Best Documentaries

Disclosure (2020)

Photo: Courtesy Everett Collection

Trans history is the subject of this documentary by actress and executive producer Laverne Cox, and the amount of territory it covers is truly remarkable; trans identity is all too frequently sold short in mainstream media, and *Disclosure* celebrates trans joy while acknowledging the limits of pop-culture representation. “We’ve all been acclimated to a culture that has devalued the lives of trans folks, and we often deeply internalize that, whether we're trans or not: *Disclosure* is a disruption of that, and it's a way to begin intervene and think and live differently,” Cox told *Vogue* shortly after the film's release.

My Octopus Teacher (2020)

Photo: Courtesy Everett Collection

Filmmaker Craig Foster documents his experience of forging an unlikely (to say the least) friendship with an octopus in a cold underwater kelp forest near Cape Town, South Africa in this surprisingly heartwarming breakout hit. The bond between the human-octopus pair makes little sense on its

surface, but as the film goes on, you'll find yourself genuinely empathizing—and probably never viewing seafood the same way again.

American Factory (2019)

The most surprising thing about this exploration of globalism and the American working class from filmmakers Steven Bognar and Julia Reichert is how relentlessly gripping it is. When a GM factory closes near Dayton, Ohio, in 2008 the economic fallout looks disastrous—an entire community thrown out of work—until a Chinese company, Fuyao, comes to the rescue, six years later. Fuyao resuscitates the shuttered factory as an auto-glass plant, but what happens next will confound any easy political narratives about the winners and losers of global capitalism. *American Factory,* the first film from Barack and Michelle Obama's Higher Ground Productions and a best-documentary Oscar winner in 2020 is a complex, exceedingly human and intelligent look at the collision of cultures, the meaning of freedom, and the future of labor.

Honeyland (2019)

Photo: Ljubomir Stefanov / Courtesy Everett Collection

Honeyland is a film that unfolds in an alternately expansive and claustrophobic register. On the one hand, there is the wild and craggy Macedonian landscape, a place untouched by modern development or convenience; on the other, there is the almost cave-like dwelling in which Hatidže, the bee keeper at the story's center, lives with her bedridden mother. Hatidže's orbit widens with the occasional trip to the country's capital, Skopje, where she sells her carefully collected honey and buys hair dye to keep up her appearance, but her life is largely limited—that is, until a brash and rough-and-tumble family arrives with intentions to move in on the precarious livelihood Hatidže is eking out from her bees. The filmmakers, who distilled 400-plus hours of footage into a taught film, could not have known that this drama would become a parable between old and new, tradition and modernity, but the film is all the more captivating for it.

Dark Money (2018)

Photo: PBS/Courtesy Everett Collection

"Kimberly Reed's documentary tackles a knotty legal subject: the history (and vital importance of) campaign finance reform, the repercussions of the 2010 *Citizens United* Supreme Court ruling, and who is pulling the strings when it comes to our elected officials" *Vogue* wrote in 2018. "It should probably be required viewing for American citizens."

McQueen (2018)

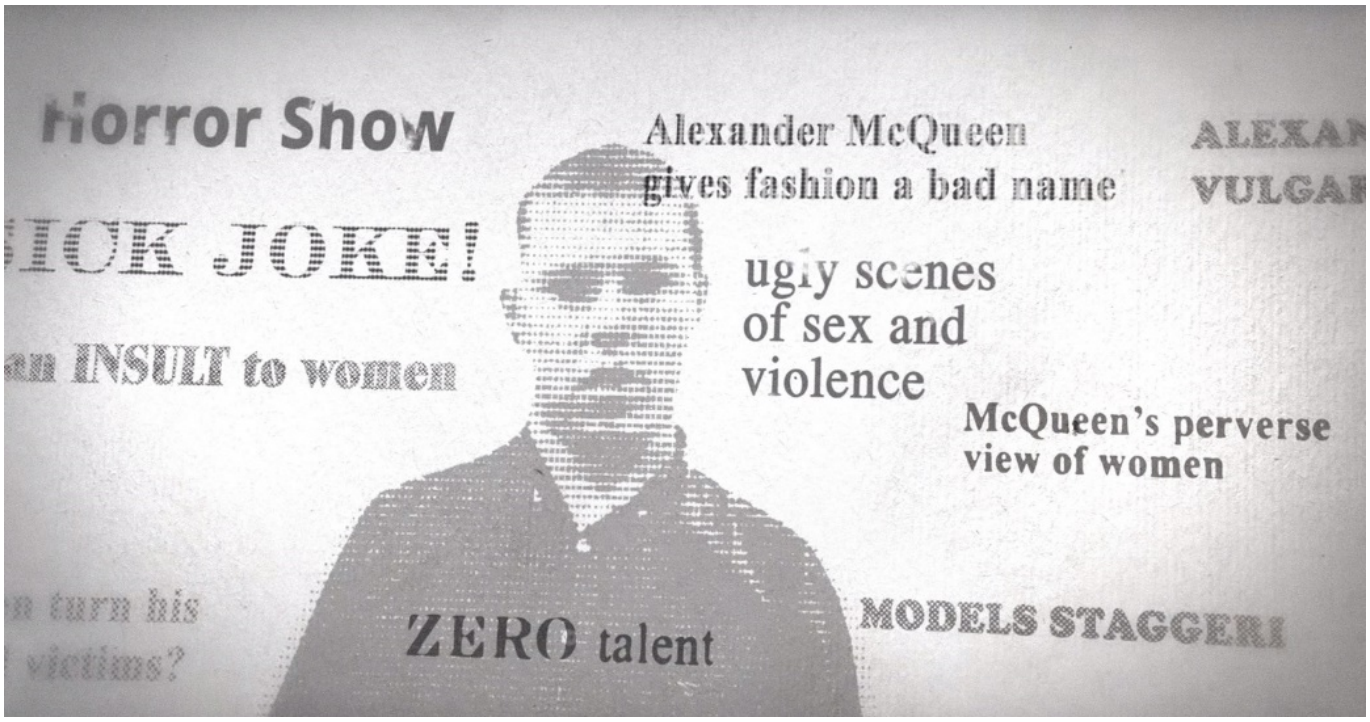

Photo: Courtesy Everett Collection

Culled from archival clips from close to 200 sources, along with new interviews and original material, Ian Bonhôte and Peter Ettedgui's documentary is shaped around five of Alexander McQueen's intricately wrought, high-concept collections, conjuring his life as much personally as aesthetically. The film delivers a staggering visual feast in the footage of these runway shows, rarely seen by those outside the fashion world, and the emotional punch of witnessing an exuberant talent headed toward self-destruction.

Robin Williams: Come Inside My Mind (2018)

Marina Zenovich (whose prior directorial credits include documentaries about Richard Pryor and Roman Polanski) began working on a documentary about Robin Williams about a year after his death, and soon joined forces with Alex Gibney, who came on board as a co-producer. That collaboration yielded a sensitive, impressionistic look at Williams's meteoric rise to fame: Zenovich uses video footage of Williams's manic stage persona (including plenty of B-roll from his various TV and film projects) alongside found audio interviews that reveal the superstar comedian's quieter side. "A portrait coalesces of a man far more complex and less cuddly than those of us in the *Mrs. Doubtfire* generation may have imagined" Julia Felsenthal wrote in her review for *Vogue*.

Shirkers (2018)

Photo: Courtesy Everett Collection

Sandi Tan's *Shirkers* is one of those films that defies categorization: a coming-of-age story, a mystery, possibly the pieced-together remnants of a lost work of art. On a more basic level, the documentary tells the story of a teenage Sandi and her two friends, who set out to make "Singapore's first indie film" in the early '90s with an American film teacher, Georges, who would prove himself to be creepy for reasons beyond his eagerness to devote his free time to hanging around with a bunch of precocious and self-serious kids. The film doesn't devolve into the kind of icky tale you might suspect, however, instead becoming a complicated and entertaining meditation on originality, punctuated with footage from the film that the teenagers made. The story of the disappearance and recovery of that footage provides a whodunit tension to the film, while the footage itself—super-saturated in color, influenced by the offbeat indie films of the late '80s and early '90s—offers evidence of the originality behind the whole venture.

Won't You Be My Neighbor? (2018)

Photo: Jim Judkis / Courtesy Everett Collection

“Tolerance, kindness, empathy: These were the guiding principles of Mr. Rogers’s homespun program, which eschewed the kinetic high jinks of so much of kids’ television” *Vogue*’s Taylor Antrim wrote in his review of Morgan Neville’s exploration of Fred Rogers quietly radical life. The resulting film is not a biographical documentary, nor a manipulative tear-jerker, but an intelligent exploration of the late cultural icon’s ideas about self-worth, about facing (not running from) reality, his respectful notions of what even very young children can handle, and the profound effects of kindness.

Jane (2017)

Photo: Courtesy of National Geographic

Brett Morgen pieces together formerly lost footage shot by Jane Goodall’s first husband (the dashing *National Geographic* photographer Hugo van Lawick) in this critically lauded documentary about her early years observing chimpanzees in Tanzania’s Gombe Stream National Park; and, more generally, about wildlife conservation and sustainable development and environmental awareness, the crusades of her past three decades. Julia Felsenthal wrote for *Vogue*: “The effect is less a primer on Jane Goodall . . . than a nostalgia-soaked tone poem about life cycles, about humanity in its natural context, an impressionistic portrait of a scientist finding her métier, of a young woman coming into her own, and an incredibly intimate look at chimps being chimps.”

13th (2016)

Photo: Netflix

Ava DuVernay's unflinching dive into America's long history of racist mass incarceration is by no means an easy watch, but it should be required viewing nonetheless. The film interviews activists, academics, and politicians including Angela Davis, Michelle Alexander, and Jelani Cobb to get at the fundamental question of why the vast majority of incarcerated persons in the U.S. are Black; *Rolling Stone*'s Peter Travers called the documentary one of the "most explosive" of 2016, and for good reason.

Cameraperson (2016)

Photo: Lynsey Addario / Courtesy of Janus Films / Everett Collection

"*Cameraperson* is the work of a documentary cinematographer—Kirsten Johnson, who has collaborated with the likes of Laura Poitras and Michael Moore—but it's more a memoir than a straight-up documentary. Using footage from the various films she's shot for others, plus home videos of her mother mid-decline from Alzheimer's and of her twin toddlers, Johnson collages together an artful portrait of her life behind the camera. It's a deeply personal, moving film that asks provocative, important questions about the power and responsibility of documenting the lives of others," wrote *Vogue*'s Julia Felsenthal.

I Am Not Your Negro (2016)

Photo: Courtesy Everett Collection

In his 2016 Oscar-nominated film *I Am Not Your Negro*, the Haitian director Raoul Peck used the late great James Baldwin's last book—*Remember This House*, a triple biography of the lives and untimely deaths of civil rights leaders Medgar Evers, Martin Luther King Jr., and Malcolm X—as armature for a wide-ranging exploration of Blackness in America. "I want these three lives to bang against each other, as in truth they did, and use their dreadful journey as a means of instructing the people they loved so much, who betrayed them, and for whom they gave their lives," Baldwin wrote in a letter describing a project he would die before even really beginning (of stomach cancer, in 1987, with only 30 pages of notes).

Peck brings his subject back to life in archival footage and in readings of his work and correspondence by the actor Samuel L. Jackson. "The idea was, how do I come up with the ultimate Baldwin?" the director told *Vogue*'s Julia Felsenthal in 2016. "How do I make sure that everybody goes back to his writing?" His film ought to do just that. It's a remarkable tribute to a very remarkable subject, and an urgent reminder that Baldwin's radical thinking about race in America is as relevant today as it was in his lifetime—and, barring massive structural change and deep national self-reflection, will remain so into the future. "The question you got to ask yourself, the white population of this country's got to ask itself is: Why it was necessary to have a nigger in the first place?" Baldwin asks in one chilling bit of footage. "Because I'm not a nigger. I'm a man. But if you think I'm a nigger, it means you need it, and you got to find out why. And the future of the country depends on that."

Kate Plays Christine (2016)

Photo: Courtesy of Grasshopper Film / Everett Collection

On July 15, 1974, a 29-year-old anchor for a Sarasota, Florida, ABC local news affiliate named Christine Chubbuck interrupted her live broadcast to read the following statement: “In keeping with Channel 40’s policy of bringing you the latest in ‘blood and guts,’ and in living color, you are going to see another first—attempted suicide.” Chubbuck then held a gun to her head and pulled the trigger. In Robert Greene’s *Kate Plays Christine*, the actress Kate Lyn Sheil plays an actress named Kate preparing to portray Chubbuck in a biopic about her life; it’s a genre-bending, eerily affecting project, wherein Sheil does her own research into Chubbuck’s life story. Greene films that investigation, and it becomes, as *Vogue*’s Julia Felsenthal notes in her review, something of a double documentary—both about Chubbuck and about Sheil’s effort to understand and inhabit the character, and whether it’s morally decent to do so.

Kedi (2016)

Photo: Courtesy of Oscilloscope / Everett Collection

Ceyda Torun’s film offers a cat’s-eye view of Istanbul, where, since the Ottoman Empire, thousands of felines roam freely virtually everywhere and anywhere, peacefully coexisting with humans. *Kedi* “glides

around Istanbul's back alleys, boho enclaves, and rat-infested piers to show us the range of these characters," John Powers writes. "As Torun's nimble camera follows the cats doing their rounds—filching food, catching rats, scaring off interlopers—the film offers a glimpse of something richer and more poetic. We see that these cats aren't merely wondrous creatures in themselves, but that they enrich the whole city. They give the people around them a vision of another freer, wilder, more spontaneous form of life, one that can be easily lost in a huge, stressful, rapidly modernizing place like Istanbul."

O.J.: Made in America (2016)

Ezra Edelman's five-part docuseries for ESPN's *30 for 30* offers a thorough exploration of the sociological and historical context that made O.J. Simpson's not-guilty verdict—though a painful, blatant miscarriage of justice—nonetheless a civil rights victory for Black Angelenos long terrorized by both the police and the courts.

Weiner (2016)

Photo: Courtesy of Sundance Selects / Everett Collection

"Why did Anthony Weiner, the married U.S. congressman who resigned from office in the wake of a sexting scandal in 2011, decide two years later to run for mayor of New York? Why did he misconstrue the timeline of his improprieties despite the very real likelihood that more sexy pen pals would come forward? Why, for that matter, was he sending dick pics to strangers at all? And why did he let the documentarians Josh Kriegman and Elyse Steinberg film his entire mayoral run, even after his comeback plans tanked amid evidence of further sexting and the perturbing news that he conducted some of his cyber affairs under the nom de plume 'Carlos Danger'?" asked *Vogue*'s Julia Felsenthal in her review of Kriegman and Steinberg's film, and while answers are thin on the ground, Weiner's "compulsive, reckless desire to be seen no doubt worked in the filmmakers' favor," she writes. *Weiner* "is an uncomfortably zoomed-in, warts-and-all portrait of a man as compulsively, recklessly addicted to politics as he is to sexting with strangers."

A Poem Is a Naked Person (2015)

Les Blank's documentary about the legendary rock musician Leon Russell was filmed more than 40 years before it was released. The film about Russell, an enigmatic artist who played with the Beach Boys, Eric Clapton, Joe Cocker, and many, many more in his recording studio in northeast Oklahoma, was stalled due, in part, to a delay in securing all the music rights. (The director's son finally secured a theatrical release for the film in 2015.) Filled with priceless footage of Russell and his contemporaries performing, *A Poem Is a Naked Person* serves as an artifact of the most iconic years in rock 'n' roll history and unfolds like what *The New York Times* called a "jam session."

Amy (2015)

Photo: Alamy

Before Amy Winehouse became a superstar who famously spiraled out of control until her death in 2011, at age 27, from alcohol poisoning, she was a regular girl with a very extraordinary talent. Asif Kapadia's brilliant documentary, *Amy*, uses footage captured by her friends and family during the full scope of her stardom: its ascent, peak, and downward spiral. Part biography, part meditation on fame as humanity's favorite blood sport, in her review of the film, *Vogue*'s Julia Felsenthal wrote that "[Winehouse's] eventual death . . . is on us all, from her family and friends who didn't force her into early rehab, to her management and label who pushed her too hard, to her fans who wanted more of her than she could give, and to society at large, to our 24-hour news cycle that feeds on the personal tribulations of the stars we lionize. We loved her so much that we made her larger than life; but when that kind of celebrity proved too much for her to handle, when she began to slip away into addiction and self-destruction, we turned on her."

City of Gold (2015)

Photo: Courtesy Everett Collection

Laura Gabbert followed the beloved *Los Angeles Times* food critic Jonathan Gold for her 2015 documentary, which showed her subject—a titan of taste and talent—to be as multifaceted a man as he was a writer. (Gold was the first to win the Pulitzer Prize for food writing, largely because of his laser focus on L.A.'s regional immigrant food culture.) The film also serves as a love letter to Los Angeles, the place where Gold was born and raised and, excepting a stint in New York when he worked at *Gourmet* in the early aughts, where he made his life. Gold died in 2018 of pancreatic cancer; Gabbert's film now serves as the only way to experience the particular delight of his genius outside of his writing.

Going Clear: Scientology and the Prison of Belief (2015)

Alex Gibney's HBO film takes a deep dive into Scientology—with help from the definitive Scientology tome, by veteran *New Yorker* reporter Lawrence Wright—and the result is an excellent primer on the religion and its cloudy history, including the life of its founder, L. Ron Hubbard, and its current figureheads: among them, David Miscavige and Tom Cruise. Like Wright's book, Gibney's film revolves around the personal testimony of former Scientologists (like Paul Haggis, the director of *Crash*) who have left the organization and provide harrowing details about its reported repressive, exploitative practices. (If you needed proof of its far-reaching real-life repercussions, when the documentary landed on the shortlist for an Academy Award, the church of Scientology allegedly launched a smear campaign to influence Academy members.)

Citizenfour (2014)

Photo: Courtesy of RADiUS-TWC / Everett Collection

Much of Laura Poitras's Academy Award–winning film unfolds in a small, claustrophobia-inducing hotel room in Hong Kong. That's where Poitras and the journalist Glenn Greenwald met with the NSA contractor Edward Snowden, now occasionally referred to as the "most wanted man in the world." Poitras began filming mere minutes after meeting Snowden in person for the first time, and continued filming him as the impact of what he had leaked to her and her reporting partner, Greenwald, reverberated around the world. What follows is "riveting," Abby Aguirre wrote for *Vogue*, "in no small part because what we are witnessing is the human drama behind events we have already experienced as consumers of news." It's part documentary, part action thriller, part high-speed chase. It's also a look at how a few people came together to change the world as we know it—by revealing how it had really been the entire time.

20 Feet from Stardom (2013)

Photo: Courtesy of RADiUS-TWC / Everett Collection

The rare music documentary that's actually fun to watch, Morgan Neville's rousing, revelatory Academy Award–winning documentary explores the lives and careers of a handful of the music industry's most successful—if all too often unsung—players: backup singers. Relying on interviews and archival footage

from the likes of Mick Jagger, Bruce Springsteen, Prince, David Bowie, Sting, David Byrne, and Phil Spector, the film proves a rollicking tribute and provides a new perspective on some of the most familiar music of the past century.

Blackfish (2013)

Photo: Courtesy of Magnolia Picture / Everett Collection

"If you were in a bathtub for 25 years, don't you think you'd get a little psychotic?" That's a question that comes up in Gabriela Cowperthwaite's investigative look at the gap between SeaWorld's public image and behind-the-scenes reality when it comes to its treatment of its orcas, as seen through the case around Tilikum, a bull orca implicated in the deaths of three people. Though a difficult watch, *Blackfish* is notable less for its direction or its camera work than for its calm, reasoned argument, and its real-world results: Attendance at SeaWorld has plummeted since the film's premiere; the company has ended its controversial orca-breeding program and begun phasing out its "Shamu" show in California.

The Act of Killing (2012)

Drafthouse Films/courtesy Everett Collection

Joshua Oppenheimer's quixotic, vaguely psychedelic film is markedly unlike any other documentary you're ever likely to see about a genocide. Oppenheimer explores the mid-1960s massacre of communists and ethnic Chinese people in Indonesia (in which nearly half a million people died) by inviting some of the surviving (and proud) executioners to make their own movie about the events, and to tell the story through their own dramatic re-enactments. (They portray not only themselves, but also people they interrogated, tortured, and killed.) "The gusto with which [the documentary's central figure Anwar] Congo and his compatriots take to the project is jarring; this is grisly history as told by the victors," Jonah Weiner wrote in *The New Yorker*.

How to Survive a Plague (2012)

Photo: Courtesy of IFC Films/ Everett Collection

"The writer Jorge Luis Borges wrote that literature is both 'algebra and fire,' and the same is true of social activism," John Powers wrote of *How to Survive a Plague* in *Vogue*. Director David France uses footage from the late 1980s and early 1990s to present an inspiring portrait of the activists behind ACT UP and TAG—largely young gay men who believed they would die from HIV-related illness and fought to make sure others didn't—who managed to take this "plague" off the back burner where politicians preferred it.

The Queen of Versailles (2012)

Photo: Courtesy of Magnolia Pictures

When the photographer Lauren Greenfield began filming David Siegel, the owner of Westgate Resorts, and his wife, Jackie, in 2007, she was intending to document the couple's construction of the largest single-family home in the United States, a 90,000-square-foot French-château-by-way-of-Orlando McMansion that they'd taken to calling "Versailles." Then the financial crisis of 2008 hit. The result is a topsy-turvy and surprisingly sympathetic (if not without a sense of schadenfreude) take on the American Dream, boom and bust.

Searching for Sugarman (2012)

Photo: Courtesy of Sony Pictures/ Everett Collection

Malik Bendjelloul's film finds its focus in Sixto Rodriguez, a Bob Dylan–esque bard from 1960s Detroit who never quite made it in the American rock scene, but who, without his knowledge, became a music icon in South Africa. The film jets from Cape Town to Los Angeles to the Motor City, and in the process tells a great story too remarkable to spoil here. "Suffice it to say," writes *Vogue*'s film critic John Powers, "Rodriguez proves not only to be greater than his music, but also reveals that the difference between a popular singer and an unpopular one is often not the singer—but those who are listening."

Stories We Tell (2012)

Photo: Courtesy of Roadside Attractions/ Everett Collection

Though known for her roles in films like Doug Liman's *Go* and her direction of the moving drama *Away From Her* (starring Julie Christie), Sarah Polley's movingly personal documentary is something of a love letter to her parents—the retired English actor Michael Polley and the Canadian performer and TV personality Diane Polley, who died of cancer when Sarah was 11. The premise is rooted in Sarah's desire to make a movie piecing together her mother through the remembrances of her friends and family members. What arises instead is more than what the director bargained for, and what *The New York Times*'s Manohla Dargis called "an affecting documentary tale about a mother and wife who ached in many of the familiar ways, but didn't always follow the typical female playbook, which also gives her life the resonance of a mystery that's too good to spoil."

West of Memphis (2012)

Photo: Olivia Fougeirol / Courtesy of Sony Pictures Classics / Everett Collection

In 1994, three teenagers were convicted of murdering three young boys in West Memphis, whose bodies apparently showed signs of torture and ritual assault. Prosecutors mounted a lurid court case that portrayed the crimes as a part of a satanic ritual carried out by alienated teenagers who dressed in black and listened to heavy metal, one of whom had a “goth” hairstyle. Beginning with an examination into the police investigation, filmmaker Amy Berg brings to light new evidence surrounding the arrest and conviction of Damien Echols, Jason Baldwin, and Jessie Misskelley. All three were teens at the time and lost 18 years of their lives after being wrongly convicted and imprisoned.

Jiro Dreams of Sushi (2011)

Photo: Courtesy of Magnolia Pictures/ Everett Collection

In *Jiro Dreams of Sushi*, the then-28-year-old director David Gelb descends into a Tokyo subway station and finds a three-Michelin-starred, 10-seat sushi restaurant, Sukiyabashi Jiro, helmed by 85-year-old chef and owner, Jiro. The documentary—a tale of ritual, discipline, and obsessiveness—unfolds in interwoven scenes of cooking and life, depicting the story of Jiro, his family, the restaurant, and the intensity of his relationship with two highly important tutees (his sons), and inspiring countless foodies and fellow perfectionists along the way.

Pina **(2011)**

Photo: Courtesy of Sundance Selects/ Everett Collection

Initially conceived as a collaboration between director Wim Wenders and his friend of 20 years, the choreographer Pina Bausch, after Bausch died in 2009 of cancer, *Pina* took on a life of its own. The film "is a filming of dance more so than it is a unified documentary about it," Antonina Jedrzejczak wrote in *Vogue*, "evocative in its elegant use of 3-D, *Pina* has no plot, chronology, or narration to speak of." What it *does* have is movement. As Wenders told *Vogue*, "I was never really much into dance, but the first time I saw Pina onstage, I found myself weeping like a baby, at the edge of my seat. My brain didn't understand, but my body seemed to. When Pina and I planned the film together, we had a couple of ground rules: no explanations, no interviews, no biographies. We wanted the work to speak for itself. She hated explaining her movement; she hated interpreting it." Or as Bausch once put it: "Words can't do more than just evoke things—that's where dance comes in."

Bill Cunningham New York (2010)

Photo: Courtesy of Zeitgeist Films / Everett Collection

Richard Press's film is a loving portrait of a singular man, the then 82-year-old beloved *New York Times* photographer Bill Cunningham—who that paper wrote "seeks out and captures humanity amongst the maelstrom of life," as a "kind of Lorax of fashion"—who celebrated the beauty of individuality in the industry and beyond. "We all get dressed for Bill," *Vogue*'s Editor in Chief, Anna Wintour, says in the film. Wrote the *Times*, "He's an aesthete and an ascetic, a member of the establishment and a bohemian, and among the last of his kind."

Exit Through the Gift Shop (2010)

Photo: Courtesy of Producers Distribution Agency / Everett Collection

"The brilliance of *Exit Through the Gift Shop*," John Powers wrote for *Vogue* in 2010, "is that you never know throughout who's in on the joke or if any of it is actually a joke at all." Ostensibly a film about the enormously popular anonymous street artist known as Banksy (and billed as the first Banksy-directed film), it instead becomes about the eccentric French shopkeeper turned aspiring Bansky documentarian, Thierry Guetta, who attempted to locate and befriend his subject, only to have the artist turn the camera back on its owner, and onto the international art world at large.

Joan Rivers: A Piece of Work (2010)

Photo: IFC Films/Courtesy Everett Collection

An inimitable figure in her lifetime—and a point of reference for series like *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* and *Hacks* since then—Joan Rivers was one of our greatest comics ever, and Annie Sundber and Ricki Stern's 2010 documentary gets at why. Taking, as Manohla Dargis put it for the *New York Times*, "an up-close and sometimes queasy-personal approach to its motormouth subject," the film presents a enthralling portrait of a woman who lived to entertain—and entertained to live.

Restrepo (2010)

How to Watch: Stream on iTunes.

Vanity Fair journalists Sebastian Junger and Tim Hetherington are embedded for one year of a 15-month deployment of Battle Company, an American platoon in the Korengal Valley in Afghanistan—prime Taliban country, nicknamed the "Valley of Death"—in a blunt, thorough accounting of modern war and the men who make it, in what *The Guardian* called the "best war film ever made."

Senna (2010)

Photo: Alamy

Asif Kapadia's documentary takes on the life and death of Brazilian Formula One star Ayrton Senna, who died only 10 years after his first race (the 1984 Brazilian Grand Prix). The film is primarily made up of archival footage, which effectively puts the viewer in the passenger seat as it demonstrates the thrills and dangers of the sport: Senna witnesses the chilling death of a fellow driver only the day before his own fatal crash, and lobbies heartbreakingly for better driver safety. That so much of Senna's last days were captured on-screen is tragic, but also unbelievably surreal, as if the viewer is watching things as they happen rather than an event from decades past.

The September Issue (2009)

Photo: Courtesy of Roadside Attractions/ Everett Collection

“There is something about fashion that can make people very nervous,” Anna Wintour (Condé Nast’s Chief Content Officer and *Vogue*’s Global Editorial Director) says toward the beginning of R. J. Cutler’s documentary. Cutler’s film, which finds its focus in the making of the 2007 September issue (a record-breaking 800-page tome that weighed more than 4 pounds, sold 13 million copies, and impacted the $300-billion global fashion industry more than any other single publication), is an intimate, funny, and ultimately instructive look at office politics, an economic boom time in print publishing, and the fashion industry through the lens of its most iconic publication. Cutler spends months behind the scenes at *Vogue*, going to Fashion Weeks both foreign and domestic, tagging along on shoots and reshoots, and popping in to closed-door staff meetings, bearing witness to the arduous, entertaining, and occasionally emotionally demanding process that goes in to making an iconic publication.

Man on Wire (2008)

Photo: Courtesy of Magnolia Pictures/ Everett Collection

James Marsh’s Academy Award–winning film follows the French street performer Philippe Petit, who pulled off one of the boldest, craziest, and most irresponsible feats of the modern era when in 1974 he spent a good 45 minutes tightrope-walking between the towers of the World Trade Center.

Waltz With Bashir (2008)

Photo: Courtesy of Sony Pictures Classics / Everett Collection

In this animated documentary, Israeli filmmaker Ari Folman struggles to make sense of his experience as a soldier in the 1982 Lebanon war. "*Waltz With Bashir* will certainly enrich and complicate your understanding of its specific subject—the Lebanon War and, in particular, the massacre of Palestinians by Lebanese Phalangist fighters at the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps," A.O. Scott wrote in *The New York Times*, "but it may also change the way you think about how movies can confront history."

When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Parts (2006)

Photo: Alamy

Spike Lee's four-part elegy for New Orleans during Hurricane Katrina employs a powerful chorus of witnesses and talking heads that cuts across racial and class lines in a style that Slate called "jazz" and

“as American as gumbo or Gershwin.” Lee combines images of the city before and after the flood: “streetcars, spray-painted alerts of corpses, stock-footage segregationists, Mardi Gras krewes, water rising so high that it threatens to submerge a green sign marking Humanity Street, survivors at the Superdome, tape of the lazy Mississippi.” As Stephen Holden wrote in *The New York Times*, the film “has no major new revelations about the outrageously tardy response of the Bush administration to the crisis, as if any were needed. The failures speak for themselves.”

Enron: The Smartest Guys in the Room (2005)

Photo: Courtesy of Magnolia Pictures / Everett Collection

“Accountants held no one to account, governments abandoned their regulatory functions, the media turned cheaters into stars, and a culture of self-righteous mendacity was allowed to flourish as long as the stock prices were high,” A. O. Scott wrote in *The New York Times* of Alex Gibney’s documentary, which captures the perfect storm that led to the rise and fall of the Enron Corporation, the energy company once ranked as the country’s seventh largest and is now synonymous with modern corporate corruption, thanks to one of the most notorious debacles in the history of corporate scandals.

Grizzly Man (2005)

Photo: Courtesy of Lions Gate / Everett Collection

Werner Herzog pieced together recovered snippets of more than 100 hours of video shot by a former actor named Timothy Treadwell—who spent 13 summers living among wild grizzly bears in Alaska before he and his girlfriend were eaten by one of them in 2003—to make the astounding, seminal, and critically lauded *Grizzly Man*. The result (which shows Treadwell, who found meaning and purpose in his attachment and devotion to the bears, interacting with the grizzlies, whom he named, occasionally hand-fed, and saw as his charges) becomes something of an argument between the filmmaker and his subject; Herzog's own overtly rational, somewhat cynical take on man's ability to coexist with nature, and Treadwell's delirious, ecstatic view.

How to Eat Your Watermelon in White Company (And Enjoy It) (2005)

Writer and director Joe Angio's documentary on the recently deceased Melvin Van Peebles is a must-see not only for its long-overdue portrayal of the larger-than-life legend of Black cinema—it's often said that, along with *Shaft* and *Superfly*, Van Peeble's *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (1971) created Blaxploitation film, though what it *really* did was to convince Hollywood studios to make Black-centered films with Black actors—but for the rollicking, picaresque tale it weaves of the *rest* of Van Peebles's life: as a novelist in France, a Tony-nominated Broadway auteur, an options trader on Wall Street, a San Francisco cable-car brakeman, an astronomy student in Holland (and that's barely a start). The New York Film Festival honored *Sweetback* with a screening on its 50th anniversary this year, and *How to Eat Your Watermelon* has been reissued as part of a Criterion Collection box set of Van Peebles's work.

Metallica: Some Kind of Monster (2004)

Photo: Courtesy Everett Collection

Directors Joe Berlinger and Bruce Sinofsky (of the *Paradise Lost* documentaries, which chronicle the lives of the wrongfully convicted West Memphis Three as they fight to be released from prison) had used Metallica music in their films. A friendship was born, and in 2001, the band agreed to let the directors document their attempt to make a new album, surviving the fallout from bassist Jason Newsted quitting and James Hetfield's alcoholism. The result is a Metallica like you've never seen before: Lars Ulrich attends therapy and confronts a former band member, and the men submit to the whims of a life coach. The A.V. Club says, "A filmed display of such candor and honesty would be remarkable coming from, say, Dashboard Confessional, but coming from metal icons, it's downright surreal."

Super Size Me (2004)

Photo: Courtesy of Samuel Goldwyn Films/ Everett Collection

Director Morgan Spurlock's affable, nauseating social experiment (opting to eat only McDonald's for 30 days) becomes a razed-earth look at the fast-food industry and America's obesity epidemic. The film

eventually led to one of the biggest food companies in the world changing their policies. Hard to get more influential than that.

Capturing the Friedmans (2003)

In 1987, in Great Neck, Long Island, Arnold Friedman, a retired schoolteacher in his 50s, and his youngest son, Jesse, then 18, were arrested and charged with committing repeated acts of sexual abuse on boys who attended the computer classes they taught in their basement. Andrew Jarecki's film (his first) is a poignant meditation on perversion and truth and that, as *The New Yorker* wrote, "reaffirms the family as the inescapable cauldron of great drama—as the birthplace and feeding ground of the most powerful emotions, including perverse sexual desire, and as the site of reconciliation and solace, too."

The Fog of War: Eleven Lessons From the Life of Robert S. McNamara (2003)

Photo: Courtesy of Sony Pictures Classics / Everett Collection

Errol Morris's Academy Award–winning portrait of Robert S. McNamara—roundly recognized (and vilified) as the architect of the Vietnam War—organizes his subject's reflections on his life and career into a list of maxims about war and human error, with what *The New York Times* called "the cumulative message suggesting that in wartime nobody in power really knows anything." It is not a film meant to reassure its viewer. "Believing and seeing are both often wrong," goes one lesson. "Rationality will not save us," says another. The final (and saddest) is delivered by Mr. McNamara with a smile: "You can't change human nature."

Bowling for Columbine (2002)

Photo: Courtesy Everett Collection

Michael Moore confronts America's relationship with guns in his trademark good-natured style in this film, using the school shooting at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, as his starting point. He poses questions that still haunt this country nearly two decades later, like: Why is America addicted to guns? What role does the media play? And why are we so content to live our lives in fear?

Spellbound (2002)

Director Jeff Blitz takes on the 1999 National Spelling Bee in a fascinating portrait of a group of young people and their families, in which a peculiar, anachronistic word-obsessed subculture becomes a window into contemporary American society.

The Gleaners and I (2000)

Photo: Courtesy of Zeitgeist Films/ Everett Collection

Voted best French film of the year by the French Union of Film Critics, Agnès Varda's *The Gleaners and I* finds its inspiration in an 1867 painting of "gleaners," or the workers who collect leftover crops after they've been harvested by farmers, by Jean-François Millet. The iconic Belgian-born filmmaker is arguably as well known for her idiosyncratic personal style as she is her role in the development of the French New Wave movement, and to join her, her handheld camera, and her small crew in the search for the modern-day equivalents of Millet's "gleaners" in the potato fields of northern France, the vineyards of Burgundy, and the markets of Paris is to experience a new way of looking at the world around us. Varda, who pulls the treasures out of the stories around her as she reflects on her own mortality and the nature of her art, is a gleaner, too.

American Movie (1999)

Photo: Courtesy of Sony Pictures / Everett Collection

Chris Smith's "portrait of a fiendishly determined filmmaker" named Mark Borchardt, a 30-year-old odd-job man from Menomonee Falls, Wisconsin, captured the "spirit of maverick independent filmmaking," according to Janet Maslin in *The New York Times*, and has also proved to be a pivotal influence on young filmmakers across the globe. Wrote Roger Ebert of the film's subject: "No poet in a Paris garret has ever been more determined to succeed."

Buena Vista Social Club (1999)

Photo: Courtesy Everett Collection

Wim Wenders helped catapult an ensemble of iconic Cuban musicians to global fame with this film, which chronicled Wenders's friend, the rock musician Ry Cooder, as he brings together 13 Cubans to record an album and perform outside of Cuba, which travel to and from was still heavily restricted. The film was nominated for an Academy Award for its heartfelt, exuberant celebration of a culture and country that had been isolated from America for decades. If you know the music of the band, this is the backstory of how the Social Club became megastars all over the world.

The Thin Blue Line (1998)

THE THIN BLUE LINE, Michael Nicol, Adam Goldfine (as Randall Dale Adams), 1988©Miramax/ Courtesy Everett CollectionPhoto: Courtesy Everett Collection

Acclaimed documentary filmmaker Errol Morris was working as a private detective when he began investigating a prosecution psychiatrist named Dr. James Grigson (nicknamed "Doctor Death," for his propensity to recommend execution) when he became obsessed with the case of Randall Dale Adams, who had been sentenced to life in prison for the 1976 murder of a Dallas police officer and who maintained his innocence. Morris believed him, and, as Janet Maslin wrote in *The New York Times*, the filmmaker "explores this case and goes well beyond it, to the darker side of justice and to a vision that is both poetic and perverse . . . Hidden motives, withheld data, and questionable interpretations of the facts are everywhere, and each interview invariably creates more questions than it answers."

Crumb **(1994)**

Photo: Courtesy of Superior Pictures / Everett Collection

Described by Roger Ebert as a "meeting of two eccentrics in sympathy with each other," director Terry Zwigoff's portrait of the artist Robert Crumb (whom the art critic Robert Hughes calls "the Bruegel of the 20th century"), best known for comic strips like *Keep on Truckin'* and *Fritz the Cat*, lays bare the latter's dysfunctional family, relationships, and sexuality. "If Crumb were merely a behind-the-scenes portrait of the artist and his troubled family, it would exert a gothic sort of fascination," Stephen Holden wrote in *The New York Times*, "but the film does much more . . . It succeeds at showing how one man's psychic wounds contributed to an art that transmutes personal pain into garish visual satire."

Hoop Dreams (1994)

Photo: Courtesy of Fine Line Features/ Everett Collection

Steve James's film follows William Gates and Arthur Agee, two African-American high school students from inner Chicago who aspire to become professional basketball players. Originally intended to be a 30-minute short film for PBS, *Hoop Dreams* instead became something much more than that: a rumination on ambition, competition, race, and class in contemporary American society that premiered at the 1994 Sundance Film Festival, where it won the audience award for best documentary. In his review, Roger Ebert wrote that "a film like *Hoop Dreams* is what the movies are for. It takes us, shakes us, and make us think in new ways about the world around us. It gives us the impression of having touched life itself."

The War Room (1993)

Photo: Courtesy of October Films / Alamy

Filmmakers D. A. Pennebaker and Chris Hegedus follow Bill Clinton's 1992 presidential campaign from New Hampshire in January 1992 to the victory celebration in Little Rock in November of that year. George Stephanopoulos and James Carville dealing with unforeseen problems and negative press, as their candidate is saddled with accusations of adultery and draft-dodging. The true focus of this watchful, frankly admiring film is the Clinton campaign staff, with James Carville and George Stephanopoulos.

Hearts of Darkness: A Filmmaker's Apocalypse (1991)

Photo: Courtesy of American Zoetrope / Everett Collection

Francis Ford Coppola's film *Apocalypse Now* premiered at Cannes in 1979, shared the Palme d'Or, and went on to become one of the great mythic productions in film history—despite being bedeviled by an endless succession of environmental interruptions, over-budget concerns, and health problems, both physical and mental, among many more logistical nightmares. Eleanor Coppola, the director's wife, and the creative engine behind *Hearts of Darkness*, captured raw, behind-the-scenes footage as it was happening, and with the help of Fax Bahr and George Hickenlooper, turned it into one of the most intimate documentaries about filmmaking ever made.

Paris Is Burning (1990)

*Paris is Burning*Photo: Courtesy of Off White Productions / Everett Collection

Jennie Livingston's poignant, profound film documents '80s New York vogueing balls—a familial world apart from white America, with its own sets of rules and rituals that were largely held secret until vogueing moved into the mainstream. (Cue Madonna.) With movements inspired by African dance, Egyptian hieroglyphics, fashion magazines, and TV shows like *Dynasty*, voguers (often disenfranchised gay Black and Latino men) strike poses with the prowess of runway models or Cirque du Soleil cast members—only better, because they can "throw shade" at the same time. The film takes its subject seriously, and the result is a tender, in-depth look at a subculture that is structured as a series of contrasts between dreams and reality, pretending and being—and which continues to resonate today.

Sherman's March (1985)

Photo: Courtesy of New Yorker Films/ Everett Collection

Ross McElwee's idiosyncratic, charming film is ostensibly about the lasting aftereffects of the "total warfare" waged by General William Tecumseh Sherman during the final months of the Civil War, which the filmmaker intends to discover by following Sherman's trail through Georgia and the Carolinas. It becomes instead a nearly three-hour long rumination on the filmmaker's personal relationships—namely his ongoing search for love in all the wrong places. Wrote Vincent Canby in *The New York Times*: "Though Mr. McElwee's timing with women is awful, he's a filmmaker-anthropologist with a rare appreciation for the eccentric details of our edgy civilization." He also set the tone for navel-gazing cineastes for generations to come.

Shoah (1985)

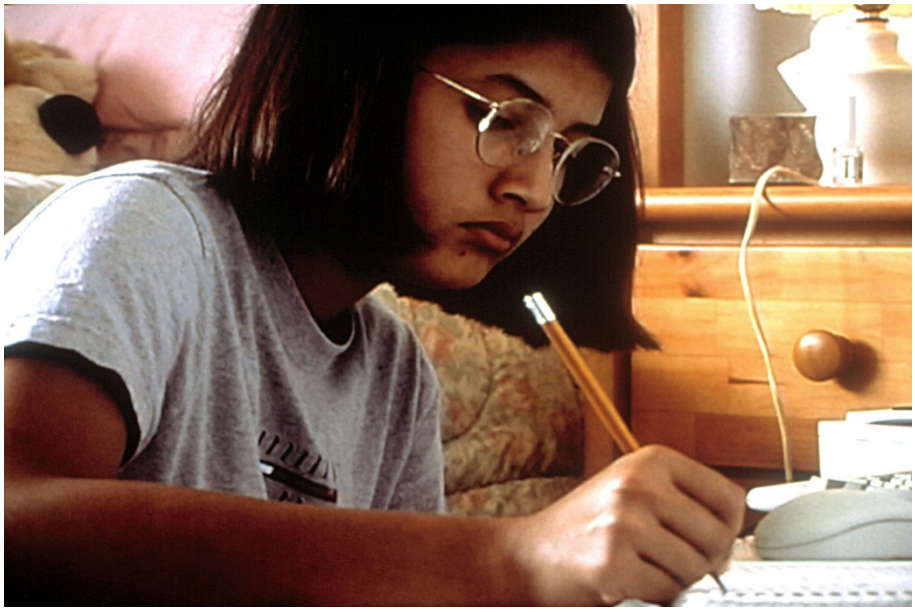

Photo: Courtesy of Thinkfilm / Everett Collection

Claude Lanzmann's seminal nine-hour examination of the Holocaust, in which he interviews countless survivors and perpetrators of one of the darkest moments in history, is more an act of witness than of documentary filmmaking. "There is no proper response to this film," Roger Ebert wrote in his review. "It is an enormous fact, a 550-minute howl of pain and anger in the face of genocide. It is one of the noblest films ever made."

The Times of Harvey Milk (1984)

Photo: Courtesy of Black Sand Productions / Everett Collection

Robert Epstein's documentary finds its focus in Harvey Milk—the outspoken human rights activist and one of the first openly gay U.S. politicians elected to public office, who was assassinated in 1978—and in the larger context around him. It's an affecting work of advocacy as portrait of gay life in America (especially San Francisco's historic Castro district, in the 1970s), and a testament to the life of a political visionary.

Burden of Dreams (1982)

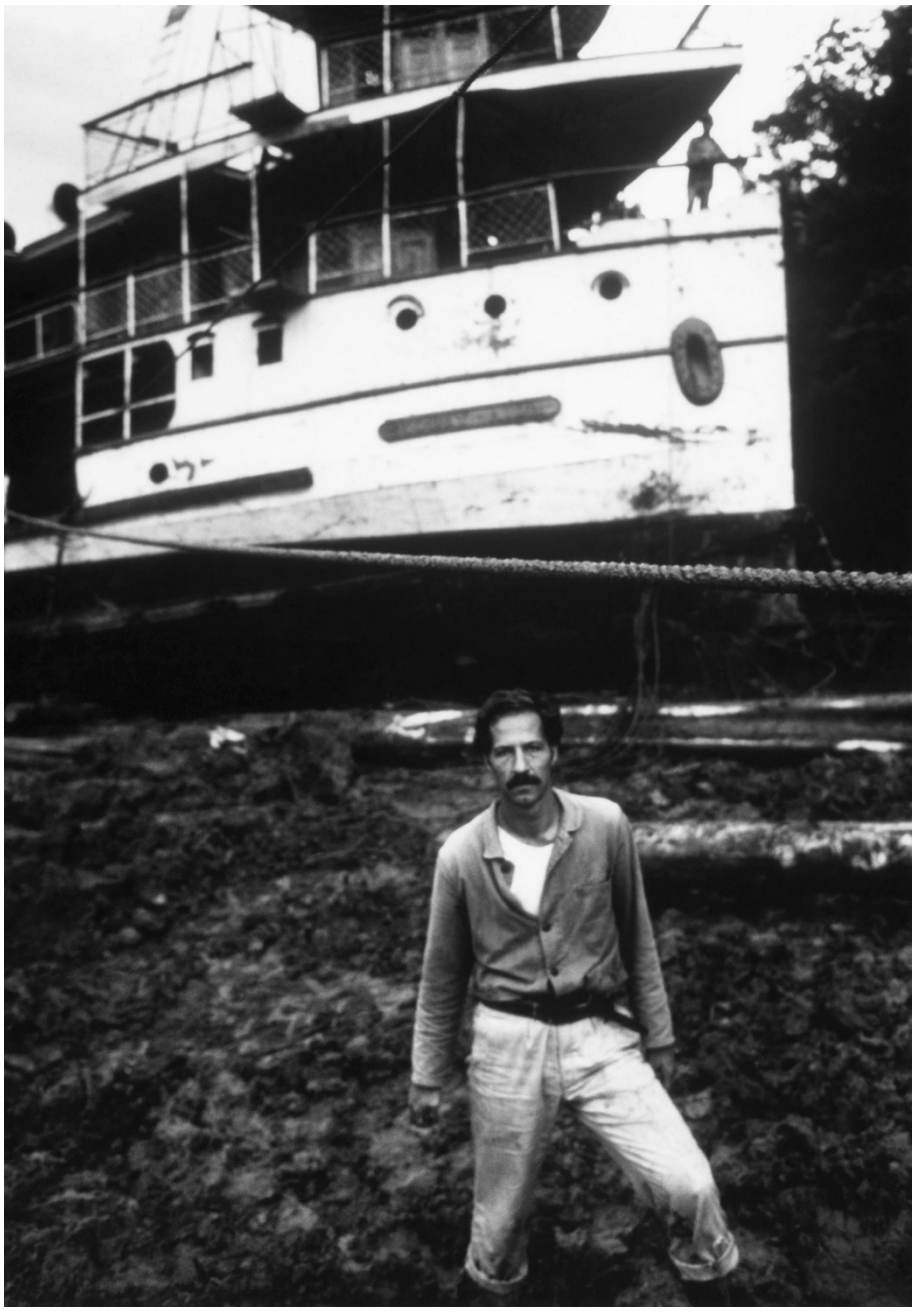

Photo: Courtesy of Flower Films / Everett Collection

For nearly five years, the acclaimed German filmmaker Werner Herzog desperately tried to complete one of the most ambitious and difficult films of his career: *Fitzcarraldo*, the story of a man determined to build an opera house in the jungle (and drag a riverboat through the rain forest, from one river system to another, in order to do it). The production, shot on location deep within the rain forests of South America, was beset with problems seemingly from inception. Two of its stars left early: Mick Jagger, for a concert tour; Jason Robards, rushed to New York with amoebic dysentery and forbidden by his doctors to return, necessitating his replacement with Klaus Kinski. Other mishaps include plane crashes, disease, and a border war between local tribes— as well as Herzog's determination to shoot the most daunting scenes without models or special effects, including a sequence requiring hundreds of tribesmen to pull a full-size, 320-ton steamship over a small mountain. "What drives Herzog to make

films that test his sanity and risk his life and those of his associates?" Roger Ebert asked in his review, citing Stanley Kauffmann, in *The New Republic*, who, in Ebert's words, argued that, "For Herzog, the purpose of film is to risk death, and each of his films is in some way a challenge hurled at the odds." Les Blank's film is an extraordinary document of the filmmaking process, and an inside look at the single-minded mission of one of cinema's most fearless directors.

Koyaanisqatsi (1982)

Director Godfrey Reggio's wordless, plotless, characterless, and wildly influential film combines epic, remarkable cinematography with the swelling intensity of Philip Glass's score and lands somewhere in the realm of a rumination on man, nature, and modern life and technology. The film's title is a Hopi Indian word that, according to Reggio, means "life out of balance," and Reggio reportedly fought with the studio, as he desired for it to have no title at all. "It's meant to offer an experience, rather than an idea," said Reggio in a 2002 interview. "For some people, it's an environmental film. For some, it's an ode to technology. For some people, it's a piece of shit. Or it moves people deeply. It depends on who you ask. It is the journey that is the objective."

Harlan County, USA (1976)

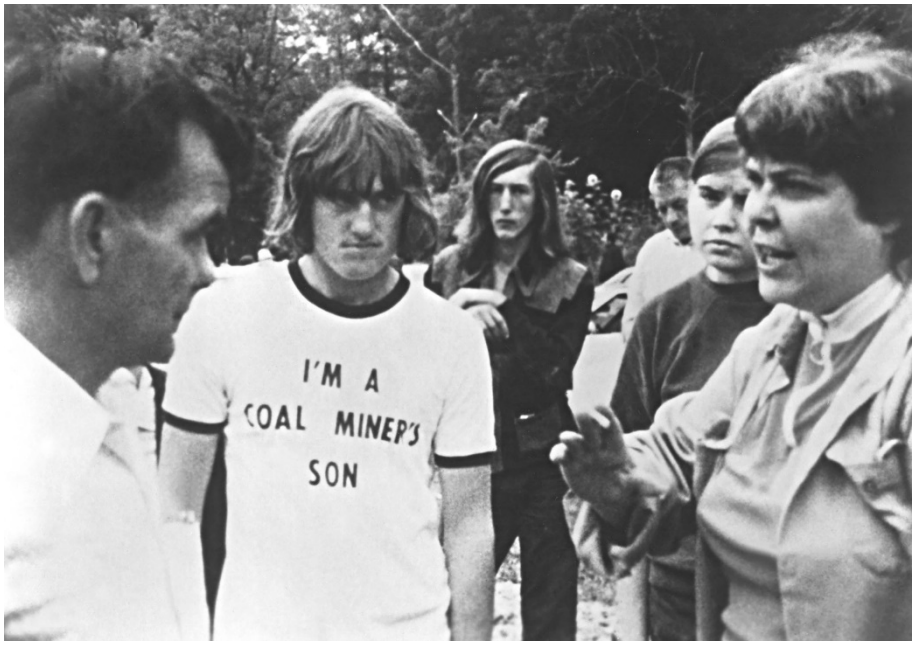

Photo: Courtesy of Cabin Creek / Everett Collection

Barbara Kopple's intimate, harrowing documentary follows a yearlong strike carried on by the coal miners at the Brookside works in eastern Kentucky, as they battle against the operators of the mine and its parent company, the Duke Power Company. "It is a brilliantly detailed report from one side of a battle that caused one death, several shootings, and a flood of violent bitterness; and that brought back to Harlan County memories of the much-bloodier coal strikes of the early 1930s," wrote *The New York Times*. It's a project that resonates today as it illuminates "the peculiar frightfulness and valor of coal-

mining," as it makes clear "just why coal-miners can never be rightly treated as less than a very special case."

Grey Gardens (1975)

Photo: Courtesy of Janus Films / Everett Collection

Few films are referenced as frequently by fashion designers as the Maysles's *Grey Gardens*, which follows Edith "Big Edie" Bouvier Beale and her daughter, Edith "Little Edie" Bouvier Beale, as they cavort around their collapsing East Hampton mansion, flirt with the filmmakers, and talk about their glamorous pasts. Surrounded by scions of wealth and power—and the stray cats, opossums, and raccoons they've taken in as guests, which famously required the Maysles to wear flea collars while filming—the Beales spiral into a bizarre, insular existence that ultimately inspired a Broadway musical and an HBO movie.

A Bigger Splash (1973)

Photo: Alamy

Stylishly merging fact and fiction, *A Bigger Splash* examines the painter David Hockney's life, art, and milieu in 1970s London (with quick but meaningful visits to New York and Los Angeles), where many of his models were also his friends and (former) lovers. Although director Jack Hazen didn't plan to make a documentary—"I wanted to make something cinematic," he later told the Hockney biographer Christopher Simon Sykes—*A Bigger Splash* offers a privileged glimpse into Hockney's process, particularly as he was working on *Portrait of an Artist (Pool with Two Figures)*.

F for Fake (1973)

Photo: Courtesy of Janus Films / Everett Collection

In a project *The Guardian* called "full of worldly cynicism and twinkly eyed charm . . . that conceals a wintry sadness about Welles's life in the make-believe and trickery of the movies," Orson Welles conspires with his untrustworthy subjects—an art forger named Elmyr de Hory, who sold forgeries of works by painters like Picasso and Matisse, and Hory's would-be biographer, the journalist Clifford Irving, who himself went on to attempt to scam the American publishing world with what he claimed was Howard Hughes's autobiography— and holds them at arm's length, "like a conjurer with his rabbit," or so said *The New Yorker*: "You came out dazzled by the sleight."

Gimme Shelter (1970)

Photo: Courtesy of Maysles Films / Everett Collection

The iconic Albert and David Maysles were on hand with Charlotte Zwerin to capture the final leg of the Rolling Stones's 1969 American tour, which infamously culminated in a free concert at Altamont where four people were killed, including one young man who was stabbed to death by a Hells Angel (who had been hired to provide security) on camera. It's been billed as both "an end-of-the-world film . . . very depressing" (Vincent Canby, *The New York Times*), and among the greatest rock documentaries ever made (*Rolling Stone*).

Original Cast Album: Company (1970)

Photo: Courtesy Everett Collection

The story of D.A. Pennebaker's *Original Cast Album: Company* begins in media res: "My phone rang. It was Danny Melnick from David Suskind's office with another idea." In a *Star Wars*-esque opening crawl, the filmmaker, known for his political and concert documentaries (including 1967's *Don't Look Back*), explains that he was pitched a series centered on original Broadway cast recording sessions. Pennebaker accepted, observing the cast and crew of Stephen Sondheim and George Furth's concept musical *Company* for the pilot. The result is arguably as moving, funny, and dramatic as the show itself, its most famous sequence, following Elaine Strich's increasingly frustrated attempts to nail down "The Ladies Who Lunch." (The *Documentary Now!* version of the film, *Original Cast Album: Co-op*, is great, and Paula Pell's spin on Stritch a highlight.) Long an essential text for Sondheim fans, *Original Cast Album* is also a fascinating treatise on the terrifically hard work of making very good art.

Salesman (1969)

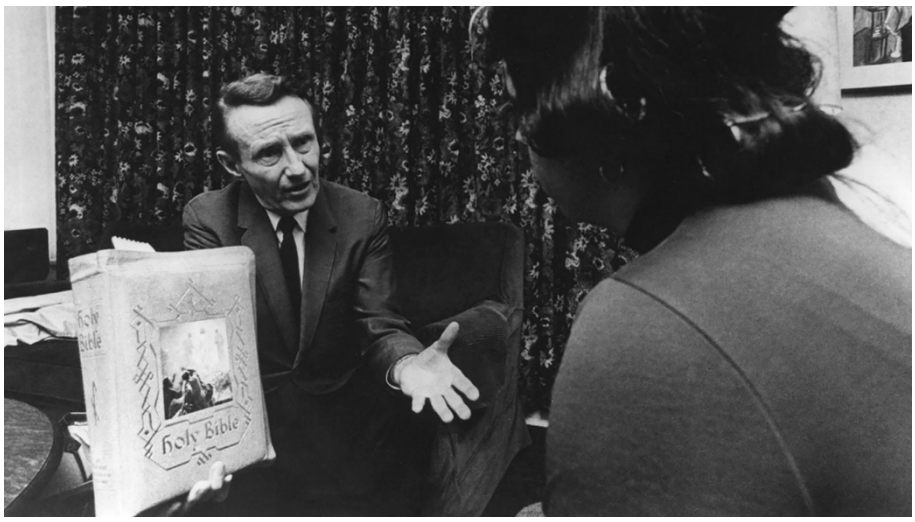

Photo: Courtesy Everett Collection

Albert and David Maysles's *Salesman* follows four door-to-door salesmen for the Mid-American Bible Company, as they travel across America hawking their wares in what *The New York Times* called a journey "just as exotic and strange a journey as any that the late Robert Flaherty (*Nanook of the North*, *Tabu*) ever took through the Arctic or the South Seas." It's also one of the great cinematic statements on America's can-do culture of capitalism, and how it tends to become a psychological cage that makes people feel like failures.

Dont Look Back (1967)

*Don't Look Back*Photo: Courtesy of Granamour Weems Archive / Alamy

Director D.A. Pennebaker follows the famously reclusive (and yes, pretty cantankerous) Bob Dylan through his tour of the United Kingdom in 1965, chronicling concert appearances, hotel room conversations, and downtime (running into Joan Baez, Alan Price, and Marianne Faithfull along the way), as the filmmaker pulls back the curtain on the "folk messiah" as he begins his shift toward rock music.

The *Up* Series (1964–)

Michael Apted's monumental ongoing documentary series, tracking a group of English schoolchildren from different social spheres at seven-year intervals, began in 1964 with *Seven Up!* and was intended to be a one-off. (As of 2012, the series is now at *56 Up*.) The original hypothesis of the series, which was initially commissioned by the BBC, was that class structure in the U.K. is so strong that a person's life path would be set at birth. In *The New Yorker*, Rebecca Mead writes that "rather than revealing the pressures of exterior social forces, the series shows the gradual inner development of empathy and sympathy—on the part of its participants and on the part of its maker" and "demands the same enlarging sympathy from its audience." Roger Ebert wrote that it is "an inspired, even noble, use of the film medium," that the films "penetrate to the central mystery of life," and that the series is among his top 10 films of all time.

Night and Fog (1955)

Photo: Courtesy Everett Collection

Released 10 years after the liberation of the Nazi concentration camps, Alain Resnais's 32-minute *Night and Fog* is as much a documentary as it is a treatise on the impossibility of true documentation. The result is both one of the most profound meditations on the Holocaust and on documentary filmmaking as a whole.

Nanook of the North (1922)

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*Nanook of the North*Photo: Courtesy of Pathé Exchange

Robert J. Flaherty's silent predecessor to the modern documentary spends one year following the lives of an Inuit family living in the Arctic Circle. "The film is not technically sophisticated; how could it be, with one camera, no lights, freezing cold, and everyone equally at the mercy of nature? But it has an authenticity that prevails over any complaints that some of the sequences were staged," wrote Roger Ebert, who also called its subject, the titular Nanook, "one of the most vital and unforgettable human beings ever recorded on film."