



CIFF

FILMSLAM 2019
43RD CLEVELAND INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL
STUDY GUIDE

FilmSlam

FILMSLAM IS PRESENTED BY

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LIFE WITHOUT BASKETBALL

USA, Switzerland, United Arab Emirates, 2018, 98 minutes
Tim O'Donnell and Jon Mercer, Directors

SYNOPSIS

Bilqis Abdul-Qaadir grew up loving basketball. In high school she became the highest scorer in Massachusetts history. She then went on to play at the University of Memphis and Indiana State, where she gained notoriety as the first Division 1 player to wear a hijab. This accolade sent her to the White House, where President Obama praised her for breaking barriers. But things changed when Abdul-Qaadir's college career ended. As she looked to play professionally in Europe, she learned that the International Basketball Federation (FIBA) restricted players from wearing headgear. For the first time, she was forced to choose between her devout faith and the sport she cherished so much. But why should she have to? Abdul-Qaadir decided to challenge the rule, petitioning FIBA and creating an awareness campaign about discrimination in sports. LIFE WITHOUT BASKETBALL follows her as she awaits a ruling from FIBA. During this time, she begins coaching Muslim girls in an effort to encourage them to follow their dreams. This inspiring documentary is proof that one person can truly make a difference. — E.F.

FEATURING

Bilqis Abdul-Qaadir – a former NCAA Division I basketball player striving to overturn the International Basketball Federation (FIBA) rule that prohibits wearing a hijab during play

ABOUT THE DIRECTORS

Biographies – Tim O'Donnell is an Emmy-nominated and award-winning documentary filmmaker. His work has appeared on ESPN, NBC, PBS, and OutsideTV and at the Sundance Film Festival and other events around the world. Jon Mercer is a director and editor whose work has been broadcast nationally and helped expand viewership for a number of online platforms. His films have screened internationally at festivals and can also be seen on PBS.

Filmography – LIFE WITHOUT BASKETBALL (2018).

CURRICULUM LINKS

Social Studies, Global Studies, Religion, English Language Arts, Media Studies

CURRICULUM GOALS

- Improve media literacy
- Develop critical thinking skills
- Engage in interdisciplinary learning
- Hone oral and written communication skills
- Foster global awareness and social justice

FILMSLAM VIEWING GUIDE

The Art of Filmmaking

Filmmakers of both narrative and documentary films (of either short or feature length) make numerous artistic decisions throughout the filmmaking process, beginning with the conception of the film, through filming, and finally during distribution and marketing. Understanding film terms and the production process helps viewers to identify and interpret these artistic choices.

Crew: The people who are involved with the production of a film and who do not appear in the film. The following are a few of the numerous people that make up a film crew:

- **Producer:** The person who oversees the entire filmmaking process. The producer finds the script, hires a director, finds financing to make and distribute the film, and markets the film.
- **Director:** The person who supervises the creative aspects of a film and instructs the actors and crew.
- **Screenwriter:** The person who creates the story, action, and dialogue.
- **Cinematographer:** The person who is responsible for the camerawork and lighting.
- **Editor:** The person who selects what he/she considers are the best shots and pieces them together to produce scenes, then larger sequences, and ultimately the film.

Development/Pre-Production: The process of preparing the film concept, assembling the crew, and determining a budget and shooting schedule. The following are terms often associated with this phase of the filmmaking process:

- **Synopsis:** A short description of the film.
- **Screenplay:** A detailed written account of the dialogue and action of a film, often including basic camera directions.
- **Literary Elements:** Films share numerous elements with literature, including plot, characters, setting, point of view, mood, and theme.
- **Genre:** A type or classification of films with identifiable similarities. Comedies, westerns, musicals, horror films, and science fiction films are popular genres.
- **Storyboard:** A series of drawings showing the scenes, shot by shot, and transitions for a film. The storyboard gives a director a clear idea of how the film will look.

Photography: The process of capturing visual images with a camera. The director and cinematographer make artistic choices about the following aspects:

- **Frame:** A single photograph of the larger film strip.
- **Shot:** A unit of film or series of frames over which the camera does not stop filming.
- **Take:** The length (in terms of time) of a single shot.
- **Focus:** The variable degree (from **hard** to **soft**) to which the image is clear and sharp.
- **Camera Angle:** The placement of the camera relative to the subject. When a camera is placed above (looking down upon) the subject, the camera is at a **high angle**. When the camera is placed below (looking upwards at) the subject, the camera is at a **low angle**.
- **Range:** The apparent distance between the camera and the subject, differentiated as **close-up shots** (framing the head from the neck up), **medium shots** (framing the body from the waist up), and **long shots** (framing the entire body).
- **Composition:** The organization of subjects or objects within the frame of the film.

- **Lighting:** The use of natural or artificial illumination and shadows for the purpose of visual clarity and/or mood.
- **Camera Movement:** There are number of common types of camera movements, including **panning** (in which the camera pivots from right to left, or vice versa), **tilting** (in which the camera pivots upwards or downwards), and **tracking** (in which the entire camera moves forwards, backwards, or sideways).

Sound Design: The process, completed during or after filming, of capturing, creating, and interweaving dialogue, sound effects, and music. The following are terms associated with this process:

- **Soundtrack:** The recorded sound of a film, including dialogue, sound effects, and music.
- **Voiceover:** A voice of a narrator, generally not seen but heard on the soundtrack of a film.

Post-Production/Editing: The process, typically after filming has concluded, of combining shots, scenes, and sequences with the soundtrack. The following are terms associated with this phase:

- **Cut:** The distinct, abrupt transition from one frame to another.
- **Fade Out/Fade In:** A technique in which a shot gradually darkens until a new one emerges from the darkness.
- **Dissolve:** A technique in which one image gradually transitions into another image in such a way that the viewer can temporarily see both images at the same time.
- **Flashback:** A sequence of a film that shows events that happened prior to those already shown.
- **Title Sequence:** Written material at the beginning of a film, usually including the names of the people involved in the production of the film (the director, producer, screenwriter, cinematographer, featured actors, etc.) and sometimes called the opening credits or titles.
- **Intertitles:** Text displayed on the screen in between photographed shots or superimposed over a photographed image.

Distribution/Marketing: The process of selling and supplying films to exhibitors, including mainstream theaters, art house theaters, film festivals, television networks, and websites.

A Short History of Filmmaking: Nonfiction Films

Since the advent of motion pictures in the mid-1890s, filmmakers have been creating nonfiction films. Often lasting about a minute, silent nonfiction films were known as “actualities” and could be further classified into two predominant sub-genres: “scenics,” depicting a filmmaker’s travels; and “topicals,” delineating contemporary events. Brothers Auguste and Louis Lumière, early filmmakers and inventors, pioneered this mode, releasing “Workers Leaving the Factory” and “Arrival of a Train” in 1895.

The nonfiction film developed into a feature-length genre, then called a “documentary,” in the 1920s. Filmmaker Robert Flaherty directed the internationally celebrated “Nanook of the North” about an Inuit family in Northern Canada in 1922. Featuring numerous staged reenactments of the family’s daily activities, “Nanook of the North” portrayed Flaherty’s subjective understanding of Inuit life. Among those impressed with Flaherty’s work was British documentarian John Grierson. Throughout the 1930s, Grierson, who mainly garnered financial support from the government and businesses instead of the film industry, lauded the educational function of film and produced a number of noteworthy documentaries, including “Night Mail” in 1936.

In addition to these feature-length documentaries, newsreels, which often preceded the screenings of Hollywood narrative films, kept viewers informed about current events prior to the

invention and popularization of television. During World War II, the American government depended upon newsreels and documentaries to explain America's role in the war and to build morale. Academy Award®-winning directors, including Frank Capra, John Ford, and William Wyler, contributed to the war effort by filming educational, and largely propagandistic, documentaries.

Following the war, new technologies transformed the style of documentaries in the 1950s and 1960s. Lighter, more portable camera and sound equipment allowed filmmakers to capture events as they happened. While some filmmakers strove for a more personal documentary style during this period, a movement known as Direct Cinema (related to the French *cinéma vérité* movement) aimed for immediacy, truth, and objectivity through techniques that called for the least amount of interference with their subjects. The “rockumentary” genre developed from this movement. D.A. Pennebaker, who directed “Don’t Look Back” (1967) about a Bob Dylan tour, and David and Albert Maysles, who along with Charlotte Zwerin directed “Gimme Shelter” (1970) about a Rolling Stones festival, were key figures in the Direct Cinema movement.

As filmmakers began to question their ability to achieve pure objectivity, the “synthetic” documentary emerged in the 1970s and continues to be a common style of documentary to this day. Filmmakers of synthetic documentary combine the observational methods of Direct Cinema with interviews, archival footage, intertitles, and music. In the 1990s, independent production companies found a growing audience for documentary films at film festivals, in art house theaters, and on cable television. The documentaries of Michael Moore (“Roger and Me” [1989], “Bowling for Columbine” [2002], “Fahrenheit 9/11” [2004]) and family-friendly nature documentaries like Luc Jacquet’s “March of the Penguins” (2005), among others, demonstrated the appeal of the mode amongst mainstream theater audiences, as well. Viewers’ familiarity with the conventions of documentaries allowed the “mockumentary,” or documentary parody—exemplified in the films of Christopher Guest (“Waiting for Guffman” [1996], “Best in Show” [2000]) and several comedic television series (“The Office” [2005-2013] and “Parks and Recreation” [2009-2015])—to take shape as a significant genre of contemporary popular culture. Today, crowd-sourcing websites, like Kickstarter and Indiegogo, enable young filmmakers to secure funding for their projects outside of studio support and thus have ushered in a new crop of innovative, socially significant documentaries.

Sources and Suggestions for Further Reading: Kristin Thompson and David Bordwell, *Film History: An Introduction*, 3rd ed. (New York: McGraw Hill, 2010); David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, *Film Art: An Introduction*, 9th ed. (New York: McGraw Hill, 2010); Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*, 2nd ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010).

PRE-SCREENING ACTIVITIES

Assess the students' experiences viewing documentary films. Which documentaries have they seen? Discuss how documentary films differ from and are similar to fiction/narrative films. In your discussion, consider film scholar Bill Nichols's definition of documentary film: "Documentary film speaks about situations and events involving real people (social actors) who present themselves to us as themselves in stories that convey a plausible proposal about, or perspective on, the lives, situations, and events portrayed. The distinct point of view of the filmmaker shapes this story into a way of seeing the historical world directly rather than into a fictional allegory."

Screen the entire film or key scenes from one or more of the documentaries listed in the short history above. Research the historical context of the film's production and how changes in the film industry, film technology, and larger artistic movements affected its subject matter and style.

In preparation for the screening of *LIFE WITHOUT BASKETBALL*, review the history and current role of Muslims in American culture. Consider watching the *New York Times* video "[The Secret History of Muslims in the U.S.](#)" or reading the *National Geographic* article "[How Muslims, Often Misunderstood, Are Thriving in America](#)" for brief but informative primers.

MAKING THE MOST OF POST-SCREENING Q&As

FilmSlam offers a unique opportunity for teachers and students to interact with filmmakers and/or local experts on the subject of the films screened. While teachers and students should feel comfortable asking any question inspired by their viewing of the films, the following questions (and many others) may help viewers understand the production process, how the subject of the film is important to their local community, and/or how they can get involved in local organizations.

What inspired the filmmaker to make a film on this subject?

What does the filmmaker hope audiences will take away from the film? (After the Q&A, consider if the filmmaker's answer aligns with or differs from your reaction to the film.)

How did the filmmaker get funding for the film?

How did the filmmaker assemble the production team? How big was the production team?

How long did the film take to produce?

Where else has or will this film be screened?

How or why is the subject of this film important to the students' local community?

How can students get involved?

POST-SCREENING ACTIVITIES

Reflect on a time you encountered one or more obstacles while attempting to fulfill a personal goal. How did you feel at the time? How did you react to the obstacle? Did you ultimately succeed or fail?

What did you learn from the experience? Would you do anything differently? Write a journal entry in response to these questions.

Research another trailblazing athlete who helped diversify and integrate American or international sports. Write a 500-word news article detailing the athlete's accomplishments and share your findings in a short presentation to the class.

PROMPTS FOR CLASS DISCUSSION

Interpreting Film Content, Characters, and Themes

Discuss the title of the film. During the period portrayed in the film, is Bilqis's life truly "without basketball"? Explain your answer.

In the film, President Barack Obama describes Bilqis as not only an inspiration to Muslim girls, but an inspiration to all of us. What can we learn from Bilqis?

The filmmakers include numerous scenes of Bilqis doing everyday activities with her family, from eating to praying to playing games. What do these scenes illustrate?

How has Bilqis's father influenced Bilqis? How has Bilqis influenced her father?

Bilqis questions who she is without basketball. Can you relate to this sentiment? Would you feel lost if you were prohibited from pursuing one of your interests? Which interest? Explain.

According to Bilqis, "the media runs Islam"? What does she mean by this statement? How does Bilqis's life compare to other Muslims portrayed in popular film and television?

Why is FIBA's rule, in Bilqis's words, "bigger than basketball"?

How has the current political climate affected Bilqis in particular?

Why is Bilqis conflicted about the decision to overturn the rule prohibiting hijabs during play? What would you have done in her place? How would you have felt?

When Bilqis met with FIBA, there were no women representatives of the organization. Why does this rightly bother Bilqis? What does it say about the organization?

How does the film end? What do you think is next for Bilqis and basketball?

Interpreting Film Style*

Documentarians have a number of tools for presenting information: interviews or "talking heads" (testimonials of witnesses or experts); observational footage (images of events as they happen); reenactments or staged events; archival footage (images initially created by someone else); **intertitles**; **voiceovers**; and graphics (maps, charts, or diagrams). Which of these tools does the filmmaker employ? What role does archival footage play in this film? Which events might be staged in this film? Which do you think are most effective at conveying the film's message?

Consider the structure of the film. How do the filmmakers piece together the tools listed above to present a compelling documentary? How are the main subjects (Bilqis and her family) introduced? How do the filmmakers transition between the different informational tools? How do these choices affect your interpretation of the film?

Recall the **range of shots** and **camera angles** the filmmaker uses. When does the filmmaker use **close-up** shots, **medium** shots, or **long** shots? What impact do framing and camera angles have on your understanding of the Bilqis's experiences?

Identify and discuss the footage shot by Bilqis on her mobile phone or computer. What do these scenes share in common? Why do you think the filmmakers chose to include them?

*Definitions for terms in **bold** can be found in the FilmSlam Viewing Guide.