

REPRESENTING DIFFERENT VOICES

Scottish documentarian John Grierson believed that documentaries could be an important part of the democratic process. By dramatizing the issues facing citizens, documentaries can give ordinary people information they need to participate thoughtfully in government. Documentaries also inform viewers about individuals, groups or issues that have been overlooked or ignored by mainstream media.



THE DECLINE OF WESTERN CIVILIZATION (1981) focused on the burgeoning punk rock music scene of Los Angeles in the late 1970s. Courtesy of Spherisfilms.

Political documentaries are made by filmmakers who support certain policies, interest groups or political parties, or who are interested in exploring particular issues. They may also be made by governments or government organizations to explain or develop support for government programs.

War films are a special



PRELUDE TO WAR (1942), directed by Frank Capra, used animation over confiscated enemy newsreel footage to illustrate its point of view. Photo from the Margaret Herrick Library Collection, AMPAS.

type of documentary. They can be used to draw people into the war effort, to report on the progress of the war, to criticize the enemy and to address problems after the war is over. Other documentaries protest against war or publicize war crimes and atrocities.

Watch the political documentary your teacher has chosen. What is the title of the film?

What is the key message of the documentary?

How does the filmmaker present this message?

Summarize the arguments for and against the subject of the film.

From whose point of view is the film told?

Who is telling the story? Is it the filmmaker or someone in the film?

Do you agree with John Grierson that documentaries are a good way to prepare citizens to participate in the democratic process? Why or why not?
