

# FROM FACT TO FICTION



GRADES 7-12

## CLASSROOM GUIDE

USING  
THIS GUIDE ▶

ABOUT  
THE FILMS ▶

DISCUSSION  
QUESTIONS &  
POST-VIEWING  
ACTIVITIES ▶

MEDIA LITERACY  
RESOURCES ▶

SUPPLEMENTAL  
RESOURCES ▶

## TEACHING THE FILMS:

Collected from around the world, this compilation of short films explores a variety of storytelling techniques, from an observational documentary about the presidential inauguration and its resulting protests to an animated tale about the strangest and possibly sweetest summer camp ever. This collection gives students the perfect smorgasbord of all the SFFILM Festival has to offer.

78 minutes

## USING THIS GUIDE

This study guide is intended to flexibly support educators in preparing for and following a class screening of the From Fact to Fiction program.

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.

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. Please direct all comments and queries to Keith Zwölfer, Associate Director of Education:

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## SERIES DISCUSSION GUIDE

1. Which film in this series was your favorite? Why?
2. Which film in this series was your least favorite? Why?
3. Which film in this series do you think was the most challenging to make? Why?
4. Many of these films are about art and creativity. Which of these films presented an artist whom you found inspiring?
  - a. How does Jem Cohen use the art of filmmaking to express his political views?
  - b. What makes MC Zumbi a true artist? What does he feel is the purpose of his work?
  - c. What do you think Real Artists is saying about the relationship between creativity and automation?
  - d. How does art inspire an outlet for sadness in Scrap Dolls?
  - e. Victor + Isolina is made in an unusual style with a split screen. How does this artistic decision make way for the story to unfold?
5. Many of these films are stories about family. Did any of these stories remind you of families that you know? Did you identify with any of these characters?
  - a. Describe the relationship between the grandparents that you meet in Victor + Isolina. How do these grandparents show their affection for one another? For their grandson?

## WHICH FILM IN THIS SERIES WAS YOUR FAVORITE?

- b. Happy Birthday Mario Woods is a very sad story about a mother's grief for her lost son. How does Mario's mother express her love now that her son is gone? How does love give her strength?
- c. In Summer Camp Island, Oscar misses his parents, but he is also dealing with some more present problems. How does Oscar realize that missing his parents isn't his biggest issue?
- d. How does MC Zumbi's family life factor into his identity and career as a hip hop artist? How does his love for his children enter his professional life?
7. These films introduce the audience to stories that might not otherwise be told.
  - a. Why do you think it's important to hear these stories?
- b. Were you surprised by any of the stories that you saw here?
- c. Which films had the most compelling characters? How did the filmmakers use the film form to put you inside the character's world?
- d. Did you want to know more about any of these characters?
8. What words would you use to describe this series as a whole?
  - a. What common themes can you find?
  - b. Do you think these films were interesting to watch together?
  - c. Did any seem out of place?



## BIRTH OF A NATION:

### SYNOPSIS

Against Cohen takes his observational camera style to Donald Trump's presidential inauguration and to the next day's protests.  
(Jem Cohen, USA 2016, 10 min)

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1) What are the political leanings of this film? How can you tell? Are the film's politics subtle or overt?
- 2) The film's title, Birth of a Nation, makes reference to The Birth of a Nation, a 1915 silent epic notorious for its racism. Why do you think Jem Cohen chose this title for his short film?
- 3) What does Birth of a Nation capture in its tone and its footage? Do you think it will be different to watch this film in ten years? How about in 100 years?

## BOOMBOX COLLECTION: ZION I:

### SYNOPSIS

A An intimate portrait peering into the minds of a pioneering "working class" Hip Hop artist, Bay Area MC Zumbi, who has been steadfast in his choice not to rap about "money and power" and instead shares his knowledge and wisdom at the cost of mainstream acceptance.  
(Mohammad Gorjestani, USA 2016, 10 min)

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1) Describe MC Zumbi, the star of the film. What does he care about most?
- 2) What is MC Zumbi's relationship to mainstream hip hop? What does he feel is the purpose of his music? How does this differ from music that goes to the top of the charts?
- 3) How does MC Zumbi want people to think about his music? Were you impressed with his skills? What did you think of his song at the end of the film?

## HAPPY BIRTHDAY MARIO WOODS

### SYNOPSIS

A bereaved mother in San Francisco's Bayview neighborhood tends the grave of her son and remembers his life.  
(Mohammad Gorjestani, USA 2017, 6 min)

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1) Who is Mario Woods and what happened to him? Why is it important to say his name and to remember him?
- 2) How do the filmmakers present the struggle of Mario's mother. Do you feel for her as you watch this film? Why is it important to tell her story?
- 3) How does this film's coverage of Mario's life and death differ from the way the mainstream media reported on the story?
- 4) What role can documentary filmmaking play in building empathy and telling stories from angles that would otherwise go unreported?

## REAL ARTISTS:

### SYNOPSIS

Sophia, an ambitious and idealistic animator, interviews for a dream job at a top film studio and discovers the hidden secrets of success.  
(Cameo Wood, USA 2017, 12 min)

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1) Describe Sophia. What does she care about? Can you relate to her?
- 2) What conflict does Sophia face when she learns the secret of her dream job? How does she respond to that test of her values?
- 3) What comment is this film making about creativity in the age of big data? Is this a timely comment?
- 4) Do you think Sophia will ever agree to work for this evil company? Can they trick her?





## SCRAP DOLLS:

### SYNOPSIS

On the east side of Detroit, an 11-year-old boy grieves over the recent loss of his best friend. A chance encounter with a short-tempered folk artist, who makes sculptures out of abandoned objects, provides him with the inspiration to come up with a creative way to honor the memory of his pal.

(Aude Cuenod, USA 2016, 14 min)

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1) Describe the setting of this film. Is this boy living in a happy place? How does the landscape reflect his mood?
- 2) What is the boy's first reaction when he meets the sculptor? What is the sculptor's reaction when he meets the boy?
- 3) How does art provide an outlet for the boy's sadness? What does the sculpture allow him to do for his friend?
- 4) How does the sculptor change his mind about the boy? Why does he decide to make a doll for him?
- 5) Is there a message in this film?

## SUMMER CAMP ISLAND:

### SYNOPSIS

At this summer camp, pajamas can talk, marshmallows can sing, and there are no parents, but all Oscar wants is to spend a normal night with Hedgehog, his friend and summertime crush.

(Julia Pott, USA 2016 9 min)

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1) What is going on at Summer Camp Island. Why is it so weird?
- 2) How does Oscar begin to understand his emotions?
- 3) What happens in the end of this film? If you were writing this story, would you end it differently? Why or why not?

## VALLEY OF A THOUSAND HILLS:

### SYNOPSIS

Deep in the rural South African village of Isithumba, a group of Zulu boys growing up with a vastly different outlook on life from their elders, have been learning to skateboard through the Indogo Skate Camp enrichment program.

(Jess Colquhoun, South Africa/United Kingdom 2016, 11 min)

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1) Describe the kids in this film. What are their lives like? What do they care about?
- 2) Were you surprised to see skaters in Africa? How are they like skaters in your community and how are they different?
- 3) What does skating give to these kids? Is the Indogo Skate Camp just about skating, or does it teach other things too?

## VICTOR & ISOLINA:

### SYNOPSIS

He said, she said. Different sides of the same story—of why Victor and Isolina separated after 50 years together—are argued between the divided screen.

(Willian D. Caballero, USA 2016, 6 min)

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1) Describe the animation style in this film. Do you like this style of storytelling?
- 2) Who are the characters, Victor and Isolina? Do you like them? Do you find them funny?
- 3) How does the split screen effect allow Victor and Isolina to have a conversation, even though they're separated. Do you think this was a good choice for the film? Why or why not?



## POST-VIEWING ACTIVITIES:

### 1) Make Your Own Short Film:

Drawing inspiration from the films, choose a person in your life who inspires you, and create a short film that profiles that inspiring person.

- Write a logline—a brief outline of the plot, meaning and message of your film (three sentences).
- Build your logline into a treatment, a short summary of what happens in your film (one paragraph to one page).
- Write a screenplay for a three to five minute film. It should be three to five pages long and include at least one character. Focus your screenplay around a single climatic event, with rising conflict.
- Using your phone or a small, handheld camera, go out and shoot your film. You can bring a friend or work in a small team, or you can shoot alone with your main character.
- Use a free video editing software like [Pixorial](#) or [WeVideo](#) to cut your footage into a film. You can add music if you want.
- Congratulations! You just made a film! Share your film with your class and your friends and family.



## 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?</p> <p>What technologies are used to present the message?</p> <p>What visual and auditory elements are used?</p> <p>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?</p> <p>Who originally constructed the message?</p> <p>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?</p> <p>What information, values, emotions or ideas are conveyed by the media content?</p> <p>What tools does the author employ to engage the viewer and evoke a response?</p> <p>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?</p> <p>For whom is the message intended?</p> <p>What is the public reaction to the media content and/or its message?</p> <p>What is your reaction to the media content and/or its message?</p> <p>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?</p> <p>Who benefits from dissemination of the message? How?</p> <p>To what extent does the message achieve its purpose?</p> <p>What effect does the message have on the audience it reaches, if any?</p>



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SUPPLEMENTAL RESOURCES  
REVIEWS

## 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 exoticised 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.



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## 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 ANIMATED FILM WHAT IS ANIMATION?

Animation is a process used to create motion pictures through the combination of still images (e.g., digital graphics, photographs of drawings, photographs of objects, etc.) which, when played in sequence, create the illusion of movement. All television cartoons, for example, are animations, and are made up of thousands of still images (drawn by hand or on a computer) that are played sequentially, along with a soundtrack, to tell a story.

### TYPES OF ANIMATION

#### 2D Animation Techniques

- Classic animation (e.g., Disney's *The Lion King*, most TV cartoons)
- Rotoscope (e.g., *Star Wars* lightsabers)
- Flip books

#### 3D Animation Techniques

- 3D animation (e.g., Pixar's *Toy Story*, *Wall-E*, *Up*)
- Stereoscopic 3D (e.g., *Avatar*)
- Cut-out / Silhouette animation (e.g., *South Park*)

#### Stop Motion Techniques

- Claymation (e.g., Nick Park's *Wallace and Gromit*)
- Puppet animation (e.g., Tim Burton's *The Nightmare Before Christmas*, *Coraline*)

### HISTORY OF ANIMATION

The world's most famous animator, Walt Disney, began making short animated cartoons based on children's stories in 1923. In 1928 he introduced Mickey Mouse in the first animated sound cartoon, *Steamboat Willie*, which became an immediate sensation. Throughout the next decade, Disney would add such elements as carefully synchronized music (*The Skeleton Dance*, 1929),

Technicolor (*Flowers and Trees*, 1932), and the illusion of depth with his multi-plane camera (*The Old Mill*, 1937), a device that allowed for animated cels to be photographed against a three-dimensional background. Although not the first animated feature, Disney's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937) was the first to use up-to-the-minute techniques and the first to receive widespread release. The film's success can be attributed in part to Disney's willingness to use animation to create a profound dramatic experience. He strove for photographic realism in films such as *Pinocchio* (1940), *Dumbo* (1941) and *Bambi* (1942).

The success of television cartoons led to the virtual disappearance of animated shorts produced for theatrical release. Animated feature-length films, however, flourished, especially after the release of Disney's *The Little Mermaid* (1989), regarded by many as the studio's best animated feature in decades. Other Disney blockbusters followed, including *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), *Aladdin* (1992), *The Lion King* (1994) and *Lilo & Stitch* (2002).

The development of computer animation was another great advancement in the form and resulted in feature films of astounding visual sumptuousness. In 1995, *Toy Story* was the first film to use only computer-generated imagery (CGI). In 2001 the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences added a new Academy Award for Best Animated Feature Film. The first recipient of the award was *Shrek* (2001). Other major animated features were *Toy Story* (1995) and *Toy Story 2* (1999), *A Bug's Life* (1998), *Monsters, Inc.* (2001) and *Finding Nemo* (2003).

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