

## One Hundred Documentary Films v.2

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*Here is a list of one hundred documentary films presented in chronological order. While not all of the films on this list are my favorites, they are all worthy of study for one reason or another. Every list is a difficult process of pairing down and offers insights into the maker's current state of mind involving an almost impossible set of trade-offs, there are still lots of favorites waiting in the wings to be worked into a future version of the list, if only I could figure out which films to pull out. One way to watch these films would be in chronological order as they are listed here, offering an opportunity to following the evolution of the documentary form. Are there films you think should be on this list? I welcome your feedback at [kino-eye.com/contact/](http://kino-eye.com/contact/)*

***The Arrival of a Train at the Station.*** Auguste and Louis Lumière, 1895, French title: *L'Arrivée d'un train à la Ciotat*. Many historians credit the Lumière brothers with the world's first public cinema screening on December 28, 1895 in the basement lounge of the Grand Café on the Boulevard des Capucines in Paris. It was the first public demonstration of their Cinematograph which functioned as camera, projector, and contact printer all in one. They showed ten or so *actualités*, as they called their films, lasting about twenty minutes in total. The films consisted of scenes from everyday life, providing early examples of documentary filmmaking. *The Arrival of a Train at the Station* is included on the DVD *The Lumiere Brothers' First Films* from Kino Video, consisting of eighty-five of the short *actualités* made by the Auguste and Louis Lumière between 1895 and 1897.

***In the Land of the War Canoes.*** Edward S. Curtis, 1914. A film written and directed by Curtis and acted entirely by Kwakwaka'wakw people who lived in the Queen Charlotte Strait region of the Central Coast of British Columbia, Canada. This was the first feature film made with a cast of indigenous North Americans. The film raises many questions: is it a documentary? A fictional narrative? Or a hybrid of both? The film presents cultural practices that the Kwakwaka'wakw no longer performed when Curtis came in contact with them and some critics suggest some are entirely fictional. Regardless of these issues, the film stands as a historical milestone. It was originally released in 1914 with the title *In the Land of the Head Hunters*, but was restored and re-released in the 1970s as *In the Land of the War Canoes*.

***Nanook of the North.*** Robert Flaherty, 1922. Considered by many the first ethnographic film, *Nanook of the North* raises all the issues of representation we still deal with today. Through the character of Nanook, not his real name, Flaherty documented the "everyday life" of the Inuit Eskimos.

We observe Nanook catching a seal and building an igloo, activities that the Inuit had abandoned by the time Flaherty was filming, but performed at Flaherty's request. Flaherty did not allow Nanook to use any steel instruments or weapons in the film. Nanook's re-enactments fit Flaherty's Rousseau-inspired romantic vision of a culture that was rapidly fading. *Nanook of the North* has become a classic documentary, however, upon close analysis it has more of the characteristics of a fiction film, formed by western imagination. The debate over representational issues in documentary film started with *Nanook* and continues to this day.

***Berlin: Symphony of a Great City.*** Walter Ruttmann, 1927, German title: *Berlin: Die Sinfonie der Großstadt*. A prime example of the city symphony genre that portrays the life of Berlin through documentary style visuals that capture daily life in the city. This film represents a break from Ruttmann's earlier abstract work. Compare with *Man with a Movie Camera*, apparently Vertov and Ruttmann inspired each another.

***Man with a Movie Camera.*** Dziga Vertov, 1929, Russian title: *Chelovek s kino-apparatom*. The best example of poetic documentary to this day, a camera person travels through post-revolution Russia capturing images of everyday life. The protagonist of this film is the collective Russian people themselves. The film is loosely organized around the cycle of a day with music and editing moving the story along. The film makes explicit the kinds of cinematic manipulation and serves as an encyclopedia of all of the techniques Vertov and his collaborators had access to including time-lapse, superimposition, cross-fade, etc. the filmmakers make themselves very evident in this film, a self-described experiment in cinematic communication.

***Triumph of the Will.*** Leni Riefenstahl, 1935. A documentary record of the Nazi Party Convention in

Nuremberg, Germany. The film stands as one of the most disturbing, yet poetic, propaganda films every made.

***Coalface.*** Alberto Cavalcanti, 1935. A documentary produced by the G.P.O Film Unit presenting a view of the mining industry in Great Britain.

***Nightmail.*** Harry Watt and Basil Wright, 1936. A film about the London, Midland and Scottish Railway (LMS) mail train that ran from London to Scotland. English poet W. H. Auden wrote a poem for the film, the poem's rhythm matches the train's, beginning slowly and then picking up speed. A prime example of the documentaries produced by the GPO Film Unit under the guidance of John Grierson.

***The Plow That Broke the Plains.*** Pare Lorentz, 1936. Documents the effects of uncontrolled agricultural farming on the Great Plains region which led to the Dust Bowl. Made back in "the day" when the U.S. government was funding documentary film in order to promote New Deal ideals. Includes a score by Virgil Thomson.

***The Spanish Earth.*** Joris Ivens, 1937. A film about the Spanish Civil War articulating a strong point-of-view in favor of the Republicans (a melange of interests ranging from centrists supporting a capitalist liberal democracy to revolutionary anarchists and communists) who were fighting against the Nationalists (which would eventually become a fascist regime under Franco) that presents the Spanish people as agents of history fighting "a people's war." The film includes narration by Ernest Hemingway.

***The River.*** Pare Lorentz, 1938. Documents the history of the Mississippi River and its tributaries and promotes the necessity of the work of the Tennessee Valley Authority and the other New Deal programs that were set up to conserve the American's natural resources. James Joyce praised the script Lorentz wrote for the narration as "the most beautiful prose that I have heard in ten years," and was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 1938. Pretty high praise for government funded propaganda. Includes a score by Virgil Thomson.

***The City.*** Ralph Steiner & Willard Van Dyke, 1939. Contrasts industrialized city life with pastoral small-town America. The film was adapted by Lewis Mumford from the story by Pare Lorentz and includes music by Aaron Copland.

***Meshe of the Afternoon.*** Maya Deren, 1943. Not a documentary, but on this list nonetheless, it's a beautiful example of surrealist filmmaking that presages personal documentaries and experimental films of a personal nature.

***The Memphis Belle: A Story of a Flying Fortress.***

William Wyler, 1944. The story of the final mission of the "Memphis Belle," a B-17 Flying Fortress that became the first U.S. heavy bomber during World War II to complete twenty-five missions over Europe and return to the United States in one piece. The film was made by the U.S. Army Air Forces First Motion Picture Unit to boost morale by showing the courage of "the boys who flew those planes." Despite the hazards of combat, Wyler and his collaborators filmed multiple bomber missions (not all of them aboard the "Memphis Belle") using 16mm cameras placed in the nose, tail, and other positions around the bomber. The original crew (which was back in the States for a war bond drive) was brought into a Hollywood recording studio to record their own dialog while watching the film, providing a sense of authenticity. In 2001 the United States Library of Congress selected the film for preservation in the National Film Registry. The "Memphis Belle" bomber is now at the National Museum of the United States Air Force at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, near Dayton, Ohio.

***Night and Fog.*** Alain Resnais, 1955. Resnais revisits the Nazi concentration camps ten years after the end of World War II. The film is made up of Resnais' own shooting on location with Nazi footage of the camps, newsreels, and variety of other sources including Leni Reifenstahl's *Triumph of the Will*. The film sparked controversy upon release. West German officials applied pressure on French officials to censor the film and it was removed from the Cannes festival line-up, yet eventually was screened out of competition. The film met with favorable reception by most critics and it eventually screened at numerous festivals. The film has sparked a number of debates, especially in terms of Resnais' failing to disclose that a majority of the victims of the death camps were Jewish.

***The Hunters.*** John Marshall, 1957. A beautiful example of ethno-poetic filmmaking, Marshall would later move to cinéma vérité, this early classic of ethnographic film follows the hunt of a giraffe by four men over a five-day period. The film was shot in 1952-53 during an expedition by the Marshall family to Nyae Nyae to study the lives of the Ju/'hoansi, one of the few surviving groups at the time still living by hunting and gathering. John Marshall was a young man when he made this, his first feature length film. The representation of the Ju/'hoansi people is romanticized and this became problematic for Marshall in subsequent years. Marshall was a natural cameraman who found in this film a subject that would dominate the rest of his life. The value of the film record that Marshall left behind is an encyclopedia of! Kung life unequaled by any other body of ethnographic film.

**Primary.** Robert Drew, 1960. Among the first American direct cinema masterpieces and the first intimate behind-the-scenes view of a political campaign. Robert Drew and his colleagues had film crews with both the Kennedy and Humphrey campaigns during the one of the state primaries.

**Eddie.** Robert Drew, 1961. A film about race car driver Eddie Sachs. The technical challenge of recording sync sound was perfected for this film: finally camera, recorder and microphone could be separate, portable elements, this and related development in Europe set the pattern that would drive the direct cinema movement for the next forty years, bringing location sound front and center into documentary production.

**Chronicle of a Summer.** Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin, 1961, French title: *Chronique d'un été*. The first film self-described as cinéma vérité and also the first film to ask questions about the possibility of the enterprise of cinéma vérité itself. Unlike their American counterparts who practiced “fly on the wall” observation, Rouch and Morin are more like provocateurs and are seen on camera in this early experiment in capturing “real life” on film. An important milestone everyone interested in documentary should see. It’s hard to see except in classes or unless you have access to a university, college library, or film department, it’s not available for sale as a consumer-priced DVD nor is it available through Netflix.

**Window Water Baby Moving.** Stan Brakhage, 1962. Some people might argue this is not a documentary, however, Brakhage himself claimed he was making documentaries of perception. Available on the Criterion Collection DVD titled *by Brakhage: An Anthology*.

**Mothlight.** Stan Brakhage, 1963. Some people might argue this is not a documentary, however, Brakhage himself claimed he was making documentaries of perception. Available on the Criterion Collection DVD titled *by Brakhage: An Anthology*.

**Crisis.** Robert Drew, 1963. Multiple camera teams around a crisis makes for a dramatic documentary. Among the early documentaries, along with *Primary*, et al.. to make use of sync sound.

**The Chair.** Robert Drew & Richard Leacock, 1963. The last moment commutation of Paul Crump’s death sentence is a poignant social document of real courtroom drama.

**Dog Star Man.** Stan Brakhage, 1962–64. Some people might argue this is not a documentary, however, Brakhage himself claimed he was making documentaries of perception. Available on the

Criterion Collection DVD titled *by Brakhage: An Anthology*.

**Dead Birds.** Robert Gardner, 1964. This film illustrates the lives of people living in the mountain Papuans in West New Guinea in 1961 before the area was “pacified” by the Dutch government. A film that goes beyond the specific subject and becomes a metaphor for both the fragility and cruelty of human existence.

**7-Up Series.** Michael Apted, 1964, 1971, 1978, 1985, 1992, 1999, 2007. The *7-Up Series* started in 1964 when Granada television interviewed fourteen 7-year-old British children from a variety of social and economic backgrounds. The film was among the first attempts on television to record real people living real lives. Every seven years since, Michael Apted has returned to interview the now-adults about their lives and how they have changed. The latest installment, *49 Up*, premiered in the U.S. on October 9, 2007 on P.O.V.

**Tokyo Olympiad.** Kon Ichikawa, 1965. A beautiful montage of the 1964 Olympics.

**Don't Look Back.** D.A. Pennebaker, 1967. Follows Bob Dylan on his 1965 tour in England. An excellent example of American Direct Cinema offering a glimpse into the private life of Dylan at a time when he is gaining popularity and transforming his style.

**Titicut Follies.** Frederick Wiseman, 1967. Close and intimate handheld camerawork by John Marshall provides a scathing look at the poor treatment inmates were receiving from guards, doctors, social workers, and psychiatrists at a prison hospital for the criminally insane in Bridgewater, Massachusetts. The Commonwealth of Massachusetts sued Wiseman and the Massachusetts Supreme Court ruled that the film constituted an invasion of inmate privacy and ordered its withdrawal from circulation. The ban on *Titicut Follies* in Massachusetts was not lifted until 1992, twenty five years later. I assume the Commonwealth of Massachusetts was more concerned about the exposé than individual rights, but how else could they prevent circulation of a film about an institution funded by public money? A classic case study in the right-to-privacy vs. the citizen’s right to know what is being done with their tax money.

**Jaguar.** Jean Rouch, 1967. Three young men from the Savannah of Niger leave their homeland to seek wealth and adventure on the coast and in the cities of Ghana. The film is part documentary, part fiction, and part reflective commentary. There was no portable sound synchronized equipment in the early 1950s when *Jaguar* was shot. Instead, Rouch had the main characters (his friends and “accomplices”) improvise a narrative while they viewed the film, which was itself

improvised along the way. An interesting example of ethno-fiction that can still be considered a documentary.

***Through Navajo Eyes*** (series). Sol Worth & John Adair, 1966. A series of seven short documentary films that show scenes of life in the Navajo Nation. An experiment by with the hypothesis that in using film as a form of expression (analogous to language in some ways), that Navajo films would reflect Navajo cultural ways of seeing. Worth and Adair taught filmmaking and editing to a group of six Navajos in Pinetree, Arizona. This series marks a turning point documentary film: whereas filmmakers typically made representation of “other” people’s world, Worth & Adair handed the camera to “other” people to see what would result. The Navajo filmmakers included long sequences of walking (a prominent theme in Navajo myths) and did not use tight close-ups on people’s faces, providing a fascinating exploration of issues of representation and subjectivity in documentary. The project is described in Worth & Adair’s book *Through Navajo Eyes: An Exploration in Film Communication and Anthropology*. The series is also known as *The Navajo Film Themselves*.

***Monterey Pop***. D.A. Pennebaker, 1968. Pure concert film, and the first one of it’s kind, the film that launched the concert film genre and still among the best examples of the genre.

***Salesman***. Albert and David Maysles, 1968. This seminal example of American direct cinema follows four bible salesmen as they travel far from their families across the country selling expensive bibles to housewives who really can’t afford them. One of the finest examples of American cinéma vérité.

***N/um Tchai: The Ceremonial Dance of the !Kung Bushmen***. John Marshall, 1969. In the 1950’s, when this film was shot, Ju/’hoansi gathered for “medicine dances” often, usually at night, and sometimes such dances lasted until dawn. The film opens with a brief introduction to the role of n/um tchai in healing and in warding off evil, followed by scenes from one all-night dance. The dance begins with a social gathering and becomes increasingly intense as the night wears on, finally concluding at dawn. Since the film was shot before the availability of crystal sync, John Marshall had to painstakingly post-synch the film during the editing process. Marshall worked with the intimate techniques of sync sound even before the technology made it practical. By the time the film was released, shooting sync sound had become the de facto standard. The film was released in black and white to save costs in the educational film market, however, it was shot in color. Gorgeous color footage of the ceremonial dance appears in *A Kalahari Family* and I believe the

distributor is planning to re-release the film in the original color at some point.

***The Blues Accordin’ to Lightnin’ Hopkins***. Les Blank, 1969. Les Blank once told the story of how he was able to make this film, to get up close and personal with an elusive character who was avoiding him, and to make a long story short, Blank ended up playing cards with Lightnin’ Hopkins and losing a lot of money to him, and at the end of the night Hopkins told Blank, “that was fun, why don’t you come back again tomorrow, even bring your camera and make this movie you want to make,” and so Blank was able to capture the great Texas bluesman during some performances and a visit to his boyhood town of Centerville, Texas. Stands as one of Blank’s most wonderful films.

***The Sorrow and the Pity***. Marcel Ophüls, 1969, French title: *Le Chagrin et la pitié*. Ophüls explores the multi-faceted response of the French to occupation during World War II.

***Land of Silence and Darkness***. Werner Herzog, 1971. Who else but Herzog could make a film in which the central character is deaf and blind that explores and celebrates human communication with the philosophical depth?

***Bitter Melons***. John Marshall, 1971. A beautifully observed and paced film about a small band of /Gwi San. Ten people share a camp, including Ukxone, a blind musician who plays music that he has composed on his hunting bow: songs in praise of melons, about trapping antelopes, about shouting and being lost in the bush. “Bitter Melons,” his favorite song, is about a woman who learned from her Bantu neighbors to plant melon seeds. Wild melons taste bitter, the agriculturalists said.

***Hearts and Minds***. Peter Davis, 1974. A documentary about the Vietnam War that premiered at the 1974 Cannes Film Festival, however, distribution in the United States was delayed by legal maneuvering, due to the controversial nature of the film. The title is from a phrase spoken by Lyndon B. Johnson, “the ultimate victory will depend on the hearts and minds of the people who actually live out there.”

***Harlan County U.S.A.*** Barbara Kopple, 1976. Excellent documentary of the 1973 coal miners’ strike against the Eastover Mining Company in Kentucky as the workers try to join the United Mine Workers Association.

***Powers of Ten***. Charles and Ray Eames, 1977. A classic piece of visualization.

***If It Fits***. John Marshall, 1978. The once thriving industrial town of Haverhill, Massachusetts on the Merrimack River now resembles, in the words of one

of the film's subjects, "a ghost town where you expect to see tumbleweeds come rolling down Main Street." *If It Fits* examines a dying industrial town and its politicians' search for votes over such issues as municipal spending, rising taxes, the revitalization of depressed areas, and attracting new industry. The film's centers around the event of the 1976 Mayoral election. Election scenes are intercut with comments from Haverhill residents, members of a local foundation, political scientist Frances Fox Piven, the president of the local union, and the shoe manufacturers themselves. The oral history which surrounds the election footage is a reservoir of information about Haverhill's present condition as well as its past. A wonderful example of gently observed cinéma vérité filmmaking and skillful editing.

***Werner Herzog Eats His Shoe.*** Les Blank, 1979. A delightful short documentary in which Les Blank meets Werner Herzog at the San Francisco airport, follows him to Chez Panisse where Alice Waters helps Herzog cook his shoe in duck fat, and the next day Blank is at the UC Theater in Berkeley where Herzog eats a piece of shoe in front of an audience. Why did this happen? Years before Werner Herzog had been talking to a UC Berkeley student and encouraged him to be a filmmaker with a unique challenge: he said that if the student ever succeeded in making a film that was shown at the Pacific Film Archive in Berkeley, he would come back and eat his shoe. The student was Errol Morris who eventually made *Gates of Heaven*, a documentary about the moving of a pet cemetery. True to his word, Herzog came back to Berkeley and ate his own shoe. In 1982 Blank followed Herzog again, this time to the Amazon jungle to film the making of *Fitzcarraldo*, which became *Burden of Dreams*.

***Garlic is as Good as Ten Mothers.*** Les Blank, 1980. A celebration of garlic as only Les Blank could do.

***N!ai, Story of a !Kung Woman.*** John Marshall and Adrienne Miesmer, 1980. Amazing storytelling about dramatic changes in a way of life. The film provides a broad overview of !Kung life, both past and present, and an intimate portrait of N!ai, a Ju/'hoansi woman who in 1978 was in her mid-thirties. N!ai tells her own story, and in so doing, the story of Ju/'hoan life over a thirty year period. As N!ai speaks, the film presents scenes from the 1950's that show her as a young girl and a young wife. The uniqueness of N!ai lies in its tight integration of ethnography and history, of the personal and the societal.

***Gates of Heaven.*** Errol Morris, 1980. A documentary about the pet cemetery business told through interviews that launched Morris' career. Among the cast of characters is Floyd "Mac" McClure whose pet cemetery fails and he must dig up and transport

hundreds of animals to another pet cemetery. A documentary classic dealing with mortality for which Werner Herzog ate his shoe.

***The Life and Times of Rosie the Riveter.*** Connie Field, 1981. "Rosie the Riveter" was the cultural icon representing the women who worked in manufacturing plants producing weapons and material during World War II. Out of interviews with hundreds of women who worked in factories during the war, Field chose five women who worked during the war to articulate the collective experience of many "Rosies." When the war was over, many women wanted to continue working, but American society's view of a woman's place crushed many of their hopes. The film beautifully weaves together the interviews with archival footage, photographs, posters, advertisements, and music from the period.

***The Atomic Cafe.*** Jayne Loader, Kevin Rafferty, & Pierce Rafferty, 88 min., 1982. Documents a defining period in history and presents a chilling and humorous look at cold-war era paranoia in the United States through newsreel footage, government archives, military training films, etc.

***Burden of Dreams.*** Les Blank, 1982. One of the best making-of/behind-the-scenes docs ever made. Essential viewing.

***Koyaanisqatsi.*** Godfrey Reggio, 1982. With stunning photography and a score by Phillip Glass, the film presents a prophetic indictment of western culture. The title is taken from the Hopi language, meaning "life out of balance," Reggio, a filmmaker deeply involved in progressive political causes, states in *Essence of Life*, a documentary film available on the DVD edition of *Koyaanisqatsi*, "It's not that we use technology, we live technology. Technology has become as ubiquitous as the air we breathe, so we are no longer conscious of its presence. So what I decided to do in making these films is to rip out all the foreground of a traditional film—the foreground being the actors, the characterization, the plot, the story—I tried to take the background, all of that that's just supported like wallpaper, move that up into the foreground, make that the subject, ennoble it with the virtues of portraiture, and make that the presence."

***First Contact.*** Bob Connolly and Robin Anderson, 1983. In the 1930s Australian miners lead by Michael Leahy and his brothers made their first trek into the New Guinea highlands. This was the first contact between white people and highlanders. Compelling footage of the initial meetings is combined with interviews of the surviving brothers and highlanders who recall the impressions and shock of those long ago

events. The filmmakers made a follow-up, *Joe Leahy's Neighbors*, about Michael Leahy's son.

***The Times of Harvey Milk.*** Rob Epstein, 1984. Not only a compelling story, but an example of excellent structuring and documentary editing. The opening sequence is wonderful.

***This is Spinal Tap.*** Rob Reiner, 1984. A classic, among the best examples of the documentary genre.

***Shoah.*** Claude Lanzmann, 1985. Survivors, witnesses, and former Nazis talk about the events of the Holocaust. Lanzmann does not use reenactments nor historical footage, instead, uses only interviews and visits to the various places his interviewees discuss. Not only is this compelling storytelling, but demonstrates the awesome power of good interviews (along with *The Last Days*).

***Seventeen.*** Joel DeMott and Jeff Kreines, 1985. A fine example of American direct cinema, and while not as well known as the classics (e.g. *Salesmen*), it deserves a place among them. The project was originally designed to be part of a series (conceived by Peter Davis) as one of six television documentaries under the collective title of "Middletown." Five of the films were broadcast by PBS in 1982, but *Seventeen* was excluded, probably due to its raw, honest, observational approach looking at teenage life in America including strong language, drinking, drugs, a romance between a seventeen year old white girl and a young black man, and no artificial plot or crisis structure. And yet these qualities—which led PBS to not show the film—are exactly what makes *Seventeen* a unique and honest portrayal.

***Sherman's March.*** Ross McElwee, 1986. McElwee originally received funding to document General William Sherman's effect on the South. But before he start the project, his girlfriend leaves him, and his journey through the South becomes personal as he meets several women in his travels and examines his own life rather than that of General Sherman's, fueled the the personal documentary movement

***Forest of Bliss.*** Robert Gardner, 1986. A film without dialogue, subtitles, or voiceover narration. On the surface it's an ethnographic study of funerary practices in Benares, India, it explores ceremonies, rituals, and the industries associated with death and regeneration. This film does not fit neatly into any category: it mixes cinéma vérité techniques with an experimental approach. The rituals and objects photographed, like the river, corpses, and the cremation pyre, all providing reflections of the ideas they embody without explicit explanation by the filmmaker or his subjects. Postmodern academics have found lots of faults with the film, but as a work of cinematic poetry, each viewer brings their own ideas and experiences to bare on the kino-eye.com/dvb/

interpretation of the film. Gardner's companion book, *Making Forest of Bliss* (Harvard University Press, 2002), is the result of a close watching of the film with his collaborator, Ákös Öster.

***Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story.*** Todd Haynes, 1987. Todd Haynes made a name for himself (two years after graduating from Brown University) with this underground cult classic in which he uses Barbie and Ken dolls to tell the story of Karen Carpenter's death from anorexia. His Barbie-scale mise-en-scene, found footage, and use of Carpenter's music is masterful. Richard Carpenter's dislike of the film led to Haynes being served a "cease and desist" order in 1989 and the film went underground, however, you can now view it on Google Video: <http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=622130510713940545>

***Cannibal Tours.*** Dennis O'Rourke, 1987. A critique of modernity and ethnocentrism that follows several American and European ecotourists on their travels in Papua New Guinea. Contemporary tourism attempts to discover places that consist of "unspoiled nature" and "primitive people," however, this film makes it evident that the primitive "other" no longer exists.

***Gap-Toothed Women.*** Les Blank, 1987. A delightful and quirky documentary as only Les Blank can make.

***The Thin Blue Line.*** Errol Morris, 1988. Errol Morris has a unique style all his own. When most people do re-creations it's pretty much the documentary equivalent of Velveeta cheese, however, when Morris does re-creations, it's in the category of cinematic art, pushing the boundaries of what we consider is, and is not, a documentary film and providing the genre with some of the best examples of John Grierson's quixotic definition of documentary as "the creative treatment of actuality."

***Joe Leahy's Neighbors.*** Bob Conally and Robin Anderson, 1988. Joe Leahy is a wealthy coffee plantation owner and the mixed race son of an Australian miner and a highland girl. Joe lives in Western-style grandeur amidst his poorer Ganiga neighbors. Joe Leahy's links to his neighbors and their financial and emotional bonds are explored in the film, a follow-up to *First Contact*. The filmmakers lived in the highlands and filmed for eighteen months. They built a grass and thatch house on the edge of Joe Leahy's plantation, in the "no man's land" between Joe and the Ganiga. The film poignantly portrays both perspectives without value judgments or resolution for either side.

***For All Mankind.*** Al Reinert, 1989. Reinert documents the Apollo space program with a focus on the human aspects of the missions. Rather than use voice-over narration, the film presents us with the voices of the

astronauts and mission control personnel. A score by Brian Eno sets the emotional tone.

***Tongues Untied.*** Marlon Riggs, 1989. Poetically celebrates the difficult life of gay black men who must deal with double discrimination in terms of race and homophobia. The film is available on the POV 20th anniversary collection DVD along with other documentary classics like *Silverlake Life: The View from Here*, *Maya Lin: A Strong Clear Vision*, *Regret to Inform*, and many others.

***Notebook on Cities and Clothes.*** Wim Wenders, 1989. A cinematic essay on film vs. video by way of fashion design. Wenders was invited by the Georges Pompidou Centre to make a film in the context of fashion and the result is this unusual documentary made from a mix of 16mm and video materials exploring the work of Japanese fashion designer Yohji Yamamoto. Wenders follows the designer from Tokyo to Paris as the designer prepares for Yamamoto's latest showing. Through dialog with the designer and his own musings, Wenders offers a mélange of reflections on the ephemeral nature of fashion and the essential differences between shooting on film vs. video.

***Roger & Me.*** Michael Moore, 1989. I have serious issues with Moore's documentary ethics. Moore pioneers a new form of rhetorical documentary that places the demands of entertainment and the director's thesis over discourse and facts, and while I would not argue that it's not a documentary, it's not in the same league of documentary as Barbara Kopple's *American Dream*.

***American Dream.*** Barbara Kopple, 1990. A good example of a respectful filmmaker-subject relationship, the antithesis of Moore's style as exemplified in *Roger & Me*.

***Hearts of Darkness: A Filmmaker's Apocalypse.*** Fax Bahr, George Hickenlooper, and Eleanor Coppola, 1991. A film about the making of *Apocalypse Now* and among the best "making of" documentaries.

***Madonna: Truth or Dare.*** Alek Keshishian and Mark Aldo Miceli, 1991. An entertaining documentary about Madonna's persona, not Madonna, but her persona.

***History and Memory: For Akiko and Takashige.*** Rea Tajiri, 1991. A daughter struggles to understand Japanese internment through historical and personal accounts of her mother and other family members. The film also explores the challenge of representing the past. Tajiri combines interviews, archive footage, images of the camp where her mother was interned, and tells the story of her father who was drafted into the army prior to Pearl Harbor. He returns home to find his family's house removed from its original lot.

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The film avoids sentimentality as it presents the melancholy of loss. A wonderful example of how to make a film about something you don't have images of.

***In the Shadow of the Stars.*** Allie Light and Irving Saraf, 1991. An affectionate look at the path to stardom inside the world of opera. In a refreshing twist, the filmmakers focus on the singers who stand "in the shadows" behind the divas and sheds light on the lure of celebrity and offers a privileged look into the world of opera. Shot in 35mm with gorgeous results.

***Manufacturing Consent: Noam Chomsky and the Media.*** Mark Achbar and Peter Wintonick, 1992. The film presents Noam Chomsky's ideas through interviews, stock footage and illustrations in a manner suitable to a new generation that does not read and prefers to watch.

***Visions of Light.*** Arnold Glassman, Todd McCarthy, and Stuart Samuels, 1992. Interviews with cinematographers are inter-cut with their films as they discuss the art and craft of cinematography. The interviews were shot in High Definition video in an attempt to demonstrate that high definition video was ready to be taken seriously as a tool for cinematography. It would take another ten years before that became true.

***Dialogues with Madwomen.*** Allie Light, 1993. This film presents seven "madwomen," including Light herself, describing their experiences with schizophrenia, manic depression, euphoria, and recovery. Interviews, reenactments, and home movie footage combine to tell each woman's story and reveal the abuses they experienced under the care of their doctors. The film challenges us to consider that what we sometimes perceive as "madness" is actually a women's self-expression. Allie Light said, "A lot of people think that madness, so-called, comes out of nowhere. But the film links it up with their environment." In the same interview she later says, "Somebody once said to me, women are in mental hospitals, and men are in prison." Shot on a mix of video interviews and 16mm B-Roll at a time when the medium of video was just beginning to be accepted by documentary filmmakers.

***Silverlake Life: The View from Here.*** Tom Joslin & Peter Friedman, 1993. A personal diary that addresses the issue of living with AIDS and the acceptance of gay couples by their family, among the new crop of films shot on Hi8 (at the time) that helped open up distribution to documentaries shot on prosumer video formats.

***The War Room.*** Chris Hegedus & D.A. Pennebaker, 1993. An behind-the-scenes look at Clinton campaign headquarters where George Stephanopoulos and

James Carville perfected the art making the news cycle work for them.

***Hoop Dreams.*** Steve James, 1994. This well crafted film shot over several years follows two boys from inner-city Chicago with dreams of becoming basketball stars. We follow them through high school and some of their college years as they win scholarships and face obstacles along the way. Among the first wave of documentaries shot on miniDV that achieved theatrical release, once and for all removing the stigma of shooting on video rather than film.

***Crumb.*** Terry Zwigoff, 1994. A wonderfully done and intimate portrait of Robert Crumb, the comic book artist known for his biting social criticism through comics like “Mr. Natural” and “Fritz the Cat.” Over a six year period, Crumb allowed Zwigoff access to his family, friends, ex-wife, and former lovers.

***Maya Lin: A Strong Clear Vision.*** Freida Lee Mock, 1995. About the life of American artist Maya Lin, whose best-known work is the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C.

***Death by Design.*** Peter Friedman and Jean-Francois Brunet, 1995. A wonderful idea-based documentary that combines interviews, a wide variety of human-scale images, and microcinematography to provide a unique perspective on the intricate details of the life and death cycles of cells.

***When We Were Kings.*** Leon Gast, 1996. A documentary about the “Rumble in the Jungle” heavyweight match between Muhammad Ali and George Foreman held in what was then called Zaire in 1974, capturing the run-up to the fight, the controversy surrounding the event. A wonderfully crafted film.

***Nobody's Business.*** Alan Berliner, 1996. A beautifully crafted documentary in which the filmmaker attempts to cover family history. Even though a personal film, it goes beyond the personal to explore themes common to many immigrant families: the erasure of the past by one generation followed by curiosity about the family tree by the next generation. Berliner approaches his subject with unusual passion and humor.

***Little Dieter Needs to Fly.*** Werner Herzog, 1997. This film tells the story of Dieter Dengler, Vietnam veteran who grew up in a Germany. Dengler recalls an early memory of American fighter-bombers destroying his village in which he saw one of the pilots and from that day forward he had to be a pilot. He eventually became a U.S. Navy pilot and while flying in Vietnam he was forced to make a crash landing in Laos. He was captured and became a prisoner of war. Eventually Dengler escaped. For the film Dengler returns to Laos and Thailand with Herzog in order to recreate his

experiences. A character based documentary done in a manner only Herzog could make. But wait, there's more. Herzog also made a fiction film based on the story titled *Rescue Dawn*, providing an opportunity to reflect on the differences between documentary and narrative filmmaking (especially since Herzog often makes documentaries with narrative elements as well as narratives with documentary elements).

***Fast, Cheap, and Out of Control.*** Errol Morris, 1997. Presents the profiles of four men with intense passion for their chosen careers: a robotics scientist, a mole-rat expert, a lion tamer, and a topiary artist. As he did in *First Person* and *The Fog of War*, Morris used the “interrotron” to film the interviews in the film.

***Four Little Girls.*** Spike Lee, 1997. On September 15, 1963, a bomb destroyed a black church in Birmingham, Alabama, killing four young girls. The crime became a defining moment in the American civil-rights movement. This film tells the story of the bombing through testimonials from members of the victims' families along with interviews with others, including George Wallace, the former Alabama Governor.

***The Last Days.*** James Moll, 1998. There have been many documentaries made about the Holocaust, however, *The Last Days* is among the best (along with *Shoah*). Rather than telling the story with archival images and narration (which provides viewers a safe intellectual distance), these film presents personal stories that puts in sharp relief the evil of the Holocaust. From a documentary maker's perspective, an example of the power of well crafted interviews is evident.

***Buena Vista Social Club.*** Wim Wenders, 1999. A poetic documentary wherein guitarist Ry Cooder gathers together twelve legendary musicians and resurrects the music of pre-revolutionary Cuba for a series of recording sessions and performances. A variety of performances and observational footage are inter-cut with interviews of the musicians reminiscing in a backdrop of a decaying but colorful Havana. The lush and colorful images were captured using a mix of miniDV and Digital Betacam in the PAL format, helping to de-stigmatize the use of video for films destined for theatrical release.

***American Movie.*** Chris Smith, 1999. Smith documents a filmmaker's attempt to make an independently produced horror film, capturing wonderfully the painful truth about independent filmmaking.

***This Is What Democracy Looks Like.*** Jill Friedberg & Rick Rowley, 2000. Edited from footage shot by over a hundred media activists, this film presents a political and emotional account the 1999 WTO protests in Seattle. An important example of the power of

collaborative filmmaking. Presents a unique point of view made possible by weaving together footage from a hundred cameras. A glimpse of the future of documentary film made possible by collaboration on a grand scale.

***A Kalabari Family.*** John Marshall, 2002. No other filmmaker has devoted as much time to single subject as the late John Marshall did. This is documentary on an epic scale: a five-part, six-hour series that 50 years in the making. It documents the lives of the Ju/'hoansi of southern Africa from 1951 to 2000. Unlike so many films that exoticize their subjects and never get beyond a superficial relationship, this film charts Marshall's evolution from a romantic observer, to a close friend, to a tireless activist. It provides a long term examination of the changes one small group of people experience over the course of half a century as they find themselves under the influence of apartheid, economic changes, foreign aid, dispossession, and misguided notions of economic development. The film transcends its subjects and provides a view of the complexities surrounding the effects of globalization. It also provides a glimpse of how the documentary form evolved as a result of technological evolution, the film contains footage that spans many phases: early days of visual observation; experimentation with post-synchronization of location audio; the first use of subtitles over indigenous dialog; the intimate observation made possible by portable double-system sync sound equipment; and the transition to analog video.

***Capturing the Friedmans.*** Andrew Jarecki, 2003. In the words of Roger Ebert, "an instructive lesson about the elusiveness of facts."

***Bowling for Columbine.*** Michael Moore, 2002. This film, like *Roger & Me*, raises questions about documentary ethics. The film is full of deceptive editing that twists and stretches the truth, yet through his storytelling skills, Moore, like a good magician, hides the mechanisms behind the tricks, resulting in a compelling argument that appeals to the emotions, but falls apart during the fact checking process.

***The Wild Parrots of Telegraph Hill.*** Judy Irving, 2003. Delightful story of a modern-day St Francis and his relationship with a flock of wild parrots in San Francisco. Beautifully shot on 16mm film, it's not only a great story, but a feast for the eyes, the soft image with rich colors does justice to the story.

***Super Size Me.*** Morgan Spurlock, 2004. An excellent example of a personal documentary in which Spurlock documents thirty days during which he eats only fast food from McDonald's, a diet which has drastic effects on his health. The film offers an entertaining and

cleverly constructed reflection on the fast food industry and bad nutrition. Spurlock gained 24½ pounds during the thirty days which later took 14 months to lose.

***Born into Brothels.*** Zana Briski and Ross Kauffman, 2004. A portrait of children of prostitutes living in Calcutta's red-light district, a slickly produced documentary with beautiful images.

***Control Room.*** Jehane Noujaim, 2004. A fascinating behind-the-scenes look at the media's vital role in manufacturing history. In the early days of the war in Iraq, Americans could see on their televisions twenty-four hours coverage of the war and observe a "U.S. victory." At the same time, a different story was being played out on television sets throughout the Arab world as Al-Jazeera broadcast images of Iraqi civilian casualties and American POWs (both taboo on American media, so much for the so-called liberal media).

***Grizzly Man.*** Werner Herzog, 2005. Herzog explores what he calls "the ecstasy of truth" in this documentary that reflects on the life and death of Timothy Treadwell, a serious bear enthusiast. Combines interviews with people who knew Treadwell and Treadwell's own footage of his interactions with grizzly bears before he and his girlfriend were killed (and partially eaten) by a bear in 2003.

***Who Killed the Electric Car?*** Christopher Paine, 2006. A well structured, informative, and entertaining documentary in the form of a whodunnit. Recounts the story of the EV-1, an electric car that General Motors introduced in California and then suddenly pulled off the road, crushing most of them, much to the dismay of drivers who loved the car. The California Air Resources Board passed the Zero Emission Vehicle mandate in 1990, providing an incentive for GM to introduce the EV-1 into the California automobile market. The mandate was eventually reversed after suits were bought by automobile manufacturers and the oil industry who feared losing out on profit from the oil-fueled transportation monopoly. The film also presents a critical look at hydrogen vehicles and a positive discussion of plug-in hybrids.

***Flying: Confessions of a Free Woman.*** Jennifer Fox, 2006. A six-hour, six-part, documentary in which we follow Fox as she travels around the world asking her women friends how they construct and imagine their lives as she struggles to figure out her own. In her attempt to capture how women talk, Fox filmed her conversations with friends using a technique called "passing the camera," rather than having a third person operate the camera or working with a traditional interview structure. Fox developed the technique in order to, "capture the way women really speak when

men are not around.” She realized that women, “tend to sit around and have long conversations about our lives that are not necessarily solution oriented, these conversations are open ended and circular and often go on for hours and are continued over days and years. Subjects are returned to over and over again and somehow through this continual hashing and rehashing things are worked out.” *Flying* investigates these conversations, Fox was, “intensely interested in the two-way conversation women have and the horizontal nature of it. I had decide that I couldn’t ask other women to be intimate if I was willing to share and put myself on the line equally.” And thus she began to experiment with “passing the camera” back and forth with her friends, “almost like a traditional talk stick, except the person talking didn’t have the camera, the person being the witness held the camera [...] we just ‘passed the camera’ back and forth in conversation.” Fox found that the technique created some powerful effects in the people involved in the process, “It seemed to immediately make people relax because they were not put on the spot alone, but also the technique is so simple and the camera so small [that the] camera actually becomes part of the conversation.” *Flying* is highly personal, however, it did not start out that way. Through the process of making the film, Fox realized she has to put more of herself into the film, “as filmmakers, we cut interesting stories that occur between the filmmaker and the subjects out, or we don’t film those moments.” But she could not do that in this film, knowing that, “in order to make a film about women’s intimate lives, I couldn’t pretend that I was not in the picture, I couldn’t pretend that I knew nothing about the subject, how could I ask women to tell me about their intimate life if I wasn’t willing to put my own private life on the line?” Fox began shooting *Flying* in 2002 and ended up with 1,600 hours of video, which took an additional year and a half to edit. The result is a personal journey to discover what it means to be a woman today.

***Operation Filmmaker.*** Nina Davenport, 2007. A crisp and insightful look at the filmmaker-subject relationship. You can read my review of the film at: [kino-eye.com/2008/06/14/operation-filmmaker/](http://kino-eye.com/2008/06/14/operation-filmmaker/).

***Intimidad.*** David Redmon & Ashley Sabin, 2008. A beautiful film that weaves together a mix of home movie, cinéma vérité, and informal interview footage to present a gently observed portrait of Cecy and Camilo Ramirez and their daughter Loida, a hard-working young family living in Reynosa, Mexico. You can read an interview I did with the filmmakers at: [kino-eye.com/2008/04/27/intimidad/](http://kino-eye.com/2008/04/27/intimidad/).

## Acknowledgements

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## Colophon

This document was produced on a MacBook Pro using Pages (part of Apple’s iWork suite) and set in Frutiger and Adobe Caslon Pro.

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