

NATIONAL BIRD



GRADES 9-12 CLASSROOM GUIDE

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TEACHING THE FILM:

National Bird is an eye-opening documentary that looks deep into the processes and consequences of the United States' drone war in Afghanistan. A class screening of the film may complement a Political Science, History, or Social Studies curriculum, and will encourage students to consider the moral ramifications of high tech modern warfare. Taught in conjunction with this guide, the film will challenge students to think critically about global conflict, morality, and the human impact of drone technology, both on Afghan civilians and American drone operators. Discussion questions and supplemental materials facilitate further research into related topics such as the definition of whistleblowing, PTSD, and the social consequences of civilian casualties.

All SFFS Youth Education materials are developed in alignment with California educational standards for media literacy. SFFS Youth Education welcomes feedback and questions on all printed study materials.

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USING THIS GUIDE

This study guide is intended to flexibly support educators in preparing for and following up on a class screening of **National Bird**.

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.

ABOUT THE FILM

Drone warfare has been sold to the public as a “cleaner,” more precise means of waging the war against terror, with technology enabling military personnel many thousands of miles away to identify insurgent targets. But just how does it work, and how accurate have the results been? The US government has been reluctant (to put it mildly) to share that information. More, it’s worked strenuously to silence those who’ve publicly questioned the secretive program’s success, and its human impact. Sonia Kennebeck’s documentary focuses on three veterans whose service experiences cause them to seriously doubt the wisdom of drone usage in overseas combat, including one woman who says, “I thought I was going to be on the right side of history, and today I don’t believe I was.” Executive produced by Wim Wenders and Errol Morris, *National Bird* had to be made in relative secrecy, as the filmmakers wanted to avoid drawing government attention to their project—or further such scrutiny to their protagonists. We get an especially vivid illustration of why that is in the detailed recounting of an actual US drone willful dismissal of long-distance analysts’ input resulted in 23 unarmed civilians’ deaths.

Program Note: mild profanity

Sonia Kennebeck (USA 2016)
92 min, Color, In English
Grades 9-12

Recommended Subject Areas:

- Ethics/Religion
- Health
- History
- Journalism
- Political Science
- Social Science
- Social Studies
- Women’s Studies
- World Affairs

Key concepts / buzzwords:

- Afghanistan
- Drones
- Healing
- Military
- Morality
- Redemption
- PTSD
- Technology
- Trauma
- War



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

PRE-VIEWING TOPICS AND DISCUSSION:

National Bird is a powerful and sometimes upsetting film that brings viewers close to the traumatic experiences of people on the front lines of the drone war, both the American drone operators and the Afghan civilians who have been casualties of the strikes.

Before watching, you may wish to familiarize students with the debate surrounding drone warfare. Use the [Supplemental Resources](#) section of this guide to find articles and lesson plans that provide context for the film. You might assign a reading or hold a class discussion about the drone war. You can return to this topic with a classroom debate following the screening.

POST-VIEWING DISCUSSION:

Character and Story

1) Describe Heather.

What is she like as a person? Can you relate to her?

Does she remind you of anyone you know?

- Why did Heather join the army?
- What was her job in the army, and what was her experience as a soldier?
- How did Heather's experience in the army change her? How has she suffered since returning home?
- Why does Heather choose to share her views and her experience with a public audience? Do you agree with her decision? Why or why not?

2) Describe Daniel.

- What is Daniel's view of the drone program?
- How does Daniel think that drones should be used?
- What happens to Daniel during the course of the film?
- How does Daniel cope with the stress of being investigated?

3) Describe Lisa.

- What is Lisa's view of the drone program? What are her concerns?
- Why does Lisa travel to Afghanistan?
 - How do you think it feels for Lisa to be on the ground in Afghanistan?
 - Why is this journey important for her?
 - What does she learn?

4) Describe the Afghan civilians whom you meet through this film.

- How has the drone war affected their lives?
- How are they coping with their injuries and losses?
- How do you think you would react if you had endured what they have endured?
- What are these characters' hopes for the future?
- How do you think these experiences will affect the political and moral views of the next generation in Afghanistan?

4) How do the characters in the film connect with to one another?

- In what ways do their stories overlap?
- Do you see parallels between the American characters and the Afghani characters?
- Who are the victims of the drone war?

WHO ARE THE VICTIMS OF THE DRONE WAR?

Context

- 1) What role does technology play in modern warfare?
 - Describe the military technology that you learn about in **National Bird**.
 - Why is the military eager to use this technology?
 - What advantages does technology provide?
 - What concerns does it raise?
- 2) Describe the process of a drone strike.
 - Who is involved in carrying out the attack?
 - How do the operators decide whether or not to strike?
 - What do they look for in making their decision?
 - What risks are eliminated in a drone attack?
 - What new risks arise from surveillance-based killing?
 - Do you believe that the risk of civilian casualties is justified? Why or why not?
- 3) Why is information surrounding the drone program classified?
 - What obstacles does secrecy create in promoting public understanding and debate?
 - What difficulties does the program's secrecy pose for veterans?
- 4) What is a whistleblower?
 - Why is it sometimes a moral imperative to expose secret information? What historical revelations have resulted from the actions of whistleblowers?
 - What risks does a whistleblower face?
 - Where is the dividing line between whistle blowing and treachery?
 - How does a potential whistleblower know whether he or she is doing the right thing?
 - Put yourself in the position of the characters in the

film: would you reveal information about the drone program? Why or why not?

- 5) What traumas do the drone operators experience?
 - In what ways does the drone program sanitize warfare and make it feel less personal?
 - In what ways does war remain the same?
 - How is the Afghan experience of a drone attack different than the experience of being bombed by a piloted airplane?
 - How is killing someone with a remote-controlled drone different than killing someone by dropping a bomb from an airplane, shooting someone with a gun, or killing someone in hand-to-hand combat? How is it the same?

WHAT IS A WHISTLEBLOWER?

Style and Message/Reading the Film for Media Literacy

- 1) What is your reaction to **National Bird**?
 - How did this film make you feel?
 - How do you think the filmmakers want you to feel when this film is finished?
 - Can you identify a thesis in *National Bird*?
 - Is this a convincing film?
- 2) How does **National Bird** begin?
 - How does the film introduce its audience to the topic of drones? What do you think the film gains by introducing us to Heather in her home?
 - What do the filmmakers achieve by juxtaposing Heather's narrative with the army recruiting videos?
 - How does this contrast set up the premise and argument of the film?

3) How does **National Bird** use drone footage?

- How do you feel when you are watching the drone footage? Is it unsettling?
- Why do you think the filmmakers relied on the overhead vantage point? How does it reinforce the film's narrative?

3) How does the film end?

- What message does it leave with its viewers?
- What do you take away from this film?

POST-VIEWING ACTIVITIES:

1) Journaling exercise: Review the film.

- Briefly summarize **National Bird**.
- What is the film's argument?
- What are the most important parts of the story?
- What does this film tell us about contemporary America?
- Would you recommend this film to your friends and family? Why or why not?

2) Activity: Classroom Debate

Using articles and lesson plans in the Supplemental Resources section of this guide, debate the pros and cons of the US drone warfare program.

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 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 1.3 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).

For more information about media literacy standards in your state, visit:

- MediaLiteracy.com: resources for advancing media education, United States Standards for media literacy education. <http://www.medialiteracy.com/standards.htm>
- Frank W Baker’s guide to State Standards Which Include Elements of Media Literacy. http://frankwbaker.com/state_lit.htm

Common Core Standards Addressed In This Lesson:

This lesson addresses the English and Language Arts standards for Reading Informational Texts grades 9-12. Additional specific standard applications are listed below:

- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.2 Determine two or more themes or central ideas of a text and analyze their development over the course of the text, including how they interact and build on one another to produce a complex account; provide an objective summary of the text.
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.3 Analyze the impact of the author’s choices regarding how to develop and relate elements of a story or drama (e.g., where a story is set, how the action is ordered, how the characters are introduced and developed).
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.11-12.3 Analyze a complex set of ideas or sequence of events and explain how specific individuals, ideas, or events interact and develop over the course of the text.



MEDIA LITERACY RESOURCES

SCREENING WITH MEANING

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	<p>All Media Is Constructed.</p> <p>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?</p>
AUTHOR	<p>All Media Is Constructed by Someone.</p> <p>Who is delivering the message? Who originally constructed the message? What expectations do you have of the content, given its author(s)?</p>
CONTENT	<p>All Media Is A Language.</p> <p>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?</p>
AUDIENCE	<p>All Media Messages Reach an Audience.</p> <p>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?</p>
PURPOSE	<p>All Media Messages Are Constructed for a Reason.</p> <p>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?</p>



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.

A BRIEF TIMELINE OF THE DOCUMENTARY

1895 The Lumiere brothers developed the first motion picture film reels, capturing brief, unedited clips of life around them called "actualities" (e.g., *Train Arriving at the Station*)

1900-1920 Travelogue or "Scenic" films became popular, showcasing exoticized images from around the globe.

1926 John Grierson coined the term "documentary" to describe Robert Flaherty's romantic nonfiction film, *Moana*.

1929 Dziga Vertov, with the Soviet Kino-Pravda movement, released the experimental nonfiction film, *Man With a Movie Camera*.

1935 Leni Reifenstahl released *Triumph of the Will*, the infamous propaganda film that chronicled the 1934 Nazi Party Congress.

1939 John Grierson collaborated with the Canadian government to form the National Film Board of Canada, with the initial goal of creating Allied propaganda in support of the war.

1960s The cinema vérité movement began in Europe, shortly followed by "direct cinema" in the U.S. Portable cameras and sync sound allowed filmmakers to capture intimate footage with minimal intervention.

1968 The Argentine film, *La Hora de los Hornos (The Hour of the Furnaces)* opened the door to the activist cinema of the 1970s, which used film as a tool to counter capitalist and neo-colonial politics in Latin America.

1988 The US Congress mandated that the US government support the creation of independent non-commercial media, and the Independent Television Service (ITVS) was founded.

2000s The widespread use of digital cameras and editing software made the documentary medium vastly more affordable to independent and amateur filmmakers. Video sharing sites such as YouTube and Vimeo allowed amateur filmmakers to broadcast their work.

PRESENT DAY The term "documentary" has come to encompass a wide range of nonfiction cinema. Contemporary filmmakers continue to push the boundaries of truth in film and to explore new avenues and applications for the medium.



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.



SUPPLEMENTAL RESOURCES

The Film's Website:

<http://itvs.org/films/national-bird>

The Debate Surrounding Drone Warfare:

Pro-Drone Articles:

<http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2013/09/the-killing-machines-how-to-think-about-drones/309434/>

http://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/21/opinion/sunday/drone-warfare-precise-effective-imperfect.html?_r=0

<https://www.lawfareblog.com/drone-papers-intercepting-nonsense>

Anti-Drone Articles:

<http://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/14/opinion/our-drone-war-burnout.html>

<http://www.democracynow.org/topics/drones>

<https://theintercept.com/drone-papers/>

Articles That Address Both Sides:

<http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2013/10/31/the-truth-and-tragedy-of-drone-warfare.html>

<http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/11/24/unblinking-stare>

Teacher Resources for Talking About Drones:

The Choices Program: Debating US Drone Policy: <http://www.choices.edu/resources/twtn/twtn-drones.php>

NYTimes Learning Blogs: 6 Questions About the US Drone Campaign: <http://learning.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/02/08/questions-about-the-us-drone-campaign/>

Teachable Moment: Drone Warfare and Obama's Kill List: <http://teachablemoment.org/teachablemoment.org/high/dronewarfare.html>



REVIEWS

Variety

Peter Debruge

Chief International Film Critic

@AskDebruge

Three veterans try to slam America's drone program without crossing into treasonous territory in this critical-minded doc.

The first time an MQ-1 Predator or MQ-9 Reaper takes out a human target on U.S. soil (along with any women, children and "military-aged males" close enough to be considered collateral damage), American citizens are likely to change their tune about the military's still-too-secret drone program. That's not just the subtext, but the virtual guarantee of Sonia Kennebeck's alarm-sounding topic doc "National Bird," which uses fly-over footage of various domestic locations to drive home the point that these unmanned aerial vehicles, designed to protect lives, could just as easily be turned against us — or the three courageous whistleblowers who've chosen to share their experience.

Chilling testimony from those three veterans, each of whom helped to wage war from behind consoles half a world away, serves as the backbone of a film that adds its voice to mounting criticism of the U.S. drone program. And while most of this terrain has already been covered in other media, with the weight of exec producers Wim Wenders and Errol Morris' names behind it (plus a catchy title suggested by Sole and DJ Pain 1's end-credits rap track), "National Bird" should cast an impressive shadow, inspiring some real debate in op-ed and public radio forums upon its release.

In contrast with most anti-drone rhetoric, launched from armchairs equally far removed from the field, Kennebeck puts forth opinions from those who have actually sat in the program's virtual cockpits, or else directly analyzed the data that serves to identify the targets. But even within their capacity as whistleblowers, her sources remain severely limited in what they can say without fear of being charged under the 1917 Espionage Act. Their lawyers not only must sign off the filming of certain scenes, but actually become characters in the film at a certain point, as happens with Jesselyn Radack, who also represents Edward Snowden.

Snowden, of course, was the subject of Laura Poitras' Oscar-winning "Citizenfour," and Kennebeck would no doubt like for "National Bird" to be seen as similarly earth-shattering. It's tricky, considering the director has to be clever about how the film presents what information she does have, dealing with the fact that First Amendment protections have receded since 9/11. Daniel (introduced, like all the film's subjects, by just his first name) can't say much, but is the most fascinating of the film's three main characters. Despite being anti-war, he describes enlisting to avoid homelessness, only to be assigned to a top-secret drone-related post. Since leaving the service, Daniel participates in peace marches and decorates his apartment with anti-establishment posters (Black Panthers, "Who Needs Capitalism?") — which might explain why the FBI raided his apartment and threatens to charge him with treason.

Similarly cautious, former drone-system technical sergeant Lisa shares a letter of commendation she received for having helped to identify 121,000 insurgent targets over a two-year period, suggesting



that viewers “do the math” to estimate how many fatalities there have been since American declared war on Afghanistan in 2001. Lisa actually feels so conflicted about her involvement that she joins a neighbor on her annual trip to Afghanistan, setting out to meet the civilian survivors of misdirected strikes.

These sequences, which put a human face on those who were lucky enough to walk away (often on prosthetic legs, as provided by a hospital she visits), drive home the danger of a world in which drones are allowed. “National Bird” cites examples of ordinary Afghans bombed at funerals, weddings and religious ceremonies, even going so far as to show footage of one mistargeted family bringing home the corpses of 23 relatives.

“It’s like borders don’t matter anymore,” observes Lisa, who was part of an operation to suck up and process personal data in order to identify individuals who could then be blasted out of the clear blue sky. If the U.S. can justify the use of drones in Afghanistan, the film implies, on what authority can we forbid other countries from doing the same to us? As a filmed conversation with retired Joint Special Operations Command general Stanley A. McChrystal makes it clear, drone technology isn’t going away. But does that mean Americans, too, will one day have to worry about being bombed as they walk to school?

Not if Heather, a former drone-imagery analyst, can help it. Since retiring from an Air Force DGS team, Heather has battled PTSD, even though she did her service a long way from the front lines. Her main objective in participating is to show how inadequately the military responds to the emotional needs of analysts, who witness countless casualties, but seldom ever get feedback on their strikes.

“I can say the drone program is wrong because I don’t know how many people I’ve killed,” says Heather, who spent much of her enlisted time on a suicide watch list with no support from the military. (Even now, it’s hard for her to find therapist with a high enough security clearance to counsel her.) While the counterargument might hold that other forms of warfare are far more “messy,” her point is perhaps the one that could most realistically enact change: She feels that the military doesn’t consider the emotional needs of its analysts, having lost several of her own colleagues to alcoholism and depression, while others redirect their frustrations at the fuzzy blobs on their monitors. To see and hear a transcript of one such strike re-enacted is traumatic enough for audiences. Now imagine watching such incidents day in, day out for years.



The Guardian

by Alex Needham

This is a disturbing documentary which, through the testimonies of three courageous whistleblowers, sheds some daylight on the USA's secret military drone programme. Directed by Sonia Kennebeck and executive-produced by Wim Wenders, *National Bird* weaves together the stories of the air force veterans Lisa, Daniel and Heather, all of whom have worked on the drones programme, gathering intelligence and tracking targets to be killed.

Then *National Bird* moves to Afghanistan, where the maimed survivors of a mistaken drone strike on unarmed civilians in February 2010, which killed 23 people, describe what happened when they were attacked. The juxtaposition of the appallingly gung-ho attitude of the drone operatives, re-enacted from a transcript of the event, and raw footage of the dead bodies (some children) returning to their anguished friends and family, is heartbreaking and enraging.

Kennebeck juxtaposes Obama's speeches about drones – in which he claims that they are able to take out insurgents without harming those around them – with the testimonies of those who know that this is untrue. Self-evidently, drones wreak widespread devastation, and the fact that a growing element of modern warfare involves studying dots on a screen and deciding on which to drop a bomb has frightening ethical implications. *National Bird* demonstrates that the nature of drone warfare makes some drone operatives trigger-happy, while others, like Heather, who analysed intelligence on warzones and wrote about her experiences for the *Guardian*, end up dehumanised and suffering from PTSD.

This is a documentary that shows rather than tells, ominously beautiful drone's-eye tracking shots of ordinary American streets demonstrating the way the technology can be used against any community. The film kicks up a gear when signals intelligence analyst Daniel, who had worked with the NSA at Fort Meade, decides to blow the whistle on the drone programme and gets the full force of the government machinery dropped on top of him, including the raiding of his house by dozens of FBI agents and the threat of decades in jail for treason. His attorney Jesselyn Radack, who represents the other whistleblowers and did the same for Edward Snowden, makes clear that once you cross the military-industrial complex, your life becomes extremely difficult. At the end of the film, Daniel's whereabouts are chillingly described as unknown.

Under the US 1917 espionage act, the film and the whistleblowers are severely restricted in what they can (or, in the case of the whistleblowers, would wish to) say, but certain sharp facts poke through the murk. Lisa shows a letter of commendation for helping to identify 121,000 insurgent targets over two years – as she points out, since the US has been at war in Afghanistan since 2001, the scale of casualties must be vast. No one will say, but it's also pretty clear that the US is using drones in countries with which it is not officially at war. With stealth and elegance, Kennebeck brings these alarming truths into the light.