrew Seklir and Tim Kinzy. The film focuses on Tim McVey, Tom Asaki and Enrico Zanetti as they try to obtain a billion points on the Nibbler video game. After seven attempts, McVey achieves success obtaining a score of a billion points. After that, the things get messy as Zanetti affirms to have beaten McVeys' score with no one of Twin Galaxies as witness. Once more we can see Walter Day and Billy Mitchell, two great names of the video arcade sphere.

## RE/PRESENTING AMERICA IN *The King of Kong*

*The King of Kong* is a documentary film about the competitive world of arcade gaming, paying special attention to this subculture and the vintagesque environment that surrounds it. The film focuses on two main characters, Billy Mitchell and Steve Wiebe, who was determined to snatch Mitchell's high score world record. Seth Gordon, the director, focuses mainly on the rivalry between the two. However, they are not the only actors in this play; Walter Day and Roy Shildt also play an important part.

The main protagonists in this non-fictional film are, as noted, on the one side, Billy Mitchell, and on the other Steve Wiebe. Mitchell is here a businessman (a restaurateur) who is well known thanks to being the first person to record the first-ever Pac-Man perfect game and for holding the Donkey Kong score of 874,300 points and having it unbeaten for approximately twenty years. Wiebe, who had always been very talented and competitive but never achieved any success, is here (in 2002) an ordinary man, a failed musician with a job position at Boeing, where his father had worked all his life. Unfortunately, Wiebe was fired the same day he and his wife bought their house. As a matter of fact, this unlucky event triggered Wiebe's wish to achieve a high score in an arcade game, perhaps to compensate for his previous failures. He checked the Twin Galaxy's top scores and when he saw Mitchell's Donkey Kong's high score he thought he could beat it. After that, he got himself a Donkey Kong arcade machine, placed it in his garage and played obsessively every night, neglecting wife and children.

In the early 2000s, there were two ways of submitting a high score. The first one was by sending a recording of a gameplay to Twin Galaxies' Headquarters, where a referee would watch the entire tape to verify its authenticity. The second one consisted of going to one of the authorized arcade game places, such as Funspot, in order to achieve the high score live. Wiebe eventually taped himself obtaining 1,006,600 points. However, instead of getting the recognition he deserved, he was investigated. Robert Mruzek and Perry Rodgers, Twin Galaxies' Head Referee and referee respectively, showed up at Wiebe's home to check his arcade machine. They opened up the machine, without his permission, and started to take pictures of it, trying to find an excuse to invalidate his score. In addition to that, a box with the name of Roy Shildt on it made them feel instantly suspicious. Wiebe and Roy had met at California Extreme where Roy saw Wiebe's potential to defeat Mitchell, his nemesis, and offered to buy Wiebe a new board because his just got broken. Robert and Perry thought that the board had been manipulated even though they could not find any evidence. They saw no problem, however, with the fact that Billy Mitchell himself, was one of the Twin Galaxies' members entitled to decide whether or not Wiebe's high score was validated, which finally was not.

Wiebe, who was by them decided to claim his throne, asked Mitchell to join him for a face-to-face combat at Funspot. However, Mitchell did not show up. He, however, was keeping an ace up his sleeve: a video recording of a high score that he was ready to show at his convenience. Eventually, not only did Wiebe accomplish a new high score of 985,600 in public but he also became the third person to reach the final kill screen and the first person to play it at Funspot. Nevertheless, Wiebe's triumph did not last long. Mitchell's tape scoring 1,047,200 points was displayed right after Wiebe had overmatched Billy's score. The tape was blurry and glitchy at times but, still, it was submitted and approved.

When Steve had almost forgotten about the entire Donkey Kong situation, he found out that The Guinness Book of World Records had asked Twin Galaxies to send their high scores for the 2007 Guinness Book. Thus, he decided to participate in a championship to try to overmatch Mitchell's taped score, unfortunately, with no success. Finally, Billy Mitchell's taped score of 1,047,200 was submitted to Guinness 2007 but Steve Wiebe scored 1,049,100 points, which translated into a new Donkey Kong World Record what made Steve Wiebe to hold both the live and the taped world records of Donkey Kong.

David Edelstein claims that "there was no doubt about which side Gordon was on" (2007). As he very well notes, it seems that Gordon is on Wiebe's side, and that the documentary is basically Wiebe's journey from anonymity to something close to stardom (the arcade games community featured in the film is, after all, quite small). Yet, the film would have no interest without Billy Mitchell and his dodgy maneuvering. He has Mruzek and Rodgers check Wiebe's arcade machine, he also claims that a taped high score is not worth as much as a live play (he never plays live...), and he submits a tampered taped world record after Wiebe overmatches him playing by his rules.

Roger Ebert writes in his review about *The King of Kong* that it is "a documentary that is beyond strange, (that) follows two arch-enemies in their grim, long-term rivalry, which involves way more time than any human lifetime should devote to Donkey Kong" (2007). Ebert is in part correct. The documentary follows two

grown up men who obsessively play a game allegedly aimed at teenagers and it is, to say the least, quite surprising to see adult men with their families, jobs and responsibilities fight for a Donkey Kong high score. However, Ebert uses here a judgmental tone which arguably only shows he has not been passionate about anything (except cinema!). It is not his call to berate Donkey Kong players for spending too many hours doing something they like, even if it is a just playing a videogame. Reaching a high score requires skills and practice and not everyone can accomplish Wiebe's feats. Owen Gleiberman writes that Gordon's film is "just one chapter of a face-off that becomes a ruthless high drama of skill, ego, celebrity, and geek passion" (2007), and that actually continued years after the end of the film. The features which Gleiberman highlights are the characteristics that make documentary film, as mentioned earlier, as exciting as a blockbuster. *The King of Kong* radiates passion and a sense of rivalry, but most importantly, it offers drama with great twists and turns, a hero and a villain.

Luke Thompson states that "What's compelling about Mitchell is that he doesn't look at all like the expected stereotype—with his blow-dried '70s rocker hair, omnipresent patriotic neckties and massive-breasted wife, he looks more than anything like a country-music executive" (2007). Thompson is somehow right. People usually have a prototype in mind of what a gamer should look like, and according to this a gamer should not have blow-dried hair, be patriotic nor have a good looking wife. Yet, Mitchell does. What is important to note is that prototypes and stereotypes are nothing but prejudiced views, another social construction of image according to a categorization. Needless to say, Steve Wiebe does not fulfil the established stereotype of a gamer, either, with his family guy look, and yet he managed to hold both the live and taped world records of Donkey Kong.

All in all, *The King of Kong* provides a look at an American subculture that has often remained in the dark for the general population, at least until Gordon made his film. In addition to that, the documentary serves as a historic view of what later developed into the loved and hated e-sports championships. What is more, the film also offers a view of the competitiveness that characterizes The American Dream, in which people (or, specifically men) are willing to do whatever it takes to succeed and become the best one in their chosen field, for nobody wants to be a loser. At the same time, as every spectator knows, being a winner, a 'king', in any competitive discipline or game is always short-lived, for there are many ready to claim the throne.

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Jordi Camí González

## ***The Art of Flight (2011): Passion for the Impossible***

### **CREDITS**

**Directed by** Curt Morgan

**Produced by** Chad Jackson, Curt Morgan

**Music by** Christopher S. Parker, Tim Scanlin

**Cinematography by** Gabe Langlois, Sasha Motivala, Jared Slater, Greg Wheeler

**Film editing by** Wes Briscoe, Curt Morgan

**Production companies** Brain Farm Digital Cinema, Red Bull Media House

**Production Companies** Brain Farm Digital Cinema, Modern Digital (Telecine), Red Bull Media House

**Distributors** Red Bull Media House (theatrical, all media)

**Runtime** 1h 20'



### **MAIN AWARDS**

This documentary has not received any awards but is considered to be a major sports film by fans.

### **OTHER NOTABLE DOCUMENTARY FILMS BY THE DIRECTOR**

*That's It, That's All* (2008), *Art of Flight: The Series* (2012, documentary TV series), *Dark Matter* (2019, short film)

### **REASONS TO SEE *The Art of Flight***

- The film is visually captivating as well as committed to get you totally immersed in the snowy landscape and the practice of snowboard. The stunning images make the film very attractive.
- The snowboarders' passion about what they do and how they are willing to risk their lives for it. They go to the most inhospitable and dangerous places and that is something remarkable about the film.
- The astonishing snowboarding stunts. We already know what extreme sports are about, and why they are called extreme; but what Travis Rice and his friends do goes beyond extreme.

## CONNECTED WITH...

- *First Descent* (2005), directed by Kemp Curly and Kevin Harrison. This is a documentary film about the beginnings of snowboarding in the decade of the 1980s and the progress that the sport has made over the decades. The first three generations of snowboarders appear in the film. It counts with the guest appearance of snowboarder Travis Rice and, like *Art of Flight*, it is mainly set in Alaska.
- *Snow Blind* (2006), directed by Christopher J. Scott. Focusing on the history of snowboarding, Scott's film describes the culture and lifestyle associated with this increasingly popular sport, which is now an Olympic discipline. Scott follows a few young competitors but, above all, it offers a panorama of all the types associated with the practice of snowboarding, from the extreme riders to the manufacturers, all joined by the same passion.
- *That's It, That's All* (2008), directed by Curt Morgan. This is the predecessor of *The Art of Flight*. The film revolves around the life of Travis Rice and his crew while they face the different challenges that snowboarding puts in their way. It shows a whole new perspective on snowboarding and brings the audience high definition footage of new stunts and tricks. Rice and Morgan subsequently collaborated in *Art of Flight: The Series* (2012) a seven-episode TV series that focuses on the making of the documentary and its "behind the scenes".

## RE/PRESENTING AMERICA IN *The Art of Flight*

*The Art of Flight* is a 2011 action sports film directed by Curt Morgan and brought to life by the Red Bull Media House. The film rests on iconic American snowboarder Travis Rice and how he and some of his snowboarding professional friends take the opportunity to snowboard the fiercest mountains all over the world. Morgan's documentary, a totally immersive experience, shows three of Rice's main adventures along with the Red Bull team traveling to Alaska, Canada and the Patagonian Mountains in Chile.

There is no clear, discernible issue addressed in the documentary but rather a story told using stunning cinematography. The footage makes the film captivating in a way that makes it difficult to get your eyes off the screen. The point that Travis Rice and friends make is that they want to take snowboarding to the next level and to do so they must seek for the most inhospitable mountains and try to snowboard down them. It is clear that what these men love most is snowboarding, above anything else. The images of the film evoke their dedication to what they do and that they are truly passionate about it.

Nevertheless, together with passion and love comes the danger. While watching this documentary this question arises: is the danger snowboarders are exposed to really worth it? Well, it seems it is. What Rice does as a professional sportsman entails a great deal of danger that could lead to disastrous consequences. Two of the settings of the documentary are the best examples of this danger. One is the Patagonian Mountains, where the mountains are, for lack of sufficient snow due to

climate change, very dangerous and extremely rocky. When they are planning the trip, the pilot of the helicopter that takes them everywhere already has doubts, and certainly when they get there it is difficult and dangerous to land. However, Rice is committed to one thing: snowboarding the Patagonian Mountains, and so he does. Watching this part of the documentary is particularly disturbing because one cannot stop thinking that they will hit a rock and close the Patagonian chapter with a disastrous ending. Luckily, that doesn't happen and once more the team prove how skilled they are and how they would rather find themselves naked in front of the danger that snowboarding supposes than not trying. The weather is not something that can set Rice and his team back. They would rather go their mountain of choice and see it for themselves than staying home and thinking what it would have been like.

The other setting in which the watcher can feel very anxious are the Canadian Mountains. By the time Rice and friends get there, there is an unpleasant amount of avalanches, which makes snowboarding almost impossible. Once again, Rice chooses to go and see for himself (and call off the adventure if necessary). The main hazard of avalanches is that, if you come across one, you will probably get buried under the snow, with fatal consequences. Nonetheless, they decide to go up the high mountains and try. One of the snowboarders in Rice's team decides to go first and that is the tensest moment in the whole of the film. Indeed, once he is done this snowboarder confirms that it is impossible to snowboard these mountains and they are forced to call other stunts off.

The film's cutting-edge cinematography is very important for its success. The images capturing the snowboarders from breathtaking angles makes the documentary very attractive and, somehow, amazingly charming. As mentioned before, this is not an issue-based documentary but a display of fascinating images that makes it engaging. Yet, issues do appear necessarily. Star Travis Rice appears in all of these images, yet he transmits an air of anonymity as he is hidden, in a way, inside his bulky equipment. Rice, along with the rest of snowboarders that appear in the documentary, are very famous, powerful icons in the world of snowboarding. Notwithstanding, although their skills are displayed and celebrated, for those unfamiliar with their names they remain interchangeable, anonymous bodies under their hulking gear.

On the other hand, it is inevitable to comment on American masculinity and how it is presented in the documentary. Behind all of the amazing stunts and the passion and the love for what they do, one gets a big whiff of American sexism for this is a very male show-off. Sports action documentaries mostly focus on men and *The Art of Flight* is not an exception, quite the opposite. Throughout the documentary it is hinted that Rice and the rest of snowboarders are proving their masculinity by doing their stunts; implicitly, they wish to be acknowledged as men by these deeds. This is not done overtly, and the skilled, talented guys are presented mostly as friends, yet the absence of women in the film is telling. Morgan's film appears to be based on the assumption that sports should be divided by sex instead of accepting that women can do sports too, extreme or otherwise. They should not be separated from the men and denied with an opportunity to be acknowledged as Travis Rice, for example, is.

Nonetheless, reviewer Melissa Larsen writes that Morgan's film "misses a lot of the 'we're just friends who like to shred and have fun' spirit that many snowboard moviemakers strive for" (2011). Larsen alludes to the fact that, regardless of the relaxed atmosphere in some scenes, what dominates is a sense of professionalism.

Morgan stresses the impression that Travis Rice is a great snowboarding professional. He gets to share the experience with friends because they also belong to the profession, and their shared purpose is to have the public acknowledge the extremity of what they do. The group of friends having fun and seeking the next adrenaline rush is there but as professionals they are extraordinary men.

“Star Travis Rice and his band of merry cohorts prove both their dexterity and bravery at every turn. But that’s all there is to the film, which supplements its primary material with scant interviews in which the snowboarders reveal a fondness for clichés, most of them centered around the idea that to be truly alive, you have to wish yourself past normal limits”, notes reviewer Nick Schager (2012). To begin with, it is true that Rice and his mates “prove their dexterity and bravery at every turn” and I consider it to be the whole point of the documentary. However, I agree with Schager that Morgan’s film is missing something, offering no real insight or an impression that sets you thinking after watching the film. Last, to say that “to be truly alive, you have to push yourself past normal limits” is a complicated statement. Of course there is nothing interesting in staying mediocre and not trying to push yourself to the limits to be the best version of yourself that you can be. Nonetheless, one can be fully and truly be alive despite not taking the risks these snowboarders take.

Tris Kennedy delivers this message: “The movie does have a slight tendency to turn into the Travis Rice show at points (...) But again, keeping the focus primarily on the exploits of one rider will doubtless make the film easier for mainstream audiences” (2012). If it were not for the fact that somehow, the documentary revolves around Rice, it would have been more difficult to watch. Without a main point like Rice’s career the documentary would not be more than a snowboarding Youtube video that would not reach the targeted audience (after all, it is sponsored by Red Bull).

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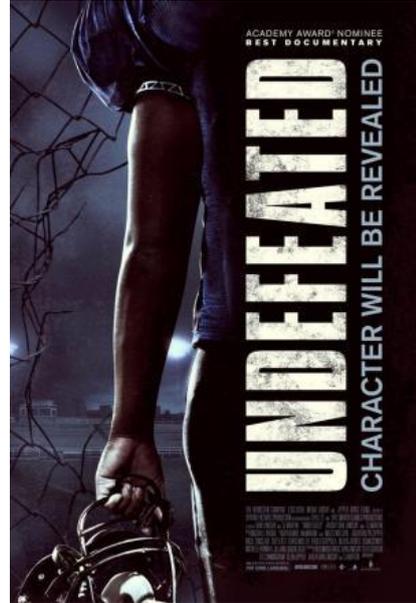
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Irene Vizcaíno Soria

## **Undefeated (2011): Battles On and Off the Field**

### **CREDITS**

**Directed by** Daniel Lindsay, T.J. Martin  
**Produced by** Rich Middlemas, Glen Zipper, Daniel Lindsay, Seth Gordon, Ed Cunningham  
**Music by** Michael Brook, Daniel McMahon, Miles Nielsen  
**Cinematography by** Daniel Lindsay, T.J. Martin  
**Film editing by** Daniel Lindsay, T.J. Martin  
**Production companies** Zipper Bro Films, Spitfire Pictures, Five Smooth Stones Productions, Level 22 Productions  
**Distributors** The Weinstein Company (theatrical)  
**Runtime** 1h 53'



### **MAIN AWARDS**

**Academy Awards (2012):** Best Documentary, Features (winner)  
**Black Reel Awards (2012):** Best Documentary (nominee)  
**Chicago International Film Festival (2011):** Best Documentary (winner)  
**Christopher Awards (2013):** Feature Films (winner)

### **OTHER NOTABLE DOCUMENTARY FILMS BY THE DIRECTOR(S)**

**By Daniel Lindsay and T.J. Martin** *I am Dying* (2015), *LA 92* (2017), *Territorio de Zaguates* (2018)

**By Daniel Lindsay** *Last Cup: Road to the World Series of Beer Pong* (2008)

**By T.J. Martin** *A Day in the Hype of America* (2002, with Brian Quist)

### **REASONS TO SEE *Undefeated***

- *Undefeated* is a very emotional documentary that not only focuses on the football team and their journey to success, but also raises awareness about the poverty and social injustice that these African-American players have growing up with.
- The documentary shows special personal footage of the players' living circumstances and their private issues in order to make the viewer understand why some of them react the way they do, sometimes with anger or unconcern.
- The film has a happy ending and also includes information on the players' lives after the documentary was shot.

## CONNECTED WITH...

- *The Battered Bastards of Baseball* (2014), directed by Chapman & Maclain Way. The film is about the Portland Mavericks, that played five seasons in the Class A-Short Season Northwest League in the 1970s and their struggles of being players in a minor league. Bing Russell, whose father rose to fame in Western movies, came to Portland to prove to himself and the world that independent baseball can work. After some difficulties in the beginning, the Portland Mavericks cause serious hype in the world of minor league baseball.
- *The U* (2009), directed by Billy Corben. The story of football program of the University of Miami and their players pursuing success on the field and in their personal lives. The team became famous within the US as they were constantly involved in violent football games and controversies such as refusing to shake their opponents' hands, causing other teams of universities not wanting to play against the Miami Hurricanes anymore.
- *More than a Game* (2008) directed by Kristopher Belman. The story of one of the NBA's most legendary stars, LeBron James. The documentary follows him and four of his teammates on their way to success and carrying out high school basketball trials in Akron, Ohio. The film focuses on their rise to fame, their struggles and especially their bond, as they refer to one another as brother.

## RE/PRESENTING AMERICA IN *Undefeated*

*Undefeated* (2011) follows a high school football team in Tennessee, more precisely of the area Manassas, on their journey to success. Volunteer Coach Bill Courtney (a white businessman running a small local company) is devoting his life to a rather weak team that has not even won a state playoff game once and mainly consists of uninterested African-American youngsters. They have grown up in this rough, economically depressed area under terrible circumstances. Most are poor, lack the support of a father and some are involved in drugs, violence and crime. Coach Bill becomes for them in a way the father figure they lack.

Chavis, one out of the three players Lindsay and Martin's film focuses on has even served a nineteenth-month sentence in a youth penitentiary. When he returns to the team, he is as aggressive as before and causes trouble by picking up fights with his team members, making it really hard for Courtney to coach them. However, due to Coach Bill's extraordinary commitment and love for these kids, he does not give up and even coaches them in their academic careers as well as their personal life. O.C., another of the three players, has great talent and quickly gets noticed by scouts of various colleges, offering him a full scholarship. Slowly but steadily the team starts to get better and wins their first games, which boosts the morale of the players. Money, the smart but financially deprived third player is really committed to go to college but unfortunately he tears his knee ligament, which makes him unable to play for twelve weeks. Devasted and not feeling part of the team anymore, he decides to quit school. When Bill learns about Money's decision, he immediately tries to convince him to go back to school, promising that he will always be part of the team. Money bursts out in tears and agrees to continue going to school.

Manassas gets better and better and keeps winning, which leads up to the state play-offs for the first time. They play the final game of the season against a team from a much richer school which they have been constantly losing against. After a heated game, Manassas unfortunately loses, but the players still get their well-deserved happy end. O.C. manages to pass the college entrance exam and takes on his scholarship at the University of South Mississippi to eventually play football in front of a crowd of 80000; Chavis graduates after curbing down his anger issues, and Money is able to study at the same university as O.C. due to a benevolent friend of Bill's that pays for all of his tuition.

The main problem of *Undefeated* is, arguably, that it fails to give the black high school students players sufficient screen time. Henry Barnes notes in his review published in *The Guardian* that the documentary "shows too much of the coach and not enough of the players" (2012). In fact, narrating and acknowledging the Coach's work is an essential part of the documentary's story line. The film's main focus is how a white man saves underprivileged, poor African-American boys and Coach Bill might be read as an example of the 'white savior complex'. Although the story of Manassas high school football team can be critiqued for this I myself did not get the impression that Coach Bill exploits his players' situation for his own benefit. He really comes across as a well-meaning, selfless citizen with a genuine intention to help. Coach Bill does seem to truly care about his players and their personal issues as he invests most of his free time and his own money on them to guarantee them a better future. The film definitely takes a stance on controversial political topics within the USA as it raises awareness about the important issue of educational and social inequality, which mostly black people are experiencing, and shows what whites can do to stop racism in their own community.

In a review published in *Variety*, *Undefeated* is described as a documentary that "can engage even folks who usually regard non-fiction features with the same enthusiasm that Superman displays when confronted with Kryptonite" (2011). This review definitely sums up my own personal thoughts on *Undefeated*, as I strongly believe that the film narrates much more than a high school football team away from failure and into being semi-successful, if only within a minor US football league. The fact that the directors mostly focused on the players' private battles, makes the documentary suitable for anybody to watch and not exclusive for an audience interested in football. Another review, by Peter Harlaub, published in *SFGate*, states that "the personal stories of the kids and coaches resonate more than the wins and losses" (2012). Again: the focus, unlike what is habitual in sports documentaries, is not success in the game but getting a chance of a better life. The heart-warming, emotional images that *Undefeated* offers explain why the film was so well received even winning an Academy Award.

In conclusion, despite the impression that Coach Bill is allegedly presented as a white savior, the film is not intended to glorify him but to expose the racial inequality issues that conditions the lives of the three young African-American players. The film shows how elitist and driven by social injustice, mostly trapping non-whites, America still is, especially the South. *Undefeated*, however, also gives hope for change by illustrating Coach Bill's work and finally showing some of the players' happy ends.

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Verena Wagner

## ***Icarus* (2017): Too Close to the Sun**

### **CREDITS**

**Directed by** Bryan Fogel

**Written by** Jon Bertain, Bryan Fogel, Mark Monroe, Timothy Rode

**Produced by** Dan Cogan, David Fialkow, Bryan Fogel, Mark Monroe, David Schulhofer, Andrew Siegman, Jim Swartz, Tessa Treadway,

**Music by** Adam Peters

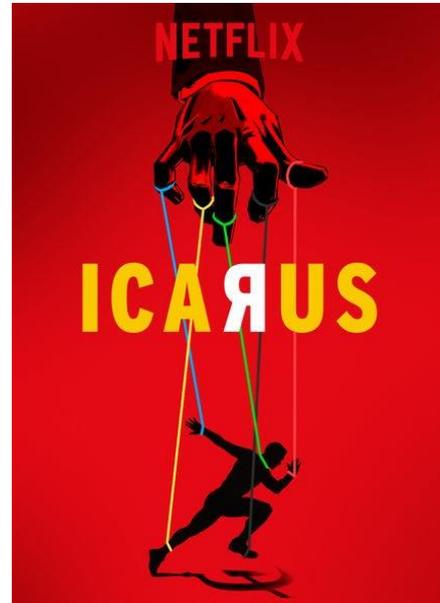
**Cinematography by** Timothy Rode, Jake Swantko

**Film editing by** Jon Bertain, Seth Harden, Kevin Klauber, Timothy Rode

**Production companies** Alex Productions, Chicago Media Project, Diamond Docs, Impact Partners, Makemake, Rise Films

**Distributors** Netflix (USA) (all media)

**Runtime** 2h



### **MAIN AWARDS**

**Academy Awards (Oscars) (2018):** Best Documentary Feature (winner)

**Critics' Choice Documentary Awards (2017):** Best Sports Documentary (winner)

**Sundance Film Festival (2017):** Documentary (Special Jury Prize) (winner);  
Documentary (Grand Jury Prize) (nominee)

**Sundance Film Festival: London (2017):** Audience Award – US Documentary (winner)

### **OTHER NOTABLE DOCUMENTARY FILMS BY THE DIRECTOR**

*The Dissident* (2020)

### **REASONS TO SEE *Icarus***

- It shows how professional players of any sport, cycling, in this case, can be blinded by fame and money without taking into account their health and honor.
- It is a reliable source to understand how the anti-doping system carried to protect/catch professional athletes is not 100% trustworthy.
- It shows that a state/Government (in this case Russia) can be involved in these scandalous practices in order to feel more powerful and successful using their citizens' lives, and how they protect themselves in doing so no matter the consequences.

## CONNECTED WITH...

- *Stop at Nothing: The Lance Armstrong Story* (2014) directed by Alex Holmes. This is a documentary that tells the story of Lance Armstrong, the cyclist who committed the biggest fraud in sports history. Holmes uncovers the deceitful image which Armstrong sold to the American people of how he miraculously became a cycling icon after his recovery from cancer. The film shows how Armstrong became more and more upfront with his cheating ways and his constant doping, and how he finally got caught: thanks to some of his ex-friends and team members.
- *Bigger, Stronger, Faster\** (2008) directed by Christopher Bell. This documentary examines steroid use by professional athletes, focusing on bodybuilders. Moreover, it explains how the view of the USA towards drugs can be confusing since some of the steroids used by sports people are legal. Bell uses this turmoil to criticize the health risks of taking steroids and the risks of the legal health supplement industry (pills/medicines).
- *Tour de Pharmacy* (2017, fiction film) directed by Jake Szymanski. This is a mockumentary that ridicules the massive doping in the cycling world. It is full of ridiculous stories involving the American cyclists while participating in the final stretch of The Tour of France at the limit of their forces. Additionally, it gently mocks the French New Wave of cyclists because of their rejection of traditional filmmaking and their wish to eradicate icons. Lance Armstrong appears playing himself.

## RE/PRESENTING AMERICA IN *Icarus*

*Icarus* is the story about how a fanatic of cycling, who is also the director of the documentary, Bryan Fogel, creates a personal plan to expose how the doping system does not really work, in response to Lance Armstrong's infamous story and his Tour de France's dubious seven wins. However, what makes this documentary outstanding is the plot twist by which Fogel's research turns into an international conflict in which Russia is the main player involved. The documentary then is rather more focused on the farce of the anti-doping system going on in Russia than on Fogel's initial plan of proving that testing athletes is not a viable strategy to catch dirty contestants. Nevertheless, the documentary proves what Fogel wanted to show since the beginning: that the anti-doping system does not work efficiently.

The story goes back to 2014 when Bryan Fogel, also co-producer of the documentary and an amateur cyclist, decided to check whether drugs (specifically EPO) could help him improve his performance at the Mavic Haute Route. He also wanted to prove that lying to the anti-doping system run by the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) is possible; if he could do it and get away with it, that meant that pretty much any athlete could do it too, as Lance Armstrong did for years. Armstrong only got caught because some teammates exposed him, but throughout all his professional cycling time he tested negative for drugs, which is proof of the failure of WADA's anti-doping system. Fogel then, in need of someone with resources to help

him with his doping plan, is put in touch with Doctor Grigory Rodchenkov, the head of the best anti-doping laboratory in the world, located in Moscow. Dr. Rodchenkov proceeds to prepare alongside Fogel a successful plan for the latter in order to win the Mavic Haute Route, a seven-day race through the French alps, using their EPO doping scheme. Even though Fogel did not win the race under the influence of drugs (as it turns out he did not do better than before), his victory was to stumble upon the biggest doping operation in the history of sports.

Along the documentary, Fogel contacts various persons working in organizations supposed to maintain the doping system under control, mainly at WADA and IOC (the International Olympic Committee). These people are the ones who at the end of the day, once they grant that doping had been going on undiscovered for years, helped Fogel and Dr. Rodchenkov to expose the fiasco of the anti-doping system. Dr. Rodchenkov, who run Russia's doping system for Putin in exchange for being discharged from the psychiatric clinic he was put in years ago, is the principal witness against the state-sponsored doping system once he absconds from Moscow and becomes a refugee in the USA. Rodchenkov provided plenty of digital and paper proof and was accepted into the FBI's witness protection program because his life was at risk. Some of his ex-colleagues had all of a sudden died; one was Nikita Kamaev (his best friend) who suffered a massive heart attack, even though he had never experienced heart problems before.

After the official investigations that WADA carried out against the Government of Russia and Putin's anti-doping system, it was confirmed, Fogel narrates, "that the Moscow lab operated for the protection of doped Russian athletes within a state-directed, fail-safe system. President of Russia Putin, ministry of Sport Vitaly Mutko, Deputy Minister of Sport Yuri Nagornykh, RUSADA's (the anti-doping system in Russia) Nikita Kamaev, and former director of the Moscow testing lab Grigory Rodchenkov were all involved in this situation with the active participation and assistance of the Russian Federal Security Service, formerly known as the KGB". This investigation resulted in WADA's banning of all Russia athletes from the 2016 Rio summer Olympic Games though most ended up participating anyway thanks to IOC, who dismissed WADA's ruling. Russia was later banned from participating in the 2020 Tokyo Olympic Games (delayed to 2021 because of the Covid-19 crisis).

Eventually, Fogel notes that Rodchenkov still remains in an unknown location under the FBI's protective custody. Yuri Nagornykh resigned as Deputy Sports Minister and was put under criminal investigation by the Russian authorities, still denying any involvement in state-sponsored doping. Vitaly Mutko, who also denied any involvement in state-sponsored doping, was promoted by Vladimir Putin to Deputy Prime Minister of Russia. Despite this massive cover-up, Richard McLaren (the independent investigator for WADA's commission) stated in his final findings, reproduced in the film, that "more than 1000 Russian athletes across all sports were involved in the conspiracy. It is impossible to know how deep and how far back this conspiracy goes".

Ken Jaworowski from *The New York Times* writes in his review that "Mr. Fogel could be considered either daring or foolhardy for his initial plan. But his work with Dr. Rodchenkov is levelheaded, and his documentary illuminating" (2017). He also remarks that "Mr. Fogel stops his own story and puts the focus entirely on Dr. Rodchenkov, who leaves Moscow for the United States. In interviews, the doctor outlines Russia's

widespread steroid program and the clandestine steps taken to cover it up". This highlights the courage that Fogel had throughout the entirety of the documentary, firstly by trying out an illegal plan in order to prove the failure of an important Governmental system, and later on with helping and rescuing his friend, Dr. Rodchenkov. Focusing on this documentary Jaworowski states that "What started as a wild idea turned into something more dangerous in *Icarus*, a documentary that had the good fortune to be filming when bad news broke". On his side, Peter Debruge from *Variety* declares that Fogel is "A cyclist who set out to prove he could outsmart athletic doping tests stumbles upon one of the game's biggest cheaters in this game-changing documentary" (2017), which led Fogel to erect "an elaborate Orwellian architecture to prove that the pressure to fix the Olympics came directly from Vladimir Putin". This review also portrays the audacity of Fogel's investigation and that of his friends that helped him to set it into motion.

British reviewer Kevin Maher from *The Times* states that *Icarus*, "A trivial *Super Size Me*-style premise (take performance-enhancing drugs on camera and see if they work!) becomes something far deeper in this thrilling anti-doping documentary from Bryan Fogel" (2017). This refers to Fogel using himself as a guinea pig in his drug investigation, as Morgan Spurlock did in his take on McDonald's trashy food. Todd McCarthy, writing for *Hollywood Reporter* stresses that "While *Icarus* technically doesn't break any news, it certainly scores many points by showing a diabolical wizard so surprisingly laying his secrets on the table" (2017). Also: "Rather than tell the strange story in a disciplined, hard-charging way, *Icarus* has a mangy, almost home-movie feel that's both engaging and indulgent". Both of them clearly think that *Icarus* has its own way of demonstrating the situations encountered and the facts needed for the understanding of it all for the spectators, without forgetting to show how it really is, both existing sides of a situation, the good and the bad.

*Icarus* insinuates that the Russian Government manipulates everyone following Putin's orders and whims. Russian athletes worry about failing to bring a medal home instead of reflecting on the dishonor of winning it with chemical help. Nevertheless, although Russia is the main country affected by this exposé, the USA also plays a big part in the scandal. Lance Armstrong was an all-American sports icon but starred in the biggest doping scam, tainting his country's honor and name. This circumstance is what led Fogel to discover the negligence of the anti-doping system that tarnished the entire Russian Olympic sports team. This could be a coincidence but by filming this, the USA stopped the Russian schemes and, in the end, by rescuing Rodchenkov, the USA appear to be the heroes and Putin's Russians the villains. *Icarus* then offers redemption from USA's dishonor while exposing Russia's lies; these, being bigger than Armstrong's, makes his cheating seem insignificant. In any case, all cheaters are always caught, sooner or later, and those who play by the rules end up winning, morally at least.

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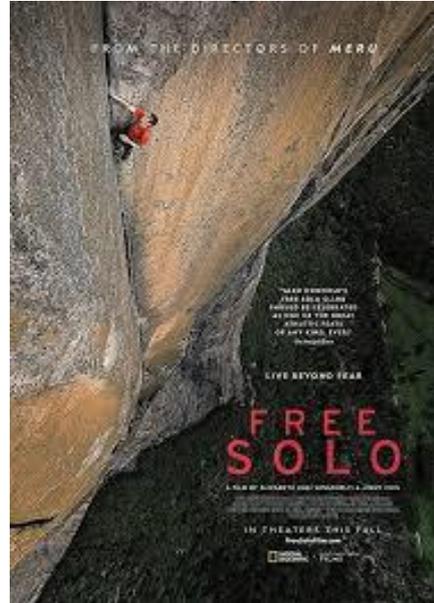
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Aurora Ruiz Cano

## Free Solo (2018): On the Edge of Death

### CREDITS

**Directed by** Jimmy Chin, Elizabeth Chai Vasarhelyi  
**Produced by** Jimmy Chin, Shannon Dill, Evan Hayes, Elizabeth Chai Vasarhelyi  
**Music by** Marco Beltrami  
**Cinematography by** Jimmy Chin, Clair Popkin, Mikey Schaefer  
**Film editing by** Bob Eisenhardt  
**Production companies** Little Monster Films, Itinerant Films, Parkes/McDonalds Image Nation, National Geographic Documentary Films  
**Distributors** National Geographic Documentary Films USA (theatrical)  
**Runtime** 1h 40'



### MAIN AWARDS

**Academy Awards (Oscars) (2019):** Best Documentary, Feature (winner)  
**BAFTA (2019):** Best Documentary (winner)  
**Primetime Emmy Awards (2019):** Outstanding Directing for a Documentary/Nonfiction Program (winner); Outstanding Music Composition for a Documentary Series or Special (Original Dramatic Score) (winner), Outstanding Sound Mixing for a Nonfiction Program (Single or Multi-Camera) (winner); Outstanding Cinematography for a Nonfiction Program (winner); Outstanding Sound Editing for Nonfiction Program (Single or Multi-Camera) (winner), Outstanding Picture Editing for a Nonfiction Program (winner)  
**Toronto International Film Festival (2018):** People's Choice Award – Documentary (winner)

### OTHER NOTABLE DOCUMENTARY FILMS BY THE DIRECTORS

**By Elizabeth Chai Vasarhelyi:** *A Normal Life* (2003, with Hugo Berkeley), *Youssou Ndour: I Bring What I Love* (2008), *Touba* (2013), *Incorruptible* (2015)  
**By Elizabeth Chai Vasarhelyi and Jimmy Chin:** *Meru: Believe in the Impossible* (2015)  
**By Jimmy Chin:** *The Shark's Fin* (2012, with Anson Fogel, Renan Ozturk), *Reel Rock 7* (with Chris Alstrin *et al.*)

## REASONS TO SEE *Free Solo*

- It focuses on the story of Alex Honnold, a professional free solo climber who decides to ascend a 3000-foot rock wall without a rope or any kind of protection.
- The documentary is visually outstanding. The landscapes of Yosemite National Park shown in the film are beautiful, and the camera angles used by the directors are breathtaking.
- The documentary makes the viewers feel the nervousness and anxiety of the filming crew as Honnold starts to climb El Capitan rock formation, risking his life.

## CONNECTED WITH...

- *To the Limit* (2007) directed by Pepe Danquart. This documentary tells the story of Alexander Huber and Thomas Huber, two German brothers who attempted to climb El Capitan rock formation in Yosemite National Park seeking a speed climbing record. They did break the record ascending the Nose, one of the climbing routes up El Capitan and a notoriously difficult one, conquered by US climber Lynn Hill in 1993.
- *The Wildest Dream: Conquest of Everest* (2010) directed by Anthony Geffen. This documentary connects the lives of two mountaineers, George Mallory and Conrad Anker. The first one was the first man to attempt a summit of Mount Everest, but he disappeared with his climbing partner in 1924. The second man also attempted to ascend the Everest and he found Mallory's frozen body seventy-five years later, in 1999, lying on the peak of the mountain.
- *K2: Siren of the Himalayas* (2012) directed by Dave Ohlson. This documentary narrates the story of a group of elite climbers who endeavor to climb K2, one of the most challenging peaks on Earth. They performed the journey in 2009, commemorating the 100-year anniversary of K2's first expedition in 1909. The documentary focuses on the climbers' behavior as a group, and the adversities they have to face climbing.

## RE/PRESENTING AMERICA IN *Free Solo*

Jimmy Chin and Elizabeth Chai Vasarhelyi's documentary focuses on the achievement of Alex Honnold, a professional climber who decides to ascend free solo a 3000-foot rock wall. Free solo is a climbing modality in which the mountaineer is alone and climbs without ropes or any kind of protection. Honnold has performed more than a thousand free solos in his life. However, in 2016, he challenged himself with a higher objective, climbing El Capitan, a vertical rock formation in Yosemite National Park. Honnold explains that El Cap feels "pretty scary", but that it is his ultimate dream.

Honnold is interviewed throughout the documentary, which is actually a character study as much as a sports film, talking about his childhood and how he started practicing climbing in the modality of free solo. He depicts himself as a shy and melancholic child who liked to play alone. He began climbing solo as a teenager because he did not know anybody and was afraid of talking to strangers. Honnold also

talks about his lifestyle. He has lived in a van with very few belongings for almost a decade, but he loves to live this way because it allows him to move freely over the country and climb wherever he wants. After his first free solo achievements he became famous in the climbing universe. He wrote a book about his experiences and organized book tours to promote his job.

It is 2016 and Honnold undertakes the project of climbing El Cap. He plans to practice and work out during the whole year in order to climb the wall in the Fall season. He gathers a team of professional climbers who can help him on his adventure. Among them is Jimmy Chin, one of the directors of the documentary, who agrees to film him. In fact, Chin and Honnold had already worked together for ten years, climbing all over the world. Chin and his filming team, completed by Chin's wife and experienced co-director Elizabeth Chai Vasarhely, have already shoot Alex on several occasions, recording his free solos. Nevertheless, they all feel quite uncertain about filming Honnold's new goal since it is extremely dangerous to climb El Cap without ropes, and the possibilities of falling are considerable. The filming crew understands that anything can happen, even the worst-case scenario in which they would be witnessing a fatal ending. They all have friends or acquaintances who have died climbing free solos, all of them dying while still young. Honnold compares free soloing to perfection because to fail or to make a false step means death, so he has to be perfect. He also compares the free solo mentality to warrior culture as you must perform 100% focused since your life depends on it. Alex does not want to die free soloing; however, he expresses that this is when he feels the most alive and that it is an appeal for him to make something difficult feel safe.

The documentary also deals with Honnold's personal life. The results of a medical test show that he does not have a normal activation of the amygdala in the brain. This means that his amygdala works, but it needs more stimulation than usual in order to process fear. This issue also affects emotions and behavior. Honnold is in fact a quite eccentric and unconventional man who lacks communicative skills. His patient girlfriend Sanni McCandless describes him as "extremely honest and a bit weird". He is not used to leading a family life and feel loved. Alex mentions that his parents were quite distant with him. His father died when he was nineteen years old. His mother remarks that Honnold's father might have had Asperger because he did not show affection towards his family. Alex feels sorry his father cannot see his accomplishments since he always supported his climbing. He has, nonetheless, a good relationship with his mother.

In the Fall of 2016, Alex climbs the rock formation at El Cap numerous times with ropes in order to memorize all the steps he has to perform to get to the top. He practices the moves over and over again until it does not feel scary to climb the rock on free solo. Honnold insists on the fact that if he fails, his hands would not be able to hold him because his body would be standing on tiny edges of the rock. However, the first time he starts the climb, he feels too uncomfortable and turns around. He feels pressured seeing the cameras recording him and fears falling in front of his friends. Three months later, in the Spring of 2017, Honnold starts training again and rehearsing all the moves. The film crew also prepares a new strategy to shoot the climb without disturbing Alex, keeping the many cameras out of his sight. Alex at last starts the ascend again. Throughout the climb, the film crew on the grounds and on El Cap is extremely nervous. The viewers of the documentary can feel the anxiety and tension

all the camera men feel, and it is hard to avoid turning your head away from the screen. After overcoming the most difficult parts of the wall, Honnold eventually reaches the top. On June 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2017, Alex Honnold became the first person to free solo El Capitan. It took him three hours and fifty-six minutes.

Jeannette Catsoulis writes in her review that “*Free Solo* is an easy sell to extreme sports enthusiasts. More sedentary viewers, though—perhaps less focused on the technical niceties of defying gravity—might discover something arguably even more fascinating in this layered documentary: a cautionary study of what can happen when you don’t hug your children” (2018). This is partially understandable. It is true that the documentary is not only about climbing as the directors also focus on Honnold’s childhood and personal life. Viewers can perceive through the film that Alex probably had a difficult upbringing, feeling misunderstood and lost during his childhood and teens. However, this is not the most significant part of the documentary. The principal core of the film is free solo climbing and how Honnold achieves an extremely challenging objective by pushing himself as hard as he can.

Peter Bradshaw notes that “Alex Honnold himself is an enigma: equable, even-tempered, but withdrawn, although McCandless clearly wants him to be more emotionally open with her. As for Honnold, he clearly isn’t finished with free solo climbs. Does a samurai’s destiny await him?” (2018). Regarding the first matter of the review, Honnold is indeed a very mysterious and eccentric person and it is difficult to understand him in some points. In the documentary, his girlfriend Sanni mentions that it is not easy to live with him sometimes because of his personality. He is very reserved, and he likes to go on his own. He also becomes angry in some occasions when things do not happen the way he desires, especially in relation to the climbing world. As for the second observation, this is totally correct. Honnold has not finished with free solo climbs. At the end of the documentary, he states that he is delighted with his new achievement but that if in some years he finds a new goal, he would not doubt to challenge himself again.

Finally, David Sims writes in his review: “Why does Honnold do this? That’s not what the directors Elizabeth Chai Vasarhelyi and Jimmy Chin are interested in. It’s a question that’s probably impossible to answer since there’s no real rational justification of an activity that promises certain death if you make a single mistake. *Free Solo*, instead, is largely about the intensity of knowing a person like Honnold, of having someone so unusual in your life, and the ways in which he bewitches, excites and frightens people around him simply by doing his job” (2018). Certainly, the documentary does not dig deeply into the reasons why Honnold performs this type of climbing. However, as Sims mentions these reasons cannot have a logical explanation, free soloing is just Honnold’s passion and he has had the opportunity to transform his passion into his job. Sims is also right about the fact that this film is about the intensity of living with a person like Honnold. In the documentary, the directors interview his family, his girlfriend, and some of Alex’s climbing friends, and they all feel the same. They love Alex and his childish eagerness and personality, but they are also scared of his ambition and how he calmly accepts death as part of his job.

In relation with America, Alex Honnold distances himself from the American society since his lifestyle is very precarious and nomadic. In fact, he lives in a van for almost a decade with very few belongings, possessing only the materials he needs for his job. He is uninterested in consumerist American society. Nevertheless, his

mentality and ambition towards achieving objectives, and being constantly challenging himself to be the first one to accomplish a complicated goal no matter the risks, is a very American way of behaving. He even says that “nobody achieves anything great being happy and cozy”. Therefore, despite having an alternative way of life, Honnold has interiorized this American idea that life is similar to a competition and that if you do not train hard enough, you will not surpass your opponents and be successful. He is, in short, a pure American winner.

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Helena Zúñiga Centenero

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