

2014

Media-Centered: Docs to Watch

Winifred Fordham Metz

University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, freddie@email.unc.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/atg>



Part of the [Library and Information Science Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Metz, Winifred Fordham (2017) "Media-Centered: Docs to Watch," *Against the Grain*: Vol. 26: Iss. 2, Article 40.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.6725>

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact epubs@purdue.edu for additional information.

Media-Centered — Docs to Watch

Column Editor: **Winifred Fordham Metz** (Media Librarian & Head, Media Resources Center, House Undergraduate Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill; Phone: 919-962-4099) <freddie@email.unc.edu> <http://www.lib.unc.edu/house/mrc>

The use of media in the classroom is ubiquitous. Visual theses are on the rise. Academic interest in and classroom use of documentary film and global cinemas is growing at an exponential rate. Resultantly, the importance of a rich and varied media resources collection is essential to academic institutions, public libraries, and K-12 media centers. It takes a lot of work, development, and research to maintain and grow a collection like this. Resources that aid in this process are invaluable...

In writing this column for a little over a year, I've touched on many elements of collection development for Media from pedagogy to copyright to nuts and bolts information on streaming media, distribution, and professional development organizations. Looking back, I was struck by the lack of discussion on the films themselves, which is undoubtedly one of the reasons I most enjoy working with a Media collection. So, I will be presenting a multi-edition article, offering a few short lists of Documentaries to note, some of which resonate in our collection here at the UNC or have spurred considerable conversations at screenings I have attended. I am not sure that I could arrange these in some sort of "top 10" order, as each offers something unique and memorable. So, here in alphabetical order, are the first of the lot:

American Promise (2013)

Directors **Joe Brewster** and **Michèle Stephenson**

This very unique, relentlessly persistent and unabashedly intimate observational documentary focuses on the lives of two African American boys, **Idris** and his best friend **Seun**, as they grow up in New York City. Filmmakers **Michèle Stephenson** and her husband **Joe Brewster** (**Idris**' parents) doggedly follow their son and his friend for thirteen years through the highs and lows of childhood and adolescence; from their first days excitedly toddling off to kindergarten up through touring potential colleges and graduating high school. As the film progresses, we see both children enroll in a highly esteemed Manhattan Upper East Side private school — the Dalton School. Eventually, though, circumstances lead **Idris**, **Seun**, and their families down very different (and at times, heartbreaking) paths.

This film is complex, layered and immensely intense, rather effectively accomplishing what it sets out to do: bringing to glaring light the complications of minority students seeking

private education. **Brewster** and **Stephenson** do not shy away from depicting the markedly high emotional and economic toll involved in such a pursuit, with many scenes intimately underscoring the numerous hurdles each family faces. And, given their incredible access, the audience follows it all, going where **Idris** and **Seun** go — into their classrooms, their homes, and their lives. What results is a vivid and unflinching examination of two young men's very personal journeys and their push to achieve to the absolute best of their abilities.

This documentary would find resonance in these subject areas: African American studies, Education, Social Issues, and Urban studies.

Distributed by: Ro*Co Films Educational
Further viewing: Brooklyn Castle, Waiting for Superman, The Big School Lottery.

Garbage Dreams (2009)

Director **Mai Iskander**

It is almost inconceivable that Cairo, the largest city in the Middle East, with a population of 18 million people has had no citywide waste disposal system for centuries. Instead, they have relied on one group of people to collect, sort, recycle, re-use and dispose of the city's garbage, the Zabaleen. Averaging 80% recycling rates, they are extremely effective in their work (in comparison, most European companies barely achieve 20% recycling rates). Unfortunately, the city is beginning to hire private companies from Spain and Italy to officially manage the trash and the Zabaleen must fight for their livelihood. Director **Mai Iskander**'s steadily observes this dilemma and what members of the Zabaleen community do to face it over the course of four years, focusing on three teenage Zabaleen boys — **Adham**, **Nabil**, and **Osama**, and one resident social worker, **Laila**. Through a series of achingly earnest interviews, with many filmed by the boys themselves, deeply moving personal narratives emerge and reveal a communal coming of age story that proves to be the heart of the film.

Adham and **Nabil** are invited to visit Wales to see how other countries collect trash and recycle. Excited by the prospect of traveling abroad, their youth and the naiveté of their world experience are starkly contrasted with their advanced vocational acumen. Their pragmatic world view on the art of recycling and reuse is poignantly pronounced as **Adham** is perceptively astonished by the amount of

trash *not* being recycled at the plant in Wales, asserting that "every piece should be recycled" to

which their Welsh host comments "that is impossible." Watching the rest of the seemingly un-recyclable items making their way down the conveyor belt to the landfill pile, **Nabil** counters — "here there is technology, but no precision." We're left to surmise that the folks in Wales should be visiting the Zabaleen instead. This film successfully underscores the importance of *learning* globally in conjunction with thinking globally.

This documentary would find resonance in these subject areas: Environmental studies, Middle Eastern studies, Social Issues, Sustainability, and Urban studies.

Distributed by: Cinema Guild
Further viewing: Waste Land, Garbage Warrior, Recycled Life.

The Harvest /La Cosecha (2011)

Director **U. Robert Romano**

U. Robert Romano's compelling vérité film follows three juvenile migrant workers as they labor with their parents in fields throughout the United States, with their earnings contributing sizably to their family's survival. Over the course of a year, we witness **Zulema**, **Perla**, and **Victor** chasing the harvest through the seasons and across the U.S., missing school, their homes, their friends, and ultimately their childhood.

Victor is an engaging 16-year-old who must decide daily between school and work. Extremely devoted to his family, he does not hesitate to choose work. As **Victor** protectively walks his little sisters to the school bus one morning, he rationalizes aloud that the girls will be well fed and cared for while he labors in the elements, hauling 1,500 lbs of tomatoes to earn \$60 for his family. Twelve-year-old **Zulema** wonders if she will ever make it to high school. A third generation migrant worker, **Zulema** began picking strawberries and other crops when she was only 7 years old, stating, "The plants when I was 10, looked like skyscrapers..." **Perla Sanchez**'s biggest hope is to finish school, go to college, and then graduate school to become a lawyer. But her dreams are fading with each school she leaves behind as she is forced to continually join her family on the road as they travel from farm to farm looking for work. The earnest reflections from these children and their parents will take root, making you look at the farms, fields, and produce you see daily with different perspective.

This documentary would find resonance in these subject areas: Agricultural labor, Child Labor, Economic conditions, Environmental studies, Human Rights, and Social Conditions.

Distributed by: Cinema Libre
Further viewing: Harvest of Shame, Elisha and the Cacao, Journey of the Roses.

continued on page 68



The Interrupters

Director **Steve James**

The first several moments of this film set the scene of a year in the life of a city grappling with extreme, prolific violence. A barrage of voiceovers from numerous Chicago newscasts report murder upon murder occurring in the city; 2009 was rife with violent shootings, many involving school-aged youth, including the much publicized brutal beating and murder of 16-year-old **Derrion Albert**. Directed by noted documentary filmmaker (Hoop Dreams) **Steve James**, the film was inspired by an article written by **Alex Kotlowitz*** and focuses on the imperative work of CeaseFire — an initiative of the Chicago Project for Violence Prevention aiming to reduce street violence through a uniquely tailored approach to outreach. Epidemiologist **Gary Slutkin**, founded CeaseFire after spending most of his career battling infectious diseases like TB, Cholera, and AIDS in countries across the world. Upon returning to his hometown of Chicago in 1995, **Slutkin** was struck by the level of street violence in the city. Drawing parallels between infectious diseases and violence, **Slutkin** posited that it should be addressed the same way — by containing the spread of the disease and preventing further transmission.

Through their work, they concluded that people from *the life* would have more knowledge of how to forecast, find, and intercept potential violence than those with no experience. These “Violence interrupters” are uniquely prepared outreach workers striving to provide conflict mediation, safe havens, mentoring, and alternatives to violence. The film focuses on three: **Ameena Matthews**, **Ricardo “Cobe” Williams**, and **Eddie Bocanegra** with **James** afforded incredible access to them and other key members of CeaseFire. Violence interrupters and mentees alike seem almost unaware of the cameras following them throughout the city. Many interactions, layered and intricate — find measures of success and failure with an epilogue providing some closure for many of the stories introduced in the film.

This documentary would find resonance in these subject areas: Adolescence, African American Studies, American Studies, Crime, Gang prevention, Latin American Studies, Rehabilitation, Sociology, Urban Studies, and Women’s Studies.

Distributed by: Cinema Guild

Further Viewing: Welcome 2 Durham, Gang Wars, Slippin’: Ten years with the Bloods.

La Isla: Archives of a Tragedy (2009)

Director **Uli Stelzner**

In 2005, a sudden explosion rocks a police training barracks in the capital city of Gua-

temala. The explosion unearthed a shocking discovery of a secret archive housing thousands of records amassed by the Guatemalan police and army dating back to the 1930s up through the end of the civil war. Director **Uli Stelzner’s** film follows as 190 people are employed to review and report on the records found in the archive. Many researchers find unexpected information about their families. Others uncover atrocities, too gruesome to imagine. All of them work diligently together to bring to light what happened to tens of thousands of people who vanished over a period of decades leading up to the end of the civil war. Eventually, some of the researchers find peace in knowing “the names of the students, teachers, workers, and peasants [previously] hidden in the consciences of soldiers...”

The slow and steady pace of this somber, contemplative film is underscored by the quietly cinematic quality of the scenes. Archival footage and photos are effectively woven throughout (some depicting graphic violence) offering the audience complete entry into the police archives as the researchers experience their work. Ultimately, this is a multi-layered, artistically drawn elegy to the thousands of people murdered by the army and secret police.

This documentary would find resonance in these subject areas: Archives, Genocide, Guatemala, Latin America, and Political Violence.

Distributed by: ISKA

Further Viewing: A film Unfinished, Granito — a story in three parts, In Rwanda we Say.

Sofia’s Last Ambulance (2013)

Director **Ilian Metev**

Director **Ilian Metev** loses no time in letting us know that while there are 1.2 million people living in Sofia, the capital of Bulgaria — there is a shocking dearth of ambulances. And, we quickly find that those that run can scarcely cover the capital city’s population and are wildly overburdened. This is an observational documentary in its truest sense, deftly accomplished with **Metev** placing three cameras on the dashboard of one of these few remaining ambulances. In doing so, **Metev** provides a very precise view of its medic team. Here, we are introduced to an ever-weary **Dr. Krassimir Yordanov**; the pluckily stoic paramedic **Mila Mikhailova**; and the quietly enigmatic driver, **Plamen Slavkov**. And what we see through these cameras is painfully human, increasingly stressful, and immensely absorbing. With their close proximity, what the cameras capture has the potential to appear uncomfortably claustrophobic but it succeeds instead in bringing a spectacular intimacy. **Krassimir**, **Mila**, and **Plamen’s** natural ease in front of the cameras undoubtedly benefit the film. While not an overly voluble group, their keenly expressive faces tell a lion’s share of the story, that of a city’s crumbling healthcare system. Any gaps are cleverly filled in with a series of sporadic radio dispatches and the steady stream of cases answered by the team.

Some of their house calls are absurdly comical, while others are expectedly tragic. Yet, as we ride with the ambulance team into a sunrise, the camera seems to catch a melancholy comfort in the enduring fortitude of these public servants, leaving the audience with a subtle sense that everything may turn out okay.

This documentary would find resonance in these subject areas: Eastern European studies, Health Care, Social Conditions, and Urban Studies.

Distributed by: N/A

Further Viewing: Pablo’s Winter, Countryside 35 x 45.

Summer Pasture (2010)

Directors **Tsering Perlo**, **Lynn True**, and **Nelson Walker III**

Nomads have lived in the Kham region of Tibet (now part of the Sichuan Province in China) for 8000 years. Here, breathtakingly beautiful mountains lead down into smooth green pastures, but at an elevation of 15,000 feet, this gorgeous grassland suffers brutal cold through all seasons except summer. Yet, the tent of **Locho**, **Yama**, and their chubby baby girl seems to remain warm throughout...

At once exotic and oddly familiar, this lush observational documentary presents the story of a young nomadic Tibetan family — **Locho**, **Yama**, and their baby girl — struggling to survive on the revenues of caterpillar fungus and yak herding. Perhaps a testament to the steady documentary filmmaking of **Lynn True**, **Nelson Walker III**, and **Tsering Perlo** — or just the mettle of the subjects themselves — the film rather successfully captures a young couple who are unabashedly earnest, unusually at ease in front of the camera, and unavoidably endearing. Either way, the audience is rewarded with a deeply satisfying, compelling visual experience. Somehow, **Yama** makes her daily work of raking yak dung a subtle art form and we find **Locho’s** vanity and compulsive applications of Noxema quirkily charming. The filmmakers skillfully juxtapose sweeping shots of the serene yet frigid pastures with cozily intimate interiors of the family’s warm tent. While the film admittedly focuses on one family, it speaks volumes to the tensions between tradition and modernity in a country experiencing great change. Ultimately, this is a very modern love story set in the most traditional of ancient cultures. The film deftly captures this family on the precipice; will **Locho** and **Yama** succumb to the lure of modern city life or will they continue to follow the yak’s tail?

This documentary would find resonance in these subject areas: China, Economic conditions, Ethnology, Nomadic People, Social Conditions, and South Asia.

Distributed by: Documentary Educational Resources

Further Viewing: The Last Shepherd, Ito - Diary of an Urban Priest, Position among the stars. 🐾