



I am eye. I am a mechanical eye. I, a machine, am showing you a world, the likes of which only I can see.

Dziga Vertov (1896–1954),
Russian documentary film maker

DOCUMENTARY AND MOCKUMENTARY

Chapter overview

Some of the very first moving pictures were documentaries. Film makers have long attempted to capture reality, but is it possible to really capture it? Which reality is the film maker capturing? Does the act of capturing a reality change it? Documentary has been a dominant genre in filmmaking from the invention of moving pictures. The documentary genre has developed over the years, ranging from observational pieces to reality television, and creating new genres, such as the mockumentary.

Moving images

For centuries, artists have tried to capture reality. For a very long time painting was concerned with attempting to be as 'realistic' as possible. Artists tried to capture the external world in a life-like way. The invention and popularisation of photography (or what was called the mechanical means of reproduction) in the middle of the nineteenth century had a huge impact on art, artists, newspapers, journalists and what became known as 'the media'.

'Reality' could now be captured by a mechanical device, a camera. This allowed visual artists the freedom to interpret the world in their own ways, rather than having to capture it realistically.

This development led to questions that are still being asked today: What is reality? Can you capture reality? And does trying to capture a reality change it? These questions are central to documentaries and have shaped the various forms of documentary.



DID YOU KNOW...

Throughout his career, French director Jean-Luc Godard (1930–) has created films which cross all boundaries. Films such as *La Chinoise* (1967) combine drama, documentary, actual events, photographs, radio broadcasts and actors.

Godard also uses techniques in which the actors/participants speak to or acknowledge the audience watching the film, thereby making the viewers a part of the film.

Still from *La Chinoise*, a political film directed by Jean-Luc Godard, 1967



In the beginning

The earliest films were what we would call very simple documentaries; that is, they document or record an event. Often they were made by placing a camera in a single location and recording the action. These early documentaries were usually only seconds long.



There is some debate about what to call these early films. Some people consider them documentaries, while others see documentary as a more sophisticated kind of film. It is perhaps most accurate to call these early attempts 'actuality films'.

? DID YOU KNOW...

Thomas Edison (1847–1931) is generally credited with the invention of motion picture technology. Edison and his team developed the technology over years from the early 1890s. By 1894 they had opened a cinema in New York. The early films were very short and were shot at Edison's factory. The earliest film we know of is a film of one of Edison's assistants, Fred Ott, sneezing. Go to **Pearson Reader** to see the film.



Actuality films

The Lumière brothers made some of the earliest and most important actuality films. Auguste and Louis Lumière built on Edison's process and in 1895 they had the first public screening of their films. These films were a combination of actuality and primitive fiction. The titles of the films sum up their content, for example *Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory* (1895) and *Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat* (1896). Each of these films was fifty seconds long and screened together in a program of ten films.

The novelty of film meant that early films attracted a great deal of attention. But before too long, people lost interest in seeing trains arrive at stations or people leave factories.

Film theoreticians have questioned whether actuality films were really capturing reality. In early actuality films people were almost always smiling, seemed happy and were wearing what would appear

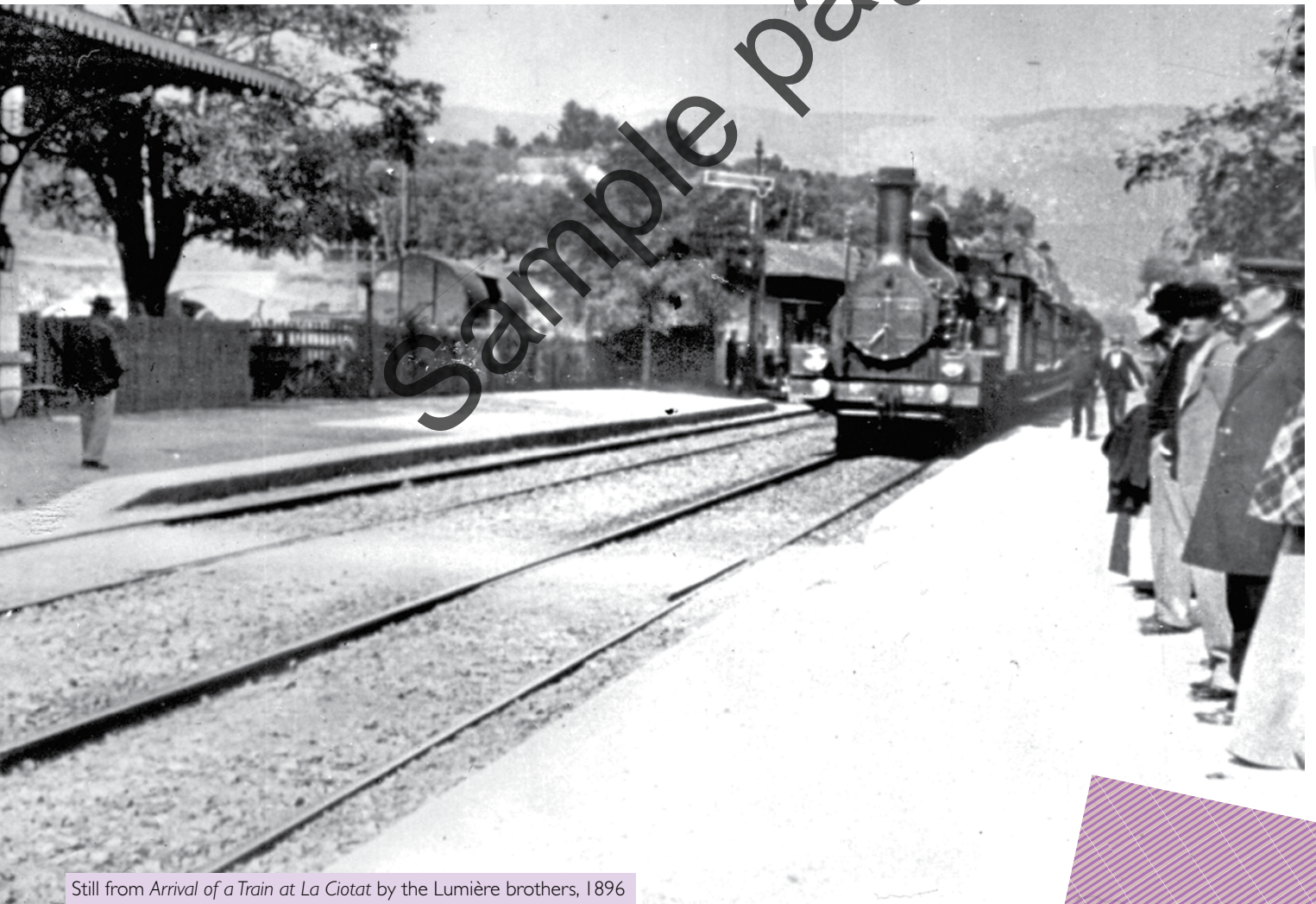
to be their best clothes, even when leaving work at the factory after a hard day's work. It is claimed, and we will examine this more closely later, that the presence of the camera and the film crew affected the 'reality' that was being filmed and that the very act of filming changes what is being filmed.

Although the Lumière brothers are considered the pioneers of actuality, or early documentary, it was another French company, Pathé, which took the actuality concept to the next stage—documentary film.



DID YOU KNOW...

While film was invented in America and developed in France, an Australian production was the first to use it in a sequence to tell a story. *Soldiers of the Cross*, made in 1900, was shot in Melbourne and consisted of 200 slides and fifteen ninety-second film clips which were combined to tell Bible stories.



Still from *Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat* by the Lumière brothers, 1896

Pathé acquired the Lumière brothers' techniques and patents on the equipment and began to film around the world. They developed public interest by filming in a wide variety of locations including Europe, America, Japan and Australia. Pathé employed camera operators and producers to travel and film events of public interest, such as major sporting events, parliaments, coronations and other public events. Pathé would then gather these films together and screen them as newsreels in cinemas. By the 1920s virtually every cinema would screen a newsreel before the feature films. These, in fact became the forerunners of the television news.

DID YOU KNOW...

The first films screened in Australia were shown at the Melbourne Opera House on 22 August 1896. Shortly after, Pathé filmed the Melbourne Cup, which was screened around the world. This film was over six minutes long and was one of the earliest film-length actuality films (for the time). It is also believed to be Australia's oldest surviving film.

1896 Melbourne Cup



Breakaway tasks

Remembering

- 1 When did Edison open his cinema in New York?
- 2 Who were the Lumière brothers and why were they important?
- 3 What two important film events happened in Melbourne?

Understanding

- 4 Is there a difference between actuality films and documentary? If so, what is it?

Analysing

- 5 Search the internet for the Lumière brothers' films *Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory* and *Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat*. Watch the films and answer the following questions.
 - a Describe the event that is being filmed.
 - b Do you think the people being filmed realise that they are being filmed? How do you know? What effect do you think this might have on the film?
 - c Does the camera move? Do you think the film has been edited at all?
 - d Why do you think these films were popular at the time?
- 6 Search the internet for the three clips of the Melbourne Cup 1896. Watch the clips.
 - a Does the camera move? Do you think the film has been edited at all? What is the effect on the audience of the camera work?
 - b Does this show the entire Cup? What has been left out and why do you think this was?
 - c How do you think the film has been arranged?
 - d The man in the long grey coat in clip 3 is the producer, Walter Barnett. He runs into shot and encourages the crowd to wave their hats, seemingly to add excitement. Do you think this is the right thing to do in a documentary?

Evaluating

- 7 Do you think the Lumière brothers were capturing reality?

Reality and documentary

Can a documentary capture reality? Is there a single objective reality out there? These are questions that have plagued film makers from the earliest days of documentary filmmaking. Some contemporary philosophers argue that there is no one single objective reality but that we each interpret reality in our own way. If this is the case then no film can capture an objective reality, because we all see things differently. In addition, the camera operator chooses what they will film, and what they will leave out; and films are edited to fit into an acceptable time length. So even if a film appears to be showing a 'reality', it has actually been edited and manipulated by the people making it.



In the case of documentaries, 'objective' usually means impartial, based on observed facts and unbiased. 'Subjective' means a personal interpretation of facts or events that is not impartial.

Other questions we can ask are: whose reality is being captured and does the act of filming an event actually change that event?

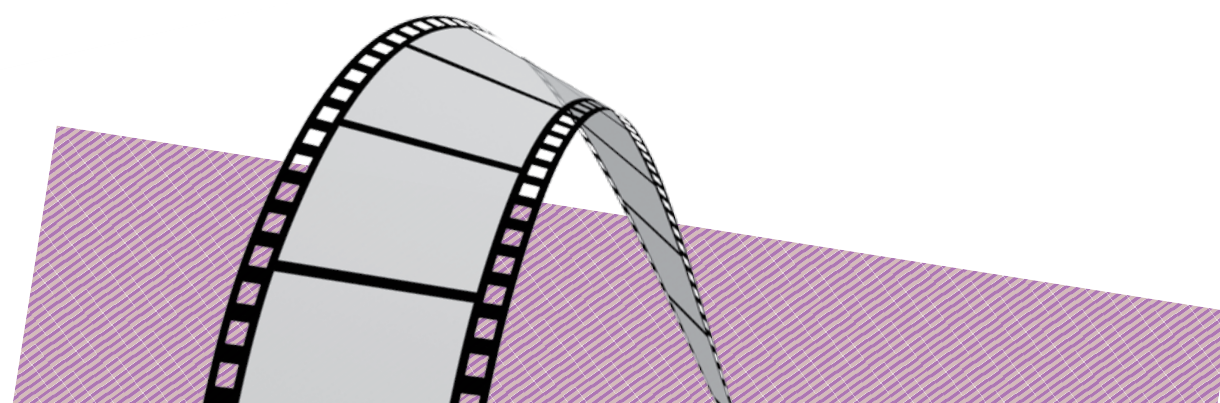
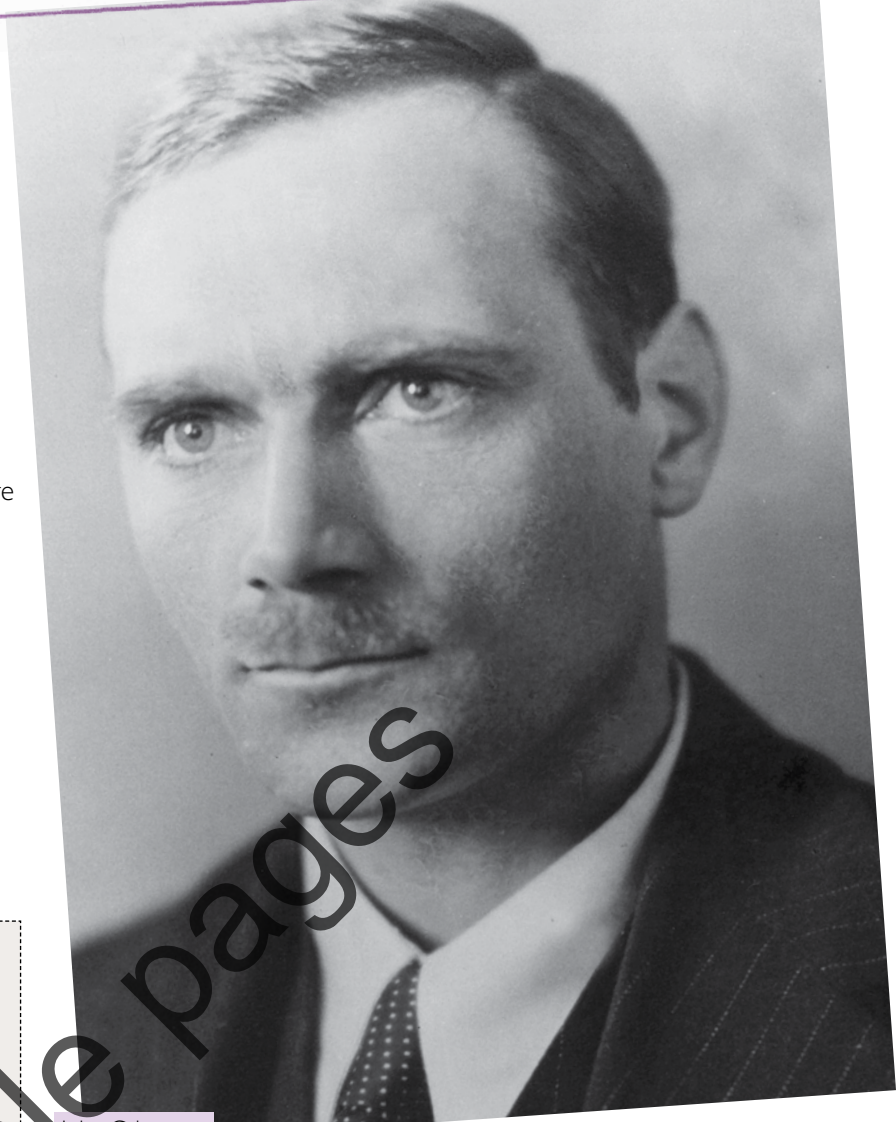
Many film theoreticians do not believe documentary film makers can show the world in an objective way. They argue that the very act of filming changes things, that when people see a camera they behave differently than they would if there were no camera.

So if a documentary doesn't capture reality how do we define a documentary? The word 'documentary' was coined by John Grierson (1898–1972), a Scot who made films in the 1930s. He defined a documentary as 'the artistic representation of actuality'. This definition

John Grierson

still holds today; other definitions include 'non-fiction film' and 'movie or television show about real life'. The important point is that a documentary is *not* real life. When we watch a documentary, we are watching a representation of a real world, life or event—a representation that has been chosen, arranged and interpreted. It is not a presentation of real life but a 're-presentation', which, as Grierson points out, has been manipulated or interpreted.

The film maker's interpretation refers to the selection of what to film, the act of filming and its effect on the event. There is further interpretation in the editing: this is where the film is arranged and decisions are made on what to show and what to omit.



Breakaway tasks

Remembering

- 1 What do the words 'objective' and 'subjective' mean in the context of documentary?
- 2 Give two definitions of documentary.

Understanding

- 3 If documentary is about real life, is footage taken from a surveillance camera a documentary? Why or why not?
- 4 What did Grierson mean by his definition of documentary?

Evaluating

- 5 Do you think the camera's presence changes things? Would your behaviour change if you knew your class was being filmed?
- 6 The concept of audience also has an effect on the filming.
 - a Do you think your behaviour or that of your classmates would change if you knew the film would be shown to the principal or your parents?
 - b Do you think that your behaviour would change if you knew the film was to be shown to a class at another school?
- 7 Do you think a camera can capture reality?

Two streams of documentary

In contemporary film theory, documentary is increasingly identified as film, a story and, it can be argued, as a fiction like any other film. One of the major questions that has faced both documentary film makers and film theorists is: is it possible to make a documentary that is objective? Attempts to grapple with this issue have given rise to two main streams of documentary, the objective and subjective.

Objective documentary

This is the dominant style of documentary and is the form we are most familiar with. The traditional documentary is in this category. The topics of objective documentaries can range across areas such as travel, historical, informational and nature. The common thread that runs through these documentaries is that they do not draw attention to the documentary process. That is, they try to make the film seem like an untouched reality. The documentary tries to make the viewer feel as though they are a fly on the wall.

The camera and equipment are never seen and the camera is generally placed in the position of an observer or third person. A good example of this is the travel or adventure documentary where we see the intrepid adventurer struggle to climb the mountain while the film crew who have recorded all this remain invisible.



*If I can make it up this
I'll be the first person to make it.*



*Only a few more steps
and I'll be there.*



Some critics argue that these objective documentaries are not objective at all. They argue that objective documentaries clearly deliver a single point of view, a point of view that is hidden by the techniques, which make it seem impartial.

It is interesting to see that point of view in these documentaries is not always fixed and can shift within a series. In a nature series one week we can see hunting a zebra from a lion's point of view—it is trying to feed its hungry family and another week we see from the point of views of the zebra—it is trying to escape the lion. In these cases the 'reality' changes according to the subject.

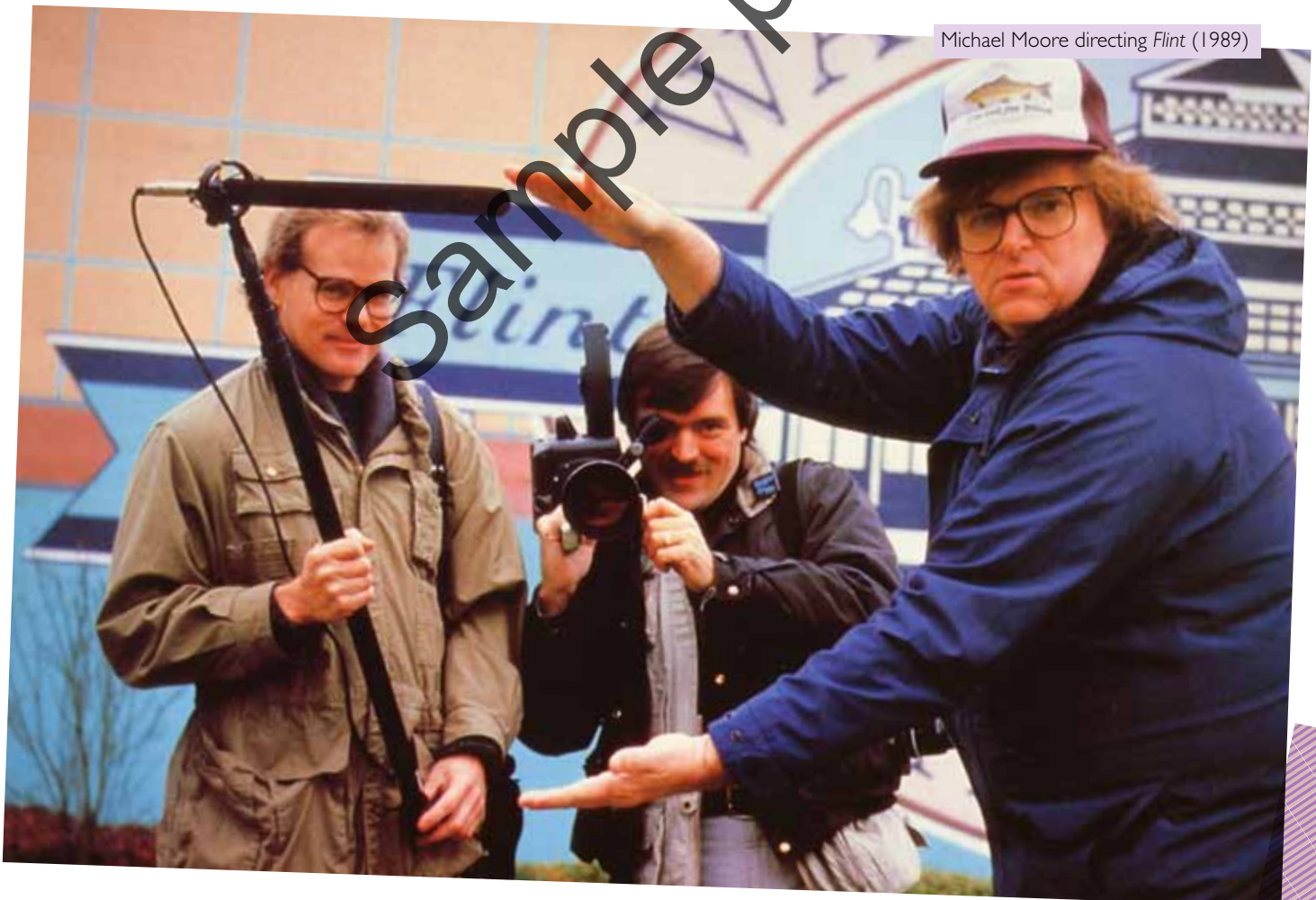
Subjective documentary

In the late twentieth century an opposition to traditional documentary films began to develop. Some critics said that the objective method was a dishonest way of making a film. They claimed that the act of filmmaking changed the 'reality'. They believed that audiences should be aware that film is a construction and the work of a film maker. They referred to the voice-overs

of film makers such as David Attenborough as 'the voice of God' and claimed it stopped viewers from interpreting things for themselves.

The film makers of the new style of subjective documentaries did not try to conceal the camera or the equipment. Film equipment was allowed in shot, because it was part of the filmmaking process and should be seen. These film makers did not attempt to pretend that their work was showing an objective reality; rather, they continually pointed out to their audiences that the film was their personal interpretation. The film maker plays an important role in subjective documentaries and usually appears on camera. Film makers who have a subjective style include Jean-Luc Godard, Jean-Pierre Gorin, Michael Moore, Morgan Spurlock and, in Australia, John Safran.

When Michael Moore makes his subjective style of documentary he acknowledges the existence of the film crew and the effect that they may have. He also approaches his subjects personally and on film, and acknowledges his own presence as a film maker and the influence that this may have on the film.



Michael Moore directing *Flint* (1989)

Breakaway tasks

Understanding

- 1 What characteristics can a documentary have in common with a fiction film?

Evaluating

- 2 Read the following quotes regarding documentary.
 - Every cut [edit between shots] is a lie. It's never that way. Those two shots were never next to each other in time that way. But you're telling a lie in order to tell the truth. (Wolf Koenig)
 - Of course there's conscious manipulation! Everything about a movie is manipulation ... If you like it, it's an interpretation. If you don't like it, it's a lie—but everything about these movies is a distortion. (Frederick Wiseman)
 - In documentary we deal with the actual, and in one sense with the real. But the really real, if I may use that phrase, is something deeper than that. The only

reality which counts in the end is the interpretation which is profound. (John Grierson)

- a What is each film maker saying about documentaries? Write an interpretation of each quote in the light of what you have read.
- b Do you think each of these film makers would agree with each other? Why or why not?

In his 1922 documentary on Inuit life, *Nanook of the North*, Flaherty used his experience of living with the Inuit as the basis for his film. In his filming he asked the Inuit not to use any modern technology, but to only use their traditional ways despite the fact that they hunted with guns. Was Flaherty lying to tell a truth about the Inuit way of life?

Still from *Nanook of the North*, directed by Robert J. Flaherty



In 1936 the British GPO (General Post Office) Film Unit produced a twenty-five-minute documentary film called *Night Mail*, about the mail train that ran from London to Scotland, as a public relations exercise. English poet W. H. Auden was commissioned to write the poem below and English composer Benjamin Britten was commissioned to write the accompanying music.

NIGHT MAIL

By W. H. Auden

I
This is the night mail crossing the Border,
Bringing the cheque and the postal order,
Letters for the rich, letters for the poor,
The shop at the corner, the girl next door.
Pulling up Beattock, a steady climb:
The gradient's against her, but she's on time.
Past cotton-grass and moorland boulder
Shovelling white steam over her shoulder,
Snorting noisily as she passes
Silent miles of wind-bent grasses.
Birds turn their heads as she approaches,
Stare from bushes at her blank-faced coaches.
Sheep-dogs cannot turn her course;
They slumber on with paws across.
In the farm she passes no one wakes,
But a jug in a bedroom gently shakes.

II
Dawn freshens. Her climb is done.
Down towards Glasgow she descends
Towards the steam tugs yelping down a glade of cranes
Towards the fields of apparatus, the furnaces
Set on the dark plain like gigantic chessmen.
All Scotland waits for her:
In dark glens, beside pale-green lochs
Men long for news.

III
Letters of thanks, letters from banks,
Letters of joy from girl and boy,
Receipted bills and invitations
To inspect new stock or to visit relations,
And applications for situations,
And timid lovers' declarations,
And gossip, gossip from all the nations,
News circumstantial, news financial,
Letters with holiday snaps to enlarge in,
Letters with faces scrawled on the margin,
Letters from uncles, cousins, and aunts,

Letters to Scotland from the South of France,
Letters of condolence to Highlands and Lowlands
Written on paper of every hue,
The pink, the violet, the white and the blue,
The chatty, the catty, the boring, the adoring,
The cold and official and the heart's outpouring,
Clever, stupid, short and long,
The typed and the printed and the spelt all wrong.

IV
Thousands are still asleep,
Dreaming of terrifying monsters
Or of friendly tea beside the band in Cranston's or
Crawford's:
Asleep in working Glasgow, asleep in well-set
Edinburgh,
Asleep in granite Aberdeen,
They continue their dreams,
But shall wake soon and hope for letters,
And none will hear the postman's knock
Without a quickening of the heart,
For who can bear to feel himself forgotten?

Source: W. H. Auden

breakaway tasks

Read the poem by W. H. Auden. Go to **Pearson Reader** to view the documentary *Night Mail*, then answer the following questions.



Web Destination

Analysing

- 1 How do the words and images match?
- 2 What rhythm does the film maker create with the words and soundtrack?
- 3 Who do you think the audience is for this documentary? What types of people are mentioned in the poem and what images of people do we see?
- 4 What is the style of documentary being used? How is the reality portrayed or manipulated?

Evaluating

- 5 Do we learn anything from this documentary? Do you think a documentary needs to have an educational role?

Strands in action

Core tasks

- 1 Prepare and present a proposal for two five-minute documentaries. They should be documentaries for either your school or your town or suburb. The audience for the first documentary is parents or adults; the audience for the second documentary is students your age. You will need to provide two written proposals and they will need to cover the following.
 - a Who is your target audience and what techniques will you use to engage them?
 - b What will the theme of your documentary be?
 - c What locations would you use and why? You will need at least five locations.
 - d Who will you interview and why have you chosen them? Write five questions for two of your interviewees.
- e What structure will your documentary take? What will be in the beginning and the middle, and how will it conclude?
- f Write a voice-over for the first two minutes of your documentary.
- g If you have the facilities, record the voice-over for one documentary and, using a still camera, take images that will match. You may now wish to put these into a video editing program and play it for the class.
- 2 Chose two minutes of footage from a documentary—it may be any documentary you like, although a nature documentary will work well. Write a voice-over for these two minutes that tells a completely different story to the original. Play the footage to the class and read out your new voice-over.

Extra tasks

- 1 Write a short poem about a journey you have taken and find images to match your words.
 - 2 With a partner, investigate the history of the documentary and prepare a report for the class. You can present your report in a format you have negotiated with your teacher. Your report will need to contain information and images from at least one of the following documentary film makers.
 - David Bradbury (Australia)
 - Errol Morris (United States of America)
 - Dennis O'Rourke (Australia)
 - Leni Riefenstahl (Germany)
 - Morgan Spurlock (United States of America)
- You will need to cover:
- a how they started
 - b where they worked and who they worked for
 - c their particular style and what was distinctive about them
 - d two of their most famous documentaries, what they are about and the impact of these films in their country or the world.