

Defining the documentary – Film

In this worksheet you will analyse the style and content of different film documentaries (those made specifically for a cinema release) to begin a database of documentary examples. This activity concentrates on recent examples but you could use the questions and approaches for a wider range of films as your study continues, grouping examples together by subject content, form and period.

Resources: Access to film reviews from magazines such as *Sight and Sound* and/or *Empire* and/or reviews online. The International Movie Database website (www.imdb.com) provides links to a wide range of reviews and institutional information.

Activity

The nominated films for the Academy Award for Best Documentary 2005 were:

Darwin's Nightmare (Hubert Sauper, Austria/Belgium/France, 2004)

Enron: The Smartest Guys in the Room (Alex Gibney, US, 2005)

March of the Penguins (Luc Jacquet, France, 2005)

Murderball (Henry Alex Rubin and Dana Adam Shapiro, US, 2005)

Street Fight (Marshall Curry, US, 2005)
(The winner was *March of the Penguins*)

1. Have you seen any of these films? If so, where did you watch them? Cinema? Television? DVD? (If you haven't seen any, have you heard of any of them?)
2. For each of the five documentaries find a review using either a film journal or an internet site and make notes on the following (you may find it helpful to work in pairs to cover all the information):
 - What is the subject matter of the film?
 - What stylistic elements (eg voiceover, interviews, animation, music etc) are referred to in the reviews?
 - Do the different documentaries have anything in common (institutional context, subject matter etc)?
 - Who do you think the intended audience is for each of the documentaries?
 - What type of release pattern (distribution) would each film have had (multiplex, art cinemas)?
3. How does each of the films conform to our initial definition of documentary – that it is:
 - Non-fiction
 - About the real (historical, political, cultural etc events) world
 - Unstaged
 - Based on observation rather than intervention by the documentary-maker
 - Informative, educational.

Suggestion for further work

The Grierson Trust also gives awards for documentaries. For a wider range of examples from cinema and television, visit www.griersontrust.org and click on Past Awards.