

Screenrights is a non-profit company which administers copyright licences in Australia and New Zealand and collects similar royalties from Europe and North America for its 2,200 members from 51 countries.

April 2006

Feature: Why and how do they make it? Popular documentary films in our classrooms

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This is an online newsletter. You can subscribe by emailing ota@screenrights.org

Screenrights

Level 3, 156 Military Road
Neutral Bay NSW Australia
Post Office Box 1248
Neutral Bay NSW 2089
Australia

Australia
Ph: +61 2 9904 0133
Fax: +61 2 9904 0498

New Zealand
Freephone: 0800 44 2348
Freefax: 0800 44 7006

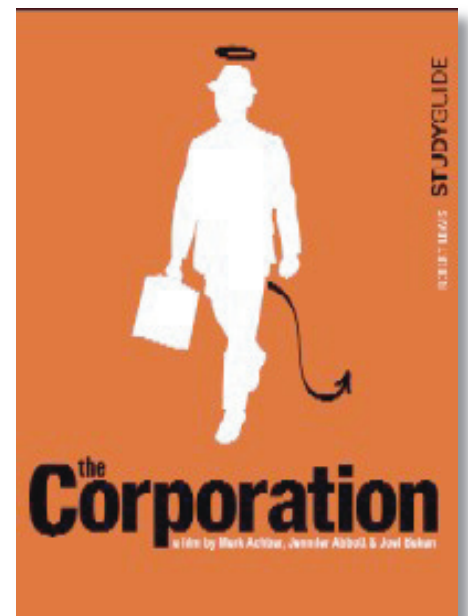
info@screenrights.org
www.screenrights.org

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Feature: Why and how do they make it? Popular documentary films in our classrooms By Boris Tribc

Over the past decade, documentary films have been elevated to the status of one of the most frequently used screen resources in English, Arts and Social Science curricula. While in the 1980s and early 1990s, the screening of documentary films in our classrooms was considered an exception, these days teachers don't find it surprising if their students have already seen the film on their curriculum list at the local cinema. So, what makes some documentaries so interesting for the education sector, the largest commercial market for documentary film in Australia? Boris Tribc examines the popular appeal of some recently produced documentaries, and offers creative paths and marketing strategies for Australian filmmakers that could be worth exploring.

Michael Moore's *Bowling for Columbine* is perhaps the most commercially successful documentary film to make it big in Australian classrooms. The reasons for its success can certainly be found in Moore's popular appeal. These days, his film premieres are viewed with anticipation each film season, but his books and television series made him a household name even before his international success as a documentary filmmaker. The director aims to echo the public voices of dissent, to present an alternative to the egocentric US government and to expose corporate kleptocracy. Moore's 'down-to-earth' voice-over narration style is often bereft of complexity or ambiguity. It enables him to speak to the vast, extremely diversified cinema audiences most of whom would be struggling to explain the difference between a documentary film and a current affairs program. The promotion of Moore's films emphasises the critical success of his work, and they are cleverly marketed to capture the attention of the mainstream cinemagoer – as socially responsible films for the 'average Joe'. The tagline for *Bowling for Columbine* reads: "Are we a nation of gun nuts or are we just nuts?" This immediately appeals to the wide range of film audiences who often find "highbrow, thought-provoking" documentary investigations unexciting and dull. Moore's marketing strategy also appeals to secondary students who appreciate the "direct" and "sincere" way in which he speaks to the audience.



The Corporation Study Guide cover

Moore's emotive language and his predictable, pro-active stance (remember the scenes with the shootings victims in *Bowling for Columbine*, and the war veteran's mother in *Fahrenheit 9/11*) reverberate strongly amongst audiences in secondary schools. Nevertheless, it is too simplistic to attribute the success of Moore's films exclusively to his populist appeal and his style of presenting. The filmmaker attracts audiences from secondary schools by displaying a profound awareness of their lifestyles, interests and general behaviour, by interviewing their peers and by searching for answers in their music, clothing and attitudes, as well as in the philosophy of teenage icons. When Marilyn Manson proclaims that s/he would listen, rather than declaim anything to the two teenage murderers, s/he addresses the essential needs of the adolescents frustrated by moral panic and the demonisation of youth in exhaustive media deconstructions of the Columbine shooting. Although some film critics may be appalled, Gus Van Sant's *Elephant* (2003) has more to do with Moore's account of the Columbine massacre than we are perhaps willing to admit. In Van Sant's film, one of the most popular amongst senior secondary students of Media in Victoria, we listen to the students' voices, and examine, connect and counterpoint their perspectives leading to the tragic event.

Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004), the highest grossing documentary film of all time in the USA, is certainly less popular amongst our students than his previous work, however, it still made it big in Australian secondary classrooms. The taglines, "The temperature where freedom burns!" and "This summer, Michael Moore turns up the heat", followed the highly successful marketing path of his previous box-office hit. However, a somewhat 'controversial' war and foreign policy theme, and Moore's blatant political engagement, as well as the reactions of Australian allies, Government officials and concerned parents, made *Fahrenheit 9/11* more difficult to incorporate into the senior curriculum than *Bowling for Columbine*.

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It is true that the military intervention in Iraq provoked heated discussions in our homes, offices, streets, cafes and, not surprisingly, classrooms. Consequently, those students who had a strong opinion about the war in Iraq, had already seen the film before it became part of their school's curriculum. Nevertheless, it is difficult to escape the impression that, for the majority of secondary students, renowned for their cynical view of politics, *Fahrenheit 9/11* may appear hopelessly bogged down in the political sphere. Unlike *Bowling for Columbine*, it is removed from their immediate vicinity and it openly takes sides with one of the major political parties in the USA. It is not surprising that teachers of Media, English and Politics frequently use Moore's attempt to influence the American Presidential elections to demonstrate bias in documentary films.

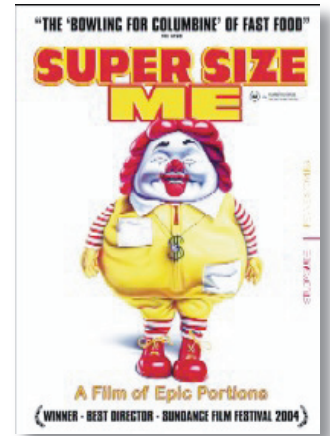
The Australian response to *Fahrenheit 9/11*, *Time to Go John* (2004), is a compilation of short films with a strong political note. It has not made an impact on school audiences. An uneven collection of documentary films, *Time to Go John* looks at the legacy of conservative government. Most of the films are engaging and address issues that should concern every citizen of this country. However, inadequately marketed, and perhaps naïve in its approach, this compilation is, like *Fahrenheit 9/11*, seen as a failed attempt to contribute to the political fall of John Howard.

Outfoxed (Robert Greenwald, 2004), *Control Room* (Jehane Noujaim, 2004) *The Corporation* (Mark Achbar, 2004) and *Supersize Me* (Morgan Spurlock, 2004) are all films addressing important social issues from a range of interesting perspectives, and films that made a profound impact on teachers' structuring of their curriculum. For the vast majority of students of English, Media, Politics and History, as well as first year university students, deconstructing government and corporate strategies means delving into new and exciting territory. *Outfoxed* and *Control Room* deal with issues of media ownership, and give teachers and students an opportunity to discuss the scope of media influence; to provide examples of biased and selective reporting, omission and gate keeping; to assess the work of different media outlets and to hear the opinions of the other side.

Despite heated discussions about media control and the role of talk-back radio hosts in our political life, Australian documentary makers are yet to create a well-researched, wry, entertaining and effective film exposing the absurdity of unison voices in print and electronic media. Australian secondary students who speak in superlatives of Michael Moore's work admittedly do not follow the ABC or SBS or their documentary programs. Some of them, as John Schwartz recently pointed out at the 2005 ATOM Conference, do not know that the ABC is a public service and have never heard of Rupert Murdoch. It is obvious that approaching this target audience requires a clever, well-prepared strategy.

Canadian documentary film *The Corporation* is an interesting look at the history, legal and economic power and influence of the corporate world on present day societies, providing revealing information for secondary students. This film has not only made it into Australian classrooms, but may offer a range of inspiring ideas for local filmmakers on how to tackle the transformation of Australian society during the past decade. Howard's announcement of industrial reforms a hundred years after the first industrial laws were passed in Australia could be a good starting point for filmmakers eager to provide a revealing, well-researched and perhaps ironical view of pre-Federation Australia in the light of the Liberal reforms at the start of the 21st century.

Morgan Spurlock's film *Supersize Me* is based on a radical premise that one can live on nothing else but McDonald's food for thirty days. Informative, satirical, and, first and foremost entertaining, *Supersize Me* examines the impact of corporate strategies on our daily lives, and our perceptions of what constitutes a healthy diet. Most Australian schools have embraced the need to promote the benefits of a healthy diet, but the school curriculum in this area is often reduced to specialised classes or campaigns of reducing the amount of junk food sold at school canteens. While these attempts do have some merit, they could be enhanced or complemented by a documentary film tackling this serious issue in a satirical way, and by using promotional and marketing strategies with a specific, Australian flavour.



Supersize Me Study Guide Cover

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The Academy Award Winner, *March of the Penguins* (Luc Jacquet, 2005) has recently become the second highest grossing documentary of all time in the USA. Considering its theme, the mating habits of emperor penguins (many consider this apolitical), and its country of origin (France), this would seem a highly unlikely candidate for a box-office windfall, especially following Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11* and a series of American documentaries with a strong social note. Yet, it emerged on the crest of the wave of the long-awaited Michael Moore fatigue. Judging by the massive response to screening previews in Australia, this esoteric, visually stunning film from a world about which we know so little, is rapidly becoming the next documentary favourite in our schools. Whether *March of the Penguins* is the first in the line of new, 'apolitical documentary films', or an attempt to draw attention to issues more important than politics, is anyone's guess. The film offers a refreshing, exciting view of documentary filmmaking for our classrooms.

In the meantime, political opponents of Moore and the Liberals in the USA, made sure that even a film about emperor penguins didn't pass without political qualifications, promoting it as a story about monogamy and family values. It has subsequently come to light that emperor penguins are not as family orientated or monogamous as some American film reviewers had initially thought. This might be a good lesson for Australian filmmakers. Moore's long shadow is difficult to escape, even if you are in South Pole, or a little more northern, Down Under.

EnhanceTV winner announced

Congratulations to Jacqueline Hyett from Central Gippsland TAFE in Victoria, winner of a DVD recorder in EnhanceTV's competition.

The competition asked entrants to tell the enhanceTV team what they liked most about the service in 25 words or less, with teachers nominating the rich and relevant content as being invaluable in planning their lessons. The site now has over 5000 subscribers, making it an important vehicle for filmmakers wanting to promote their content to the education market for free.

Regularly changing features, including this month's features on ANZAC day, have proven to be popular with teachers. Educators also like the free downloads such as study guides, as well as the email television guide which allows them to find out about upcoming programs specific to the curriculum they teach.

To find out more about EnhanceTV can work for you, visit www.enhancetv.com.au

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With only 2.6% of this pool remaining, the team has continued its excellent record in distributing the money that it collects.

"But this last stage is still important," Member Services Executive Cameron Patience said. "We want to get as much of this money out the door as possible. It's members money and we are working with the rightsholders we are contacting to ensure that we get it into their hands before the deadline."

If you have any questions, email memberservices@screenrights.org

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Screenrights International royalties

Screenrights International will soon be distributing 2004 retransmission royalties from Finland and 2003 and 2004 royalties from Germany. Money will also be distributed for 2004 private copying in Spain.

Screenrights International Administrator Maha Ismail said she would shortly be contacting members who have registered titles and whose programs were broadcast in these territories during these particular years.

How fair is fair use?

With the issue of "fair use" of copyright material now a question of major importance for rights owners, the Australian Copyright Council has published a Bulletin looking at how the fair use defence works and proposals for change.

The Commonwealth Attorney-General's department is currently reviewing provisions in the Copyright Act that allow for the fair use of copyright material for certain specified purposes. One of the proposals being considered is whether these exceptions should be broadened to allow for a more US style exception, providing for the fair use of copyright works regardless of the purpose of the use.

Technology has also increased the pressure on a copyright owner's ability to control how and when their work is used with many consumers now able to copy material with relative ease.

Screenrights has made submissions in relation to this matter, arguing that changes to the provisions that allow for the fair use of copyright material should not erode a copyright owner's right to make a living from his or her work. Our submissions are available on our website: www.screenrights.org

In particular we are concerned that any changes to the provisions do not erode the current educational copying provisions that allow for educational use of copyright material, provided copyright owners are paid for this use of their work.

The Copyright Council Bulletin provides a useful resource for anyone who is interested in this issue, with information on the current provisions, the international situation and the proposals for change in Australia. It can be ordered from the Council's website: www.copyright.org.au

50 years of ABC footage at your fingertips

Thousands of hours of footage recorded over the past 50 years by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) can now be accessed through an online database called TARA online.

TARA contains records on genres such as news and current affairs, science, music, sport and the arts, all sourced from productions dating from 1956, when television was introduced in Australia.

The database also includes records from other items donated to the ABC plus records of National Geographic and Associated Press Television News material that is held in Australia.

Augustus Dulgaro, Manager of Product and Content Sales said the online footage search service would "assist producers and researchers to find that all-important shot for their next production."