



# Lead Me Home

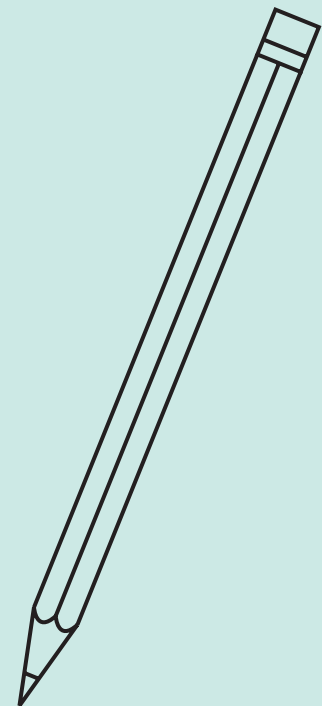
## STUDY GUIDE

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

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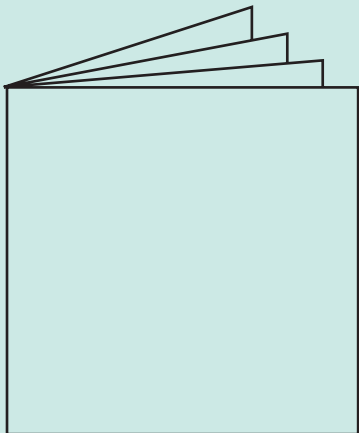
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## About the Film

In **Lead Me Home**, tents become bedrooms; trucks become washrooms; parks become kitchens. Love occurs, as does strife and violence. People make homes for themselves wherever they end up. When directors Pedro Kos and Jon Shenk set out to tackle the subject of homelessness, they had one goal: to humanize the experience, in whatever form that might take. The pair set out to depict the stories of people living on the street who, were it not for a vast set of unfortunate circumstances—addiction, mental illness, sexual abuse, homophobia, healthcare costs, disability—would be living no differently from those sleeping comfortably mere blocks or even just floors away. In the shadow of boundless real estate development proliferating in Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Seattle, Kos and Shenk filmed the daily lives of more than two dozen subjects over three years to provide a slice-of-life portrayal of what it's like to experience homelessness in America today. Conceived as a two-part visual symphony shot in distinct production periods, the film opens a window into a parallel world hiding in plain sight and challenges the audience to feel the scale, scope and diversity of unsheltered America.

### CONTENT WARNING

This film includes depictions of **police and state violence & homelessness** that could trigger viewers. The film itself and this viewing guide contain **descriptions of violence, sexual assault and other trauma**. Please be thoughtful when introducing this content to your students and create a safe space for them to step away if they feel like it is necessary.

DIRECTED BY  
**Pedro Kos & Jon Shenk**

PRODUCED BY  
**Bonni Cohen  
Serin Marshall  
Richard Berge**

**(USA 2021) English,  
40 mins**

Netflix

## Subject Areas

- Critical Thinking
- English Language Arts
- Government
- History
- Political Education
- Social Emotional Growth and Development
- Social Justice Issues
- Social Studies

Recommended for grades 6-12. The film contains brief profanity and some adult themes.



## Teaching the Film

This short documentary directed by Jon Shenk (**An Inconvenient Sequel**) and Pedro Kos (**The Great Hack**) captures the lives and stories of people experiencing homelessness in Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Seattle. By weaving a tapestry of diverse individual stories with evocative details of contemporary urban life, the short aims to humanize this overwhelming issue through the eyes of those living on the streets, and ultimately to challenge stereotypes, and shift the audience's perspectives about this misunderstood and often-ignored, but ever-growing social crisis.



**Pedro Kos'** latest documentary feature film **Rebel Hearts**, which he directed, wrote, and edited premiered in the U.S. Documentary Competition at the 2021 Sundance Film Festival and was released worldwide by Discovery+. Prior to that he wrote and produced Jehane Noujaim and Karim Amer's Netflix Original Documentary **The Great Hack** which premiered at the 2019 Sundance Film Festival and was nominated for a BAFTA award. His feature directorial debut **Bending the Arc** (co-directed with Kief Davidson) premiered at the 2017 Sundance Film Festival. Previously, he edited Jehane Noujaim's Academy Award nominee **The Square** which earned Pedro an Emmy Award for Best Editing for a Non-Fiction program, Lucy Walker's Academy Award nominee **Waste Land** and **The Crash Reel** (2013 SXSW Film Festival Audience Award winner), Jon Shenk's **The Island President** (2011 TIFF Documentary People's Choice Award winner) among others. Pedro is from Rio de Janeiro, Brazil and received his B.A. in Theater Directing from Yale University.



**Jon Shenk** recently co-directed the Emmy award winning **Athlete A** with his film partner, Bonni Cohen. **Athlete A** (Netflix) premiered at the 2020 Tribeca Film Festival and has been nominated for two Emmy Awards. Jon co-directed and photographed **An Inconvenient Sequel: Truth to Power** (Participant Media/Paramount) which premiered on opening night of the Sundance Film Festival in 2017, was shortlisted for the 2018 Oscars, and was nominated for a 2018 BAFTA for Best Documentary. In 2016, Jon co-directed and photographed the Peabody Award-winning film **Audrie & Daisy** (Netflix), which premiered in competition at the 2016 Sundance Film Festival. In 2011, Jon directed **The Island President** (Goldwyn Films), winner of the 2011 TIFF's People's Choice Award and IDA's Pare Lorentz Award. Jon was awarded the 2004 Independent Spirit Award for directing **Lost Boys of Sudan** (Shadow Distribution/PBS), served as the DP for the 2008 Academy Award-winning **Smile Pinki** and won an Emmy for **Blame Somebody Else** (PBS), 2007.



# Discussion Questions

## BEFORE THE FILM

Do you believe housing a human right? What factors have helped you form that belief?

Do you think you and your family have the responsibility to care about and stand up for your houseless neighbors?

### UNIVERSAL DECLARATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS, ARTICLE 25

Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control.

**-General Assembly of the United Nations  
December 10, 1948**

Do you interact with the houseless people in your neighborhoods and communities? Why or why not?

What stereotypes has our society developed about houseless individuals? Are the stereotypes true?

## AFTER THE FILM

How did the film make you feel? What are your immediate thoughts about it?

Did it change the way you think about houselessness? Why or why not?

How do you think the expansion of big tech in these West Coast cities contributes to spikes in houselessness?

If you have never experienced houselessness personally, did this film help you understand what it would feel like to live without stable housing? Did you empathize with the houseless folks in the film? Why or why not?

Does this film make you reconsider your relationship to the houseless people you interact with on a regular or irregular basis?

When the film opens, we see the main characters before we hear any of them speak or introduce themselves. Do you remember what your first judgments were of the characters? What did you automatically assume about them?

Why do you think the directors chose to introduce the audience to the documentary participants through something as intimate as a "Vulnerability Assessment"?



## Discussion Questions

At 7:46, the documentary participant who is living in their car with their children says, "You know what's funny... when you gradually get into an extreme situation it doesn't seem as extreme." What does this insight from the participant make you feel?

There is a short scene from 8:06 to 10:03, where government officials discuss the problems their communities are having with homelessness. What did this scene show you? How are city officials tackling the issue of finding housing for the unsheltered community members that they have been hired to serve? Do the officials seem to be invested in finding a solution?

At 11:12, the person behind the camera asks several participants "How did you end up homeless"? Did the participant's answers shock you at all?

Do you think the police and other city employees have the right to move camps and throw away the belongings of people who are living outside? Why or why not?

- For further context, [read this article](#) from Sept 2021 regarding the U.S. appeals court's decision on seizing and discarding houseless people's bulky property.

At 30:20, one documentary participant says that homelessness "can happen to anybody". How does that make you feel? Do you think that is true? If homelessness can happen to anybody, then what does that say about the system we all live under and how it treats us?

Why do you think the film ended with the line "On any given night over half a million Americans experience homelessness." What does that number mean to you?

The film starts off by informing us that in the five years prior to 2020, Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Seattle have all declared states of emergency due to the amount of people who have been forced into homelessness within their cities. By the end of the film, what actions had you seen the cities take to solve that emergency?

"[The documentary participants] were not only so generous, but also really incredibly wise to want to share their stories, because they understood that by doing so they would be helping to tell a larger story that could help break down the invisible barriers and walls that divide us. They really got that and wanted to be involved."

- **Pedro Kos** (Co-Director of **Lead Me Home**)



# Discussion Questions

One of the common misunderstandings about being without stable housing is that for each person there is one inciting moment that goes wrong that causes them to lose their home. While this may be true for a few people, the majority cite many contributing factors. Did you see evidence of this in the film? What kinds of things went wrong for the documentary participants that lead them to houselessness?

"If we suddenly found ourselves without a home, we would do what human beings do, which is to try to figure out a way to create some sanctuary for ourselves so that we could sleep, so that we could eat, so that we can go to the bathroom, so that we can socialize and have safety. And so that remained a North Star for us throughout the filming, to create visual language that would allow the audience to be reminded that the cycle of the day for those of us who are fortunate enough to have homes to go to at the end of the day is actually not that dissimilar to the cycle of people on the streets, in terms of what we aim to achieve."

- Jon Shenk (Co-Director of **Lead Me Home**)

## FILMMAKING STYLE

What filmmaking techniques do the filmmakers use to establish the difference in lifestyle between housed and unhoused people?

Why do you think the filmmakers choose to include so many wide shots of the landscape throughout the film?

How do the filmmakers help the audience draw conclusions about the state of houselessness in these cities using only visual clues?

How is the film's score used to evoke feeling?

What moods does the film's color-grading evoke in you?

How does the long drone shot from 9:24 to 10:03 make you feel? Why do you think the filmmakers chose to include this long take?

What techniques do the filmmakers use to visually represent class divide and wealth disparities?





# Continue Your Research

Do some research on [Bill Nichols six modes of documentary](#)—poetic, expository, reflexive, observational, performative, and participatory. In which mode would you classify this documentary? Does it occupy space in more than one mode? What traits from the film helped you classify its mode?

Read this 2019 report on “[California’s Housing and Homelessness Challenges in Context](#)” written by Legislative Analyst’s Office.

Explore [data on houselessness state-by-state](#) using this report from the National Alliance to End Homelessness.

How does [gentrification](#) lead to displacement?

Learn about cycles of homelessness and [what causes homelessness in America](#).

Listen to ‘[We the Unhoused](#)’, a podcast hosted and produced by Theodore Henderson, an unhoused Angeleno that strives to elevate the voice of the unhoused in the media and talk to them, not at them.

Read reporting that is written by and for unhoused people as well as their advocates.

- For 25 years, [International Network of Street Papers](#) has supported the street paper movement to help tens of thousands of homeless vendors each year to earn an income and improve their lives. On their site, they have an interactive map

highlighting the [Street Papers of the world](#) that they partner with.

- [Street Spirit](#) is a monthly newspaper that is sold by homeless people in Berkeley and Oakland.
- [Street Sheet](#) is published by the [Coalition on Homelessness](#), a policy and advocacy organization that fights for housing justice and human rights of San Franciscans.
- [Real Change](#) exists to provide opportunity and a voice to low-income and homeless people in the Seattle area, while taking action for economic, social and racial justice.
- [LA CAN](#) organizes community residents to work collectively to change the relationships of power and has multiple publications created with and for the houseless populations in LA.

The politicians in the short scene from 33:36 - 34:36 seem to have a lot to say about how hard “solving homelessness” is, but they don’t have very many strategic plans to end homelessness in their cities. What do you think is stopping them from finding the answers? Do some research and see if you can find any [solutions](#) or [policy changes](#) that have been proposed. What solutions do you think would work? Do you have any other ideas that you think would help get people off the streets and keep them in stable housing long term?



# Activities

## UNDERSTANDING SOCIAL WELFARE

Students frequently mistake people without homes for welfare recipients. Although many people without homes are unemployed, there are others who have jobs but still cannot afford housing. It is imperative that these misconceptions be clarified. As a class or in small groups, define the following terms to help students understand how social welfare programs work nationally and in your state.

\* Be sure to set explicit expectations and create a safe space for this activity. Unfortunately, there is often a social stigma around social welfare programs. Since some of your students and their families may rely on these programs, it is important to make clear to your class that being respectful about these topics is mandatory for participation in this activity.

- Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF)
- Food Stamps
- Median Income
- Poverty (Look up what the poverty line is in your state, county, and city)
- Social Security
- Supplemental Security Income
- Welfare
- WIC

## DIFFERENT TYPES OF HOMES

Take a walk and observe types of homes. Look at pictures of homes in different parts of the world. Discuss the similarities and differences. Discuss with students other homes and families that they have visited. Make an individual or group collage of different kinds of homes. Have students discuss what different types of homes. Why are there

different types of homes?

## CONSTRUCTING CITY POLICIES

What was going through your mind when you heard the woman on screen (at 24:13) talking about her experience being homeless with her children? What public resources was she able to access? What was she not able to access? How did she help her kids cope while she was getting her family through that traumatic situation?

- Imagine you are an elected official in Seattle and you have the power to create new city policies to help protect families that might be vulnerable to losing their housing. What policies, laws, or protections would you put in place in order to protect this woman and prevent families like hers from experiencing houselessness in the first place? This might be a good place to start your brainstorming.

Listen to a few episodes of '[We the Unhoused](#)', a podcast hosted and produced by Theodore Henderson, an unhoused Angeleno that strives to elevate the voice of the unhoused in the media and talk to them, not at them. In groups or as individuals, have students research topics around houselessness, affordable housing, housing policy, welfare, social security, systemic oppression or poverty. Ask them to write and record a podcast episode with information that they gather. Anchor is a free app that can help students create and distribute their podcasts.

Extension: Gather all of the students' podcast episodes and release them as a class. Depending on your situation, you could choose to monetize the pod, and any profits could be donated to a local grassroots organization that is helping to end housing insecurity, or '[We the Unhoused](#)' itself!



# Get Involved!

**Brainstorm** ways in which you and your students can be better neighbors to the houseless populations in your communities. Students have a natural desire to help others. Taking action to stop houselessness empowers students, familiarizes them with the community, and makes real the content of any classroom lesson. Here are some ideas of **actions** you and your students can take as a class.

- **Contact a local shelter or soup kitchen** to see what items are needed. Many shelters can accept only limited amounts of clothes, but toiletries (toothbrushes, shaving cream, shampoo, etc.) are often in short supply. Collect the items and deliver them to the shelter.
- Have students **contribute one story book** each and bring them to a shelter for families. Other items to collect might be school supplies or toys.
- **Have a fundraiser** to benefit a local agency that works with the homeless.
- **Create artwork that has an impact.** Some possible themes might be “Everyone Deserves A Home,” “Share The Wealth” or “We Need More Houses.” Frame them in cardboard, and set them up at a shelter or soup kitchen.
- Reach out to a shelter where families stay. **Write letters** to the kids staying there.
- **Create a bulletin board of articles** on houselessness, affordable housing, welfare, health care, poverty, and other related issues.

Post them where students from other classes can see them, or make a presentation to other classes.

- **Write an article** for a local or school newspaper about what your class found out about housing, poverty, and people without homes.
- **Write to leaders and representatives** in your state, county, or city. Express your opinions on the solutions to the problems that cause people to lose their housing.

**Follow-up:** Have students write or draw about the experience, and send a thank-you letter, if appropriate.

**Extension:** Make it an annual or quarterly event to cooperate with a local agency. Homelessness is a community-wide problem requiring a community-wide response.



# Common Core Standards

## ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS

### College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Reading

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.1-3

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.7-9

### College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Writing

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.W.1-2

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.W.4-9

### College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Speaking and Listening

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.SL.1-6

### Reading: Informational Text

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.6-12.1-3

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.6-12.6-9

### Writing

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.WHST.6-12.1-9

### Speaking & Listening

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.6-12.1-6

## Language

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.6-12.3-6

## History/Social Studies

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-12.1-9

## Science & Technical Subjects

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RST.6-12.1-2

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RST.6-12.7-9



# 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.

## **MEDIUM: All media is constructed.**

- What is the message? How is it delivered? In what format?
- What technologies are used to present the message?
- What visual and auditory elements comprise the media content?
- 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)?
- What biases might the author have?

## **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?

## **PURPOSE: All media messages are constructed for a reason.**

- Why was the message constructed?
- Who benefits from dissemination of the message? How do they benefit?
- To what extent does the message achieve its purpose?
- What effect does the message have on the audience it reaches, if any?



# 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 genocidal political message not rooted in 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. However, no film is ever made in a vacuum, and even observational documentaries will portray the biases of the filmmaker(s).

Modern documentaries often seek to raise awareness about a social, environmental or political issue, guiding their audiences toward civic in which they are all edited together.

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.

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.



# A Brief Timeline of Documentary

**1895** - The Lumiere brothers develop the first motion picture film reels, capturing brief unedited clips of life around them called 'actualities.'

**1900-1920** - Travelogue or 'scenic' films become popular showcasing exoticized images from around the globe.

**1919** - Russian filmmaker Dziga Vertov issues a manifesto calling for a new style of cinematic reportage that documents real life. Rather than relying on fanciful scripts and artificial acting, Vertov insists that the future of cinema depends on reporting the truth.

**1922** - Robert Flaherty films **Nanook Of The North**, generally cited as the first feature-length documentary. The film employs many of the conventions of later documentary and ethnographic filmmaking, including use of third-person narration and subjective tone, and a focus on an indigenous person as the film's hero.

**1926** - Dziga Vertov, with the Soviet Kino Pravda movement, released the experimental nonfiction film, **Man With A Movie Camera**. The film uses experimental editing techniques and cinematic innovations to portray a typical day in Moscow from dawn to dusk. Rather than simply recording reality, however, Vertov attempts to transform and enlighten it through the power of the camera's "kino-glaz" (cinéma eye).

**1935** - German filmmaker Leni Riefenstahl is commissioned by Adolph Hitler to film the annual Nazi Party rally of 1934. The resulting film, **Triumph of the Will**, is a landmark both in documentary technique and in the use of film as an astonishingly powerful propaganda medium.

**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 the support of war.

**1960s** - The 'cinéma vérité' movement began in Europe. Portable cameras and sync sound allowed filmmakers to move freely and capture intimate footage.

**1968** - The Argentine film, **La Hora de los Hornos**, opened the door to activist cinema of the 1970s, using film as a tool to counter capitalist politics.

**1968** - Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) established.

**The late 60's and 70's** and later decades see shifts in the narrative approach of many documentaries. Although cinéma vérité, third-person narrative and other earlier documentary forms continue, first-person video storytelling, fueled by the flood of camcorders into the marketplace in the 1970's and after, begins to emerge as something of a unique genre.

**1973** - PBS series, **An American Family**, the precursor of what would later be called "reality TV" shows, provides a close-up, vérité view of Loud family.

**1990** - Filmmaker Ken Burns' eleven-hour documentary series, **The Civil War** is aired on five consecutive nights on PBS. The series achieves the highest ratings ever for PBS, averaging more than 14 million viewers each evening.

## 2000s and Beyond

The widespread use of social media, digital cameras, and editing softwares continues to make the documentary medium more affordable and accessible to independent filmmakers all over the world. The term 'documentary' has come to encompass a wide range of nonfiction filmmaking.