

Haven Stetor

Dr. Pedersen

HNRC 102

13 March 2024

Films As Documentaries

In Carl Plantinga's article "Documentary," he discusses whether all film types can serve as documentaries. On page 496 he brings up a claim by Ed Branigan: "...one can comprehend any film either fictionally or nonfictionally, the difference lying in the 'method or procedure for making decisions about assigning reference.' All films, the claim goes, have nonfictional dimension and can provide of their historical situation and effects." I agree that a wide range of scripted films can serve as documentaries. The films I chose to discuss serve as documentaries covering what life was like for young adults throughout each decade. I will begin at the 1970's and discuss how films over the decades serve as a documentary showing what life was like for young adults during each decade and what was happening in the film industry.

I would like to start off by addressing why people may not agree that all films can serve as documentaries as to what life was like throughout each decade. Because the films are scripted, some would argue that they are not an accurate representation because everything is exaggerated for entertainment. In the film examples listed later in this paper, the stereotypical high school roles are often exaggerated. In "The Breakfast Club" for example, each character's high school stereotype is exaggerated, and this may lead the audience to assume that every teenager in the 1980's fit into one of those stereotypes. Some may also argue that films serve more as documentation than they do as documentaries. Plantinga thinks that it is important that people do not confuse documentaries with documents. On pages 495 he states, "Yet documentary films cannot be reduced to the provision of documentation." On page 496 he goes on to say, "To confuse a document with a documentary film is a serious error in categorization. The

documentary film is not just a document, though it may make use of documents.” If an artist creates a mural showing the historical significance of a particular city, it will serve as documentation of the events that occurred, but it would not be considered a documentary. Some may make the same argument in film. It can document historical significance, but it serves more as a document than it does as a documentary.

While some films may be presented for their entertainment value, films can cross the line into documentary territory if the director intended to document aspects of life. They would provide near-factual accounts of young adult life in each era. Even films that fall under the documentary film category are not completely factual because they incorporate reenactments of scenes and edited information. In each of the films that I’ve chosen to highlight, the style of the film would imply that the director’s intention in creating the film was to create a documentary about what life was like for young adults through each era.

Unintentionally, the directors also captured the film culture of the time through the cameras they filmed on and how it was edited. If you watch a film from the 1970’s for example, it would have been filmed on a film camera from that period, the characters would most likely use popular slang from the time, and the character’s styles would reflect the styles from the 70’s. They also did not have computers to edit films like we are familiar with today, so they had to physically cut up the film and put it back together using a razor and tape. According to noschoolfilm.com, in the 1970’s “a shift towards more unconventional and daring films that were edgier, riskier, and often explored controversial subject matter” (Hellerman 2023) took place. A lot of restrictions that were in place in prior decades were lifted, so directors had to ground to experiment. All this information was documented through fictional film.

The first movie that I will cover is “Saturday Night Fever” from 1977. The imagery, music, costuming, choreography, and set design all document trends from that time. The song “Night Fever” by the Beegees was used in the club scene and in the trailer for the movie. The Beegees were an iconic band, and their disco-style of music is what the period is known for. The way that the characters in the movie dress reflects the time, and the sets throughout the movie including the house and the club document the decorating style. One interesting aspect of this movie is the choreography. Because it is a dance drama, disco moves are featured throughout. “Saturday Night Fever” was shot on film and directed by John Badham, who directed many other popular 1970’s films including the show “The Streets of San Francisco.” Even though this movie is fiction, it immerses the audience in 70’s culture and documents elements that cannot be recreated through a modern movie set in the 70’s.

The same is true for “The Breakfast Club” from 1985. There are a few references to celebrities of the time including John Bender asking Principal Vernon “Does Barry Manilow know that you raided his wardrobe?” when they first arrive at detention. Barry Manilow was a singer/songwriter from the 1980’s. The movie documents high school stereotypes from the time and how each of those stereotypes were expected to act and dress. Cars from the 80’s are shown as the parents of each of the students drop them off. Fashion trends from the time are prominent during this movie including Claire’s permed hair and the guys wearing lots of layers and oversized clothing. Social trends like smoking, which would not be acceptable in a movie like this today, can be seen throughout. The song “Don’t You Forget About Me” by Simple Minds was used to attract attention to the movie, and as a result it gained popularity in the music charts at the time. The character Claire Standish was played by Molly Ringwald, who was a well-known actor and starred in other popular movies like “Pretty In Pink” and “Sixteen Candles.” “The Breakfast Club” was directed by John Hughes who directed other famous 80’s films

including “Sixteen Candles” and “Ferris Bueller’s Day Off.” This movie, like “Saturday Night Fever,” was shot on film and edited by hand. Overall, “The Breakfast Club” is a great documentation of the 1980’s and its fashion, celebrities, and music style.

The next movie I chose to support my claim was “10 Things I Hate About You.” This movie was released in 1999, and it truly documents the aesthetic and music from the 90’s. The song that plays when the movie begins is “Bad Reputation” by Joan Jett & the Blackhearts. Kat Stratford's blue prom dress with her hair up in a curled bun is a great documentation of 90’s prom looks. Low-rise jeans, butterfly clips, and platform flipflops can also be found throughout the movie. Bianca acknowledges 90’s fashion when she says, “What is the difference between like and love? Because I like my Sketchers, but I love my Prada backpack.” The set design and props document the 90’s well. These are most noticeable when the Stratford sisters are sitting in the living room talking to their dad, and when Kat backs into another car in the parking lot in her Dodge Dart GT. Just like in “The Breakfast Club,” there is a lot of smoking found throughout the movie. The movie itself was shot and edited on physical film just like in the 70’s and 80’s, and they used a Moviecam Compact Camera to shoot it, which was part of a line of cameras released in 1990. The music, fashion, set design, and film-style all make “10 Things I Hate About You” a great documentation of the 1990’s.

For the 2000’s I chose to talk about “Mean Girls,” which was released in 2004. There is an iconic lineup of actors cast in this movie. The star of “Mean Girls” is Lindsay Lohan. She is a well-known actor from the late 90’s and early 2000’s. Her first big movie, “The Parent Trap,” debuted in 1998. Regina George is played by Rachel McAdams, who was another early 2000’s star. She is known for her roles in “The Hot Chick,” “The Notebook,” and “Wedding Crashers.” Besides documenting well-known actors from the 2000’s, “Mean Girls” also documents fashion from the time, and it might have even revolutionized it. “The Plastics,” which is the main friend

group that the movie follows, are known for their skirts, high heels, and wearing the color pink. This is where the famous line “On Wednesdays we wear pink” came from. There was also a rise in more grungy rock looks like we see Janis Ian wearing. Regina George can be seen driving a 2002 Lexus SC 430 in a couple scenes throughout the movie, and her bedroom contains trends from the time like the canopy bed, hot pink accents, and Avril Lavigne posters. A lot of early 2000’s slang was written into the script as well. Words like “fetch” and “sick” were commonly used as adjectives. The song “Milkshake” by Kelis, which was released in 2003, was used to advertise “Mean Girls” and is used in the movie itself. The camera used to shoot “Mean Girls” was a Panavision Camera, and the film was edited using editing software, although it is unclear which software was used. Overall, the movie “Mean Girls” does a great job of documenting the elements of the early 2000’s both on camera and through the filming techniques.

The 2010’s were well documented in the movie “The Fault in Our Stars” from 2014. The movie is based on the novel written by John Greene in 2012. The song “All of the Stars” by Ed Sheeran was used in the trailer as well as in the movie. The song “Boom Clap” by Charli XCX was also featured. There are a lot of 2010’s fashion trends seen throughout the movie including skinny jeans, high UGG boots, beanies, and low-top converse. Bold patterns, bright colors like teal and pink, and fairy lights were inspired by social media apps like Tumblr and Pinterest and can be seen in Hazel’s bedroom. This is when we also start to see smartphones like the iPhone being used as opposed to the landlines or flip phones from the past decades. Texting is used as a main way to tell the story of Augustus Waters and Hazel Grace throughout the film. The movie was shot on an ARRI ALEX XT camera, which came out in 2013. In post-production the team digitally removed Augustus’s leg and replaced it with a prosthetic using innovative CGI techniques. “The Fault in Our Stars” represents a turning point in film and culture both technologically and in trends like social media and fashion.

The final decade that I will discuss is the 2020's. While the decade is not over, and trends will continue to evolve, a series that I think represents the 2020's well is "The Summer I Turned Pretty" on Prime Video. This series is based on the novels written by Jenny Han. She also produced the series. Taylor Swift songs like "August," and multiple others are used throughout the series as well as in trailers. All the characters have iPhones to communicate, and social media apps like TikTok, Instagram, and Snapchat are referenced. They can also be seen using AirPods and laptops. Conrad and Jerimah, the two brothers in the series, drive a 2021 Jeep Wrangler and a 2022 Range Rover. Modern fashion is captured in the patterned shorts and plain tops worn by the guys and the jean shorts, cropped tops, and converse worn by the girls throughout a good bit of the series.

As we've looked at various movies throughout the decades, we can see that there are elements that are documented for each decade showing trends, fashion, and popular culture in each era. From the disco in the 70's to the Taylor Swift music in the 2000's, styles change, and films do a great job in documenting these changes throughout the decades. This is why I agree with Plantinga in saying that, while these films are scripted, they can serve as documentaries.

Works Cited

Hellerman, Jason. "Why Do We Herald '70s Cinema as the Hollywood Heyday?" *No Film School*, No Film School, 20 Apr. 2023, nofilmschool.com/1970s-film-history.