This study guide is intended to flexibly support educators in preparing for and following up a class screening of The House I Live In, a feature documentary about the social, cultural, and economic impact of the US War on Drugs. Support materials are intended to facilitate group discussion, individual and collaborative creative exercise, subject-based learning and access to resources for further investigation of material. Educators are encouraged to adapt and abridge the content as necessary to meet their unique learning objectives and circumstances.
Using This Guide

Group screening of The House I Live In can be a useful tool for inspiring discussion and prompting further research on a wide range of social and political issues. It can be well incorporated into a history or ethnic studies curriculum. This study guide may be used flexibly within a classroom environment to guide these discussions, inspire follow-up activities and to supplement the educational value of the viewing experience. Content is selected to challenge high school students to think critically about the history and politics, as well as the human impact of drug legislation, and to facilitate further research into related topics such as systemic racial inequality, activism, and the process of creating a social justice film.

About the Film

The House I Live In is a tough film that sends its audience deep into the structural, political, and human quagmire of the US War on Drugs. While asking sharp and pointed questions about why we continue to enforce broken policy, the film brings us close to people and their families on both sides of the legal system. Jarecki’s approach builds empathy for both the system’s victims and its perpetrators, showing the audience that inside the drug war’s structure there may be good people but often there is no right answer. Through interviews, old newsreels, and carefully placed home movies, the film’s approach humanizes staggering statistics and puts the whole mess of US drug policy roundly in its historical context. Interviews with prominent writers, and medical and legal experts supplement the film’s groundwork in prisons, police departments, and on the streets. The House I Live In is a dense film that hopes to shock its audience into action. Activists and non-activists alike might need to take a few deep breaths after the final credits.

Recommended Subject Areas:

- US History
- Ethnic Studies/African American Studies
- US Politics
- Urban Studies
- Media Literacy
- Social Studies

Key concepts / buzzwords:

- Documentary
- Activist/Social Justice Film
- Drugs
- The War on Drugs
- The History of Racial Discrimination in US Drug Policy
- Economic and Racial Inequality
- Single Parent Households
- Ambiguity
- Political Opportunism
- Jim Crow
- Felonies and Voting rights
- Addiction
- For-Profit Prisons
- Systemic Injustice

Directed by Eugene Jarecki
USA, 2012, 108 minutes, color, English.
Grades 9-12
**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

**PRE-VIEWING TOPICS AND DISCUSSION**

*The House I Live In* is a great supplement to an American History curriculum, but it is a heavy film that might raise highly charged issues in the classroom. Before watching, students should be familiar with the history of the Civil Rights Movement and Black history in America, and they should be prepared to see a firsthand view of the struggles of poverty and addiction.

As a frontloading activity, before watching, students might engage in a journaling exercise to identify their own understanding and experience of the drug war and mass incarceration in America. Some leading questions are:

- What is the purpose of a prison and who is sent there?
- What drugs are illegal in America? Why?
- Who sells drugs and why?
- What does it mean to be addicted to drugs? How do people become addicted to drugs? How do they recover?

After watching the film, students can revisit their journaling and reassess their answers.

**POST VIEWING DISCUSSION:**

**CHARACTERS AND STORY**

1) The film introduces you to lots of different people whose lives intersect with the War on Drugs. Which stories stuck out in your mind as you were watching? Which characters did you feel close to, who did you like? Were there any “good guys” or “bad guys” in this film? Which characters and stories surprised you?

2) Think about the story of Anthony Johnson and his family. Who were Anthony’s father’s role models? Who were Anthony’s role models? What challenges does a kid face growing up with an incarcerated parent? Can you explain how the cycle of drug use, drug dealing, and incarceration gets passed down through generations? Think about the way Shanequa Benitez, who grew up in the same housing project as Anthony Johnson, talked about the practical necessity of selling drugs to get by. Why do you think it’s so hard for a kid to break free?

3) Eugene Jarecki, the filmmaker, began to be concerned about the war on drugs because he saw the effect that it had on Nannie Jeter’s family. At one point in the film, Nannie explains the difficult choice she made in continuing to work with Eugene’s family when they moved away from New Haven. She tells him, “Eugene, that was the wrong thing to do.” How do you think Eugene felt to learn that he had inadvertently played a role in Nannie’s families struggles? Whose fault is it that Eugene grew up with his mom and Nannie, but that Nannie wasn’t around for her own son? With this story in mind, why do you think that drug addiction and the drug war disproportionately impact low income communities? What changes can we make as a culture to make the system more fair?

**WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF A PRISON AND WHO IS SENT THERE?**

- What is the purpose of a prison and who is sent there?
- What drugs are illegal in America? Why?
- Who sells drugs and why?
- What does it mean to be addicted to drugs? How do people become addicted to drugs? How do they recover?
4) Carl Hart is a character who lives in several different zones of the drug war. On the one hand, he is a Columbia professor researching addiction. On the other, he comes from a neighborhood where drug crime is widespread and he even sold drugs as a young man. How does meeting a character like Carl help the film’s audience break down stereotypes they may have had about who is involved in the drug war?

CONTEXT

1) Make a timeline of the history of drug legislation in America. When were drugs first made illegal in the United States? Why? Who were the early drug laws designed to target? When did the “War on Drugs” begin officially? How do its policies mimic earlier legislation in unfairly targeting minority and low income populations? What other factors have contributed to high levels of drug use and incarceration among these communities? Do you agree with Michelle Alexander’s statement that mass incarceration is the new Jim Crow?

2) The film shows footage of politicians speaking in favor of harsher drug legislation, even though evidence suggests that harsh laws don’t help the problem. Why are politicians supporting laws that don’t work? What economic factors are at play in our system of mass incarceration? Consider the scene where Dr. Gabor Mate, the addiction expert, argues that maybe these policies are working after all, but their goals are different than the goals that they state publicly. What is your reaction to that argument?

3) How has the drug war changed the role of law enforcement? How does the pursuit of drug crimes bring money into police departments? What negative impact does this have on non-narcotic police operations? How has the drug war changed the relationship between police and the community?

4) The House I Live In presents US drug policy as a system that is broken on every level, and yet no one seems able to stand up and fix it. Using examples from the film, identify the various occupations that play a role in perpetuating this system. Looking at each occupation individually, why do you think people get stuck playing their roles? Now, identify actions that someone in each of those jobs might take to step out or to speak out against the system. What risks will they face? Why do you think systematic injustice is so difficult to change? What can you do, as students, to affect change on an unjust system?

5) Were you surprised by the statistics in the film, i.e. to learn that the US has the highest prison population in the world? The film talks a lot about what’s wrong with the system, but it leaves it up to the audience to imagine a different reality. After watching this film, what would you propose as an alternative to incarcerating people for addiction and drug-related crimes? If you were a legislator, what laws would you write to address America’s drug problem?

STYLE AND MESSAGE/ READING THE FILM FOR MEDIA LITERACY

1) The House I Live In is a documentary film that makes a provocative statement. Why do you think Eugene Jarecki made this film? What is the central message and the purpose of the film? Who is its intended audience? How do you think the filmmaker wants you to feel after watching?

1) This film challenges the political, social, and economic status quo; it argues that we should change the way we are running our criminal justice system. Have you seen any other films that call for social change? What do you think is unique about film as a medium for activism?

2) The House I Live In is a political film, but it is also very personal. Whose stories do you hear in this film? How do personal stories work with facts and statistics to strengthen the argument of the film? How has the War on Drugs touched director Eugene
Jarecki’s life? How do you think his personal experiences have shaped his political consciousness and his goals as a filmmaker?

3) Taken as a whole, the War on Drugs is an enormous subject, but in this film it is boiled down into an entertaining feature length argument. What strategies do Jarecki and his editors use to keep you on the edge of your seat? (hint: look at the mix of action shots and interviews. When is the camera moving? When is it still?)

What do you think is sacrificed when a complex issue is presented in the context of entertainment? If this film didn’t exist, where would you go to learn about the War on Drugs? Thinking as an activist, why might you make an entertaining film about a difficult subject?

POST VIEWING ACTIVITIES

1) The film mentions California’s three strikes law and the recent passage of Prop. 36 to reform it. Write a short report on the history of California’s three strikes law. See if you can get access to the advertisements and campaign materials that led to the original passage of the law in 1994, and compare them with advertisements from November 2012. Looking at two takes on the same issue, what role do you think language plays in shaping public opinion?

2) The film briefly touches on Mexico’s drug wars and the relationship between the US appetite for illegal drugs and drug violence across the border. Explore the LA Times website dedicated to coverage of Mexico’s drug wars and/or listen to the podcast Children of the Same Sorrow (see supplementary materials). Write your reactions in a journal entry. How does US drug policy extend beyond our nation’s borders?

3) Film is a powerful tool to raise awareness for activism. The House I Live In tackles a national policy issue, but activism often begins on a much smaller scale. Can you think of a social issue, or a problem that affects you, your family, or your friends, that should be brought to the attention of the community? Are there any national or international causes that you would like to support? Write a logline for your own social justice film.

CALIFORNIA MEDIA LITERACY STANDARDS ADDRESSED IN THIS LESSON:

- Grades 9 & 10: Standard 1.14 Identify the aesthetic effects of a media presentation and evaluate the techniques used to create them (e.g., compare Shakespeare’s Henry V with Kenneth Branagh’s 1990 film version).
- Grades 11 & 12: Standard 1.14 Analyze the techniques used in media messages for a particular audience and evaluate their effectiveness (e.g., Orson Welles’ radio broadcast “War of the Worlds”).
- Grades 9 & 10: Standard 1.2 Compare and contrast the ways in which media genres (e.g., televised news, news magazines, documentaries, online information) cover the same event.
- Grades 11 & 12: Standard 1.1 Recognize strategies used by the media to inform, persuade, entertain, and transmit culture (e.g., advertisements; perpetuation of stereotypes; use of visual representations, special effects, language); Standard 1.2 Analyze the impact of the media on the democratic process (e.g., exerting influence on elections, creating images of leaders, shaping attitudes) at the local, state, and national levels; Standard 1.3 Interpret and evaluate the various ways in which events are presented and information is communicated by visual image makers (e.g., graphic artists, documentary filmmakers, illustrators, news photographers).

COMMON CORE STANDARDS IN THIS LESSON:

- Reading informational texts 9-10
- Reading Informational Texts 11-12
- History and Social Studies 9-10
- History and Social Studies 11-12
**DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT**
(by Eugene Jarecki, from Bmorenews.com)

I have been thinking about making this film for over 20 years. I first met Nannie Jeter, a prominent character in the film, when I was just a few days old coming home from the hospital. From that day on, she became a second mother to me, and her children and grandchildren a second family. I am white and Nannie and her family are black, and growing up in the wake of the civil rights movement, I think I imagined we were all living in a post-racial America—a place of greater equality and justice. Yet, as we grew older, our paths diverged; where I found privilege and opportunity, Nannie’s family found a new kind of struggle that re-emerged with a vengeance for black Americans in the post-civil rights era.

When I asked Nannie what had happened, she felt that it was chiefly the rise of drugs in America that had ravaged the lives of people in her family. But the more I talked to experts, the more I heard the same thing: whatever damage drugs do to people has been made far worse by the laws America has enacted to stop them. Suddenly, the so-called “War on Drugs” began rising into view as something I had to investigate and better understand. I wanted to know what it was that had most fundamentally hurt people I love.

With this in mind, I began interviewing people across the country whose families had been pulled into a vicious cycle of drugs and the criminal justice system. Alongside dealers, users, and their family members, I spoke to police, wardens, judges, medical experts, and others to begin to understand how it was that America came to launch a war against its own people.

I interviewed experts who broadened my understanding of the subject in ways I wanted to share with others. I learned that drug abuse is ultimately a matter of public health that has instead been treated as an opportunity for law enforcement and an expanding criminal justice system. I spoke with scientists desperate for a drug policy based on data rather than rhetoric. I saw how this misguided approach has helped make America the world’s largest jailer, imprisoning its citizens at a higher rate per capita than any other nation on earth, and how the drug war has become America’s longest war, now entering its 40th year and costing more than a trillion dollars to date.

For people to understand the scale and urgency of this crisis, I felt that facts, figures, and expert testimony weren’t enough, so I sought out individuals whose lives were directly and deeply shaped by the War on Drugs, hoping their stories would reveal some of the everyday tragedies left in its wake. Ultimately, with my beloved Nannie Jeter as inspiration, THE HOUSE I LIVE IN grew into a larger examination of race, class, and capitalism in America—of a tragically misguided system that preys upon the least fortunate among us to sustain itself.

With this in mind, I began interviewing people across the

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**NYTimes Review**

**ONE WOMAN’S FAMILY, A STRING OF CASUALTIES IN THE WAR ON DRUGS**

By MANOHLA DARGIS  Published: October 4, 2012

A call to national conscience, the activist documentary The House I Live In is persuasively urgent. Directed with heart by Eugene Jarecki, the movie is an insistently personal and political look at the war on drugs and its thousands of casualties, including those serving hard time for minor offenses. It is, Mr. Jarecki asserts — as he sifts through the data, weighs the evidence and checks in with those on both sides of the law — a war that has led to mass incarcerations characterized by profound racial disparities and that has created another front in the civil rights movement.

The title of the documentary isn’t purely metaphorical. The House I Live In is, for starters, the name of a song written by Lewis Allan and the blacklisted Earl Robinson (“All races and religions/That’s America to me”), that became a part of the Paul Robeson songbook. Frank Sinatra sang it in a 1945 short film of the same title that is a plea for tolerance written by_
Albert Maltz, one of the Hollywood 10. Mr. Jarecki uses the Robeson version over the final credits of the documentary, a nod to that singer’s long history of civil rights activism. Touchingly, the song also serves as Mr. Jarecki’s plaintive acknowledgment that his documentary was directly inspired by his lifelong relationship with an African-American woman who worked for his family, Nannie Jeter (her real name).

Ms. Jeter was, Mr. Jarecki says early, “like a second mother” to him when he was growing up. On its face and unexamined, that statement could be a perilous, risible gambit, but Mr. Jarecki navigates skilfully through the complexities of his relationship with Ms. Jeter, partly by immediately addressing his own privilege. She entered his life shortly after he was born, and their worlds overlapped as the decades passed.

“Our families were close, and her children and grandchildren were my playmates growing up,” Mr. Jarecki says, his voice wafting over images of Ms. Jeter and her family closely watching television coverage of the 2008 presidential election. “But as we got older,” Mr. Jarecki continues, “I saw many of them struggling with poverty, joblessness, crime and worse.”

When he asked Ms. Jeter what she thought “had gone wrong,” her answer — drugs — surprised him. Whether Mr. Jarecki was as surprised as he states is immaterial to how he uses this relationship between a white man and his long-term black caretaker to build an argument about drugs in America and, more critically, about race and class. Nothing in the movie, including the data he amasses, the history he excavates and the miles he racks up during his investigation, is as striking as his decision to risk seeming naïve or worse by making himself part of the story. Yet it is precisely his insistence that this is the house that he, too, lives in that helps distinguish this movie, investing it with resonant feeling.

It may be a war that Mr. Jarecki noticed almost by accident, but it’s one he has seized on with characteristic vigor. As he showed in earlier documentaries like “The Trials of Henry Kissinger” and “Why We Fight” (about the military-industrial complex), Mr. Jarecki is fearless about taking on sprawling subjects that could eat up 10 hours on cable and squeezing them into feature-length packages. The war on drugs, which officially stretches back to the Nixon administration, is the kind of large-scale topic that Mr. Jarecki loves digging into, and he does so here effectively, showing and telling with a wealth of rapidly shuffled visual material, including judiciously deployed family photographs and home movies, newsreels, television news reports and the archival like.

Working again with the film editor Paul Frost, Mr. Jarecki smoothly folds these images in with dizzying statistics and a cavalcade of talking-head interviews with a range of sympathetic experts, including Michelle Alexander, the author of “The New Jim Crow.” He also checks in with a psychologist, as well as with historians, legal professionals, prisoner advocates and inmates. Among the most important collaborators he taps for explanatory duties is the journalist turned pop-culture god David Simon, the creator of “The Wire.” Receiving what seems to be more screen time than any interviewee, Mr. Simon makes at once a fine, friendly narrative guide; a restrained voice of moral outrage; and, as the movie builds to its sweeping conclusions, a conspicuous stand-in for Mr. Jarecki.

Those conclusions won’t surprise those who keep up on the war on drugs and debates over mass incarceration. But Mr. Jarecki isn’t a journalist and doesn’t pretend that he’s breaking news; he is instead something of a showman (the choice of Mr. Simon as a voice of reason over a generic graybeard is savvy) as well as a great synthesizer and storyteller whose nonobjective investment in this material is one of his strengths.

It’s easy to take issue with a documentary like The House I Live In, which tackles too much in too brief a time and glosses over complexities, yet this is also a model of the ambitious, vitalizing activist work that exists to stir the sleeping to wake.
LATimes Review

By Sheri Linden, Special to the Los Angeles Times
October 11, 2012, 1:54 p.m.

Politically engaged filmmaking is nothing new for Eugene Jarecki, who has grappled with weighty themes in documentaries that include “The Trials of Henry Kissinger” and “Why We Fight.” With The House I Live In, a cogent look at America’s failed war on drugs, his work reaches new depth and urgency.

It’s a film as profoundly sad as it is enraging and potentially galvanizing, and it’s one of the most important pieces of nonfiction to hit the screen in years.

Jarecki lays out a clear and compelling case demonstrating that U.S. policy against mind-altering substances and, more to the point, the people who use or sell them, amounts to a systematic scourge upon those with the least resources in this country — a war based on class and race.

Arguing this aspect of the case with eloquence are Michelle Alexander, author of “The New Jim Crow,” and, more scorchingly, David Simon, who has chronicled America’s mean streets first as a reporter and then as creator of “The Wire.” Traveling around the country, Jarecki also spoke with academics, physicians, journalists, convicts and cops.

The first-person specifics include his own. He interviews Nannie Jeter, the African American woman who was a second mother to him, caring for him and his siblings as an employee of his parents. Jarecki grew up with Nannie’s kids and their cousins, not all of whom are still alive, and many of whom have been in and out of prison because of drugs.

The House I Live In doesn’t overlook the matter of personal responsibility; it places that responsibility within a larger sociopolitical context, one that can be ignored only in the name of protecting the status quo. Nannie looks back with devastating regret at the price her children paid so that she could remain gainfully employed. And when she reveals why she left the South in the first place, she’s tracing a life story defined in part by institutional injustice.

Jarecki’s film is a call for fairness and for a reasoned, humane approach to a complex problem, one that over the decades has been drastically oversimplified, in the tradition of prohibition and punitive moralism.

One of the many incisive historical particulars that the film puts forth is the fact that Richard Nixon, whose administration launched the War on Drugs with a fusillade of tough-guy rhetoric, allotted more funds to treatment than to interdiction.

The increasingly hardhearted and unrealistic approach to addiction as a criminal rather than a health issue separates the United States from most developed countries and has produced the largest prison population in the world. Physician Gabor Maté offers his critique as an addiction specialist.

An Oklahoma warden points out the fallacy in locking up people not because theyre dangerous and you fear them, but because, as he puts it, youre mad at them.

That anger has fueled a policy of mandatory minimum sentences that disproportionately affects blacks and the underprivileged in general. Jarecki sketches an eye-opening history connecting the criminalization of drugs with the economic need to demonize the country’s minorities.

Cutting through delusions of a post-racial America, the film is a searing report on the state of the union as an industrial (privatized) prison complex, built on a justice system that gives cops more incentive to rack up busts for nonviolent drug crimes than to pursue murderers and rapists.

Speaking to a young drug dealer facing a lengthy mandatory minimum sentence, and then to his father, a former dealer whose words give way to tears, the documentary goes to the heart of the matter: the human cost, and the question of what kind of society we want to live in.
In her invaluable 2010 book, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, Michelle Alexander posits the decades-long U.S. government policy known as the “war on drugs” as a system of racial control, a true successor to the series of laws that kept black Americans in the South in a state of legalized segregation following Reconstruction. Although Alexander is among the talking heads assembled by Eugene Jarecki for his own docu-indictment of the government’s drug policy, her assessment of the war on drugs as specifically race-based is refuted by many of the other subjects in *The House I Live In* who claim that the U.S.’s narcotics laws are based on controlling lower class people of all colors, and that poor white meth addicts are increasingly vying with their non-white counterparts for space in U.S. jails.

Whether or not you view the mass jailing of nonviolent drug offenders as specifically racially inflected (and the film cites plenty of data that suggests it certainly has been, such as the fact that while African Americans are responsible for roughly 13 percent of crack use, they constitute 90 percent of the crack-related prison population), Jarecki’s doc stands as a powerful indictment of a program that’s decimated communities, cost taxpayers roughly a trillion dollars, and hasn’t reduced the amount of drugs being consumed in this country one iota. The director’s methods are pretty ordinary (expert talking heads, historical background, case studies of people going through the legal system, a bit of a first-person angle), but the mixture of different techniques and varied views results in a rich, multi-faceted look at one of America’s most misguided policy initiatives, outlining the ways in which what was once viewed as a matter of public health became an excuse to lock up threatening “undesirables.”

Although one can bemoan the relative short shrift given to Alexander, whose book remains the definitive study of the toxic effects of the war on drugs, there’s no denying the ways in which Jarecki’s film effectively wedds rhetorical outrage to well-researched fact. While the documentarian’s methods aren’t always the most imaginative (he indulges in that old, condescending ask-the-man-on-the-street-and-reveal-his-ignorance gambit), he’s assembled a damning collection of evidence that can’t be ignored. It’s always difficult to assess what social role activist documentaries play among the cacophony of competing media voices, but Jarecki’s movie serves not only as a valuable civics lesson that may or may not steer public debate in new directions, but as a powerful piece of anguished filmmaking in its own right.

From frequent explicator David Simon’s controlled lividness to the tearful tale of Jarecki’s family’s housekeeper, Nannie Jeter, whose decision to move with her employers from her native New Haven to upstate New York left her son vulnerable to the deadly pressures of drug abuse, first-person testimony provides the anguished heart of the project, but it’s the film’s historical perspective that proves most valuable. Historian Richard Lawrence Miller usefully explains how drugs such as opium, cocaine, and marijuana were once legal and used openly by upper-class white citizens, but when they became associated with, respectively, Chinese immigrants, African Americans, and Mexicans, they were soon outlawed and used as means of keeping these hated populations in check. As the film argues, this project continued through the ‘80s, when Reagan’s draconian drug policy began to target black men, many of whom, left destitute by the decreasing availability of manufacturing jobs and governmental neglect of their failing neighborhoods, turned to the only viable economic option available, dealing drugs, and into the present, when desperate poor whites operating meth labs are beginning to round out prison populations.
We live in a world where technology mediates a large portion of human interaction and the exchange of information. Every projected image, every word published on a page or a website, and every sound from a speaker reaches its audience through the medium, through the language of the device. The ability to parse the vast array of media messages is an essential skill for young people, particularly in a mainstream commercial culture that targets youth as a vulnerable, impressionable segment of the American marketplace. Most students already have a keen understanding of the languages different media use and the techniques they employ to inspire particular emotions or reactions, but they often lack the skill or awareness to fully deconstruct the messages they continuously receive.

Analysis of a media message—or any piece of mass media content—can best be accomplished by first identifying its principal characteristics:

1. **Medium**: the physical means by which it is contained and/or delivered
2. **Author**: the person(s) responsible for its creation and dissemination
3. **Content**: the information, emotions, values or ideas it conveys
4. **Audience**: the target audience to whom it is delivered
5. **Purpose**: the objectives of its authors and the effects of its dissemination.

Students who can readily identify these five core characteristics will be equipped to understand the incentives at work behind media messages, as well as their potential consequences. Media literacy education empowers students to become responsible consumers, active citizens and critical thinkers.

### Core Concepts of Media Analysis

| MEDIUM | All Media Is Constructed.  
How is the message delivered and in what format?  
What technologies are used to present the message?  
What visual and auditory elements are used?  
What expectations do you bring to the content, given its medium and format? |
|---|---|
| AUTHOR | All Media Is Constructed by Someone.  
Who is delivering the message?  
Who originally constructed the message?  
What expectations do you have of the content, given its author(s)? |
| CONTENT | Media Is A Language For Information.  
What is the subject of the media message?  
What information, values, emotions or ideas are conveyed by the media content?  
What tools does the author employ to engage the viewer and evoke a response?  
To what extent did the content meet your expectations, given the format/author? |
| AUDIENCE | All Media Messages Reach an Audience.  
Who receives the message?  
For whom is the message intended?  
What is the public reaction to the media content and/or its message?  
What is your reaction to the media content and/or its message?  
How might others perceive this message differently? Why? |
| PURPOSE | All Media Messages Are Constructed for a Reason.  
Why was the message constructed?  
Who benefits from dissemination of the message? How?  
To what extent does the message achieve its purpose?  
What effect does the message have on the audience it reaches, if any? |
THE NON-FICTION FILM

WHAT IS A DOCUMENTARY?

A documentary is a film whose goal is to capture truth, fact or reality as seen through the lens of the camera. But there are many kinds of documentaries, and not everyone’s idea of truth is the same. The Scottish filmmaker John Grierson coined the term “documentary” in 1926 to describe American filmmaker Robert Flaherty’s romanticized culture studies, but nonfiction filmmaking dates back to the earliest motion picture reels.

The definition of documentary expanded as filmmakers experimented with technology and the goals of nonfiction. Avant-garde documentarians, like Dziga Vertov in the 1920s, believed that the mechanical eye of the camera gave a truer image of reality than the human eye and pointed his lens at newly industrialized cities. Leni Reifenstahl’s propaganda films from Nazi Germany used the nonfiction form to convey a political message, a slanted truth. The international cinema vérité or observational movements of the 1960s attempted to remove authorship from the documentary. The observational filmmaker hovered like a “fly on the wall” watching the world without commentary. Modern documentaries often seek to raise awareness about a social, environmental or political issue, guiding their audiences toward civic participation and activism.

While watching a documentary, it is important to remember the core concepts of media analysis: who made the film, for what audience and why? The nonfiction format can be deceptively subjective, as all filmmaking involves an inherent selection process: in the images that are shot, the music and narration that accompanies them and, most significantly, the way in which they are all edited together. Media literacy means always analyzing a documentary for its message and authorial intent.
The Making of a Documentary

Idea, Issue, Story.

Even though they are nonfiction films, most modern documentaries structure their content around a traditional story arc, with a beginning, middle and end, as well as characters, and a conclusion, theme or thesis to impart to the audience. Documentary filmmakers begin their projects with an idea or an issue that they wish to explore more deeply. Through research and planning, they develop a comprehensive plan before they begin shooting.

The Production Process.

To capture candid moments on film, modern documentary makers often leave the camera running, collecting far more footage than the final film requires. They may do this during interviews or in observational-style encounters with their subjects. To get increased access and an observational aesthetic, documentary makers often use handheld cameras and natural light, rather than staging a more formal filming environment.

Post-Production and the Documentary.

Because a documentary film relies upon candid footage, a large part of the film’s construction occurs in the editing room, where you work with what you’ve captured. A documentary editor will sift through long interviews just to find a few phrases that will summarize the film’s message. To emphasize important points and build the story, some documentaries use a voiceover, an interview or a scripted narrative that brings candid footage together into a coherent statement. An original score can work alongside the voiceover to unify the footage and shape the mood of the film. Audiences often underestimate the power of sound to generate an emotional response. Many documentaries also use charts, graphs and historical footage to add context and emphasize key points.

Distribution.

Once a film is completed, the filmmaker needs to help it find its audience. Many documentaries are made independently on small budgets, but what’s the point of all your work if no one hears your message? Some documentaries will be released in theaters around the country or get programmed on public or cable TV channels, but most documentary filmmakers will start by submitting their work to film festivals, in hopes of attracting distributors for the theater and television markets. Filmmakers may also make their films available online and use social media to reach their target audience.
The vast majority of interpersonal human interactions taking place at any given moment are taking place via some type of medium. Every image projected on a screen, every word published on a page, every sound produced from a speaker – each comprises a piece of media content, a media message of some sort. The ability to discern between and understand the vast array of media messages by which we are continually surrounded is an essential skill for young people to develop, particularly in a mainstream commercial culture that targets youth as a vulnerable, impressionable segment of the American marketplace. Most teenage students already have a keen understanding of the languages different media use and the techniques they employ to inspire particular emotions or reactions.

Analysis of a media message – or any piece of mass media content – can best be accomplished by first identifying its principal characteristics: (1) the physical means by which it is contained and/or delivered, (2) the person(s) responsible for its creation and dissemination, (3) the information, emotions, values or ideas it conveys, (4) the audience to whom it is delivered, and (5) the objectives of its authors and effects of its dissemination.

Students who can readily identify these five core characteristics (abbreviated in this section with the keywords Medium, Author, Content, Audience and Purpose) when faced with mass messages will be equipped to understand the incentives at work behind them, as well as their potential consequences. Media literacy education incentivizes students to become responsible consumers, active citizens and free, critical thinkers.
THE NON-FICTION FILM

BRIEF HISTORY OF THE DOCUMENTARY
1895  Lumiere Brothers develop the first motion picture film reels, capturing brief, unedited clips of life around them called “actualities” (e.g., *Train Arriving at the Station*).

1922  Robert Flaherty’s *Nanook of the North* is the first feature-length film to be called a “documentary,” employing the “creative interpretation of reality” to tell a factual story.

1936  John Grierson releases *Night Mail*, an example of the more poetic, experimental approach to documentary that his movement embodied.

1963  The cinema vérité movement begins in Europe, shortly followed by “direct cinema” in the U.S. Films of these movements attempt to present factual information objectively and observationally, though many were produced with political or ideological motivations.

1999  *The Blair Witch Project* is released, becoming the highest grossing film of all time (relative to its production cost). Marketed and styled as a documentary, the suspense/horror film used the genre to unprecedented effect, fooling millions of filmgoers into believing it was a non-fiction film (obviously enhancing the fear factor). The “mockumentary” has since caught on as a comedic sub-genre.

TYPES OF DOCUMENTARY

All documentaries may be measured along a spectrum of impartiality. Some documentaries attempt to record and present information in as objective and unbiased a manner possible, as if the film were made by a fly on the wall. Other documentaries present real-world information, but do so in a highly obtrusive, manufactured, often biased manner. Arguably no documentary can be 100% unobtrusive to the events it seeks to record (subjects are almost always aware of the presence of a camera, for example), and no documentary can be 100% objective (a single edit represents a subjective filmmaking decision). Media literate students should be able to discern the plausibility and purpose of documentary programs based on their authorship, the nature of their content, the extent to which bias is expressed, etc. Generally, all documentary films and programs occupy one (and sometimes more) of the following categories:

1. **Poetic**: The most abstract type of documentary. The earliest documentaries were essentially poetic; images were organized based on associations and patterns, creating a fragmented, impressionist, lyrical record of actual places, objects and people. Poetic documentaries do not include characters or plots, and were largely made by early filmmakers looking to subvert the coherence and standardization of early narrative films. Some modern music videos can be considered poetic documentaries. Notable examples: *Rain* (Ivens, 1928), *City Symphonies: NY, NY* (Thompson, 1957).

2. **Expository**: Documentaries that speak directly to the viewer (via titles and/or voiceover) in an effort to persuade, convince or educate. Most modern documentary films and TV programs are primarily expository. Expository docs may be further categorized as follows:
   – **Persuasive**:
     • Commercial: Docs that advocate a particular product, service or brand
     • Political: Docs that advocate a certain position on political contests/issues
     • Theological/Ethical: Docs that advocate a certain position on religious/moral issues
     • Topical: Docs that advocate a certain ideological position on social issues
THE NON-FICTION FILM

– Educational:
  • Scientific: Docs that attempt to convey factual information on science topics
  • Historical: Docs that attempt to convey factual information on historical topics/periods
  • Biographical: Docs that attempt to convey factual information about individuals
  • Topical: Docs that attempt to convey factual information about social issues

Both persuasive and educational documentaries present information in traditionally efficient ways. Impartial, “omniscient” voice-over narration, on-screen text and insert shots of supporting charts, illustrations, maps, etc. are stylistic techniques common to most expository documentaries. The combination of interview audio and “b-roll” footage of associated visuals is another classic convention of non-fiction filmmaking. It is not uncommon for filmmakers or television producers to take advantage of the credibility that this format lends, and to present fictional (or, at best, debatable) information as factual. Thus, the distinction between a persuasive doc and an educational doc is largely based upon purpose and audience; a film made to argue a point of view or perpetuate a myth may appear no less fictional than an educational doc about photosynthesis.

Expository documentaries are inherently more impactful on the people and environments they attempt to capture than observational docs; but inherently less impactful than participatory docs. The presence of the filmmaker is usually acknowledged and/or obvious (audible interviewer in conversation, voice-over narration, on-screen titles/diagrams/maps/schematics, character interaction with crew, etc.) under the pretense that the filmmaker(s) are only involved peripherally. Some filmmakers include dramatic re-enactments of story content in their “documentaries”. While this can be as emotionally compelling as a heart-wrenching Hollywood tragedy, it fully removes any pretense of factual impartiality.

3. Observational: Docs that attempt to simply and spontaneously observe some part of the world with minimal intervention. Observational films are less abstract than poetic documentaries and less biased or forceful than expository documentaries. Observational docs date back to the 1960s when the advent of mobile lightweight cameras and portable sound recording equipment enabled non-fiction filmmakers to capture events in an organic, unobtrusive way (new celluloid films also needed less light to achieve exposure). This mode of documentary historically avoids stylistic “add-ons” like voice-over commentary, music, titles, re-enactments, etc. These films aimed for immediacy, intimacy and revelation of individual human character in ordinary life situations. Examples: High School (Wiseman, 1968); Gimme Shelter (Maysles, 1970); Don’t Look Back (Pennebaker, 1967)

4. Participatory: Participatory documentarians rightly believe that it is impossible for the act of filmmaking to not influence or alter the events and characters being filmed. Much like an anthropologist studying a culture by taking part in it, a participatory filmmaker inserts him/herself into the action at hand as a means of inciting and documenting reactions and as a means of making his/her authorship transparent and spontaneous. The encounter between subject and filmmaker inherently becomes a critical component of the film. Autobiographical documentaries are 100% participatory. Examples: Man with a Movie Camera (Vertov, 1929), Sherman’s March (McElwee, 1985), films by Michael Moore.

Adapted from Bill Nichols, Representing Reality (1991) and Introduction to Documentary (2001)
SUPPLEMENTAL RESOURCES

• The film’s website has a wide range of resources, from links to interviews with the filmmaker, to avenues for activism. [http://www.thehouseilivein.org/](http://www.thehouseilivein.org/)

• *Democracy Now* interview with Michelle Alexander and Randall Robinson on the mass incarceration of Black people in America. The clip further emphasizes how criminalization of nonviolent crimes and the disproportionate prosecution of people of color creates a caste system in America. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2g4hCn8srvI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2g4hCn8srvI)


• *Bringing Down the New Jim Crow*, a radio documentary series, explores issues related to race and the US War on Drugs. The audio programs run approximately 50 minutes. This is a particularly good resource for a lesson on the impact of the War on Drugs in Mexico, which is touched on but not expanded upon in *The House I Live In*. Excerpts might be used in class. [http://newjimcrow.com/media/bringing-down-the-new-jim-crow-radio-documentary-series](http://newjimcrow.com/media/bringing-down-the-new-jim-crow-radio-documentary-series)

• The *LA Times* interactive site dedicated to Mexico’s drug wars: [http://projects.latimes.com/mexico-drug-war/#/its-a-war](http://projects.latimes.com/mexico-drug-war/#/its-a-war)

• A video interview with Eugene Jarecki in *The Guardian*. The clip runs approximately seven minutes. At the end he talks about dramatization of the drug war in popular TV shows like *The Wire* and *Breaking Bad*. This might be a good jumping off point to talk as a class about representations of drug and drug crime in popular culture. [http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/video/2012/nov/22/house-i-live-in-eugene-jarecki-video](http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/video/2012/nov/22/house-i-live-in-eugene-jarecki-video)