

Critically Viewing A Documentary Film

Documentary films are an important and engaging way to experience stories and learn about other people's experiences. Excitingly, they have become increasingly narrative-driven, meaning that instead of presenting the message in a style that merely reports, documentaries now tell compelling non-fiction stories. This means that documentary filmmakers have adopted many of the techniques used in fiction films to create stories, and documentary films can now be experienced and analysed in a similar way to fiction films.



Considering the point of view of the filmmaker

“Filmmaker” is the name given to the source of a film. This could be a person in any number of different roles, including the director, producer or distributor. The filmmaker is whoever has the most say in the statement that the film is making. Often in the case of a documentary, the film's director is working with the subject of the film because of what he or she wants to say about it.

When viewing a documentary film, an important question an ‘active’ viewer should ask is, “What does the filmmaker believe about the subject of the documentary?” After which, the viewer should consider whether the point of view of the filmmaker could lead to the message of the film being biased or misleading, and whether or not the viewer can rely on the filmmaker to present information that is reliable and informative.

This doesn't mean that we should discount the reliability of documentary films as providers of valid information. It just highlights that an active viewer should fully consider the ‘reality’ being presented in the film as one that is guided by the views of the individuals and/or organisations that have created it. Paying attention to the bias within a film (either intentional or unintentional) by viewing a documentary film in an active manner ensures that you as the viewer will think critically about the role of the filmmaker in the overall message of a documentary film.

Considering new and different information

If you're satisfied that the filmmaker's purpose for the documentary film is sincere (even well-meaning), then the message can be relied upon to inform and educate. While watching, it may become apparent that the message of the film and your personal beliefs are somewhat different. This provides an exceptional opportunity to consider what your personal beliefs are, and to think critically about why you hold those beliefs.

The content of the documentary film may force you to consider a different view to your own – be open to this, and if required, challenge yourself to seek more information so that your view about the topic is as informed as possible.