



CIFF

FILMSLAM 2019
43RD CLEVELAND INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL
STUDY GUIDE

FilmSlam

FILMSLAM IS PRESENTED BY

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THE CITY THAT SOLD AMERICA

USA, 2018, 67 minutes
Ky Dickens, Director

SYNOPSIS

What do Kleenex®, the Pillsbury Doughboy, “Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer,” and the “Wassup” Bud Light Commercial have in common? They were all created by Chicago advertising firms. In fact, most of the advertising techniques we use and reference today come from Chicago, which has always been a city known for its creativity and innovation. Before the invention of the transcontinental jet, Chicago served as the central hub of the entire country. Every train going east to west or north to south had to stop in Chicago. What resulted was a vital center for the exchange of people, goods, and most importantly, ideas. THE CITY THAT SOLD AMERICA is a glorious deep dive into Chicago’s rich history and its lasting effects on our world today. In what reads like a love letter to the Windy City, THE CITY THAT SOLD AMERICA is an upbeat and fascinating documentary that history buffs, Chicagophiles, and everyone else will thoroughly enjoy. – G.S.

ABOUT THE DIRECTOR

Biography – Ky Dickens is best known for her highly acclaimed documentary work and her emotionally compelling commercial reel. Her documentaries have been featured on CNN and are available on Netflix, iTunes, and Amazon. Her film “Sole Survivor” received the award for Best Feature Film at the 2013 BMA Awards; her documentary “Fish Out of Water” was inducted into the United States Library

of Congress; and her film “Zero Weeks” garnered multiple Best Documentary Feature and Best Editing awards. She is also the recipient of the Focus Award for Achievement in Directing from Women in Film.

Filmography – “Fish Out of Water” (2009), “Sole Survivor” (2013), “Zero Weeks” (2017), THE CITY THAT SOLD AMERICA (2018).

CURRICULUM LINKS

History, Social Studies, Cultural Studies, Economics, 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 *THE CITY THAT SOLD AMERICA*, review the history of advertising in America more broadly. Consider reading William M. O'Barr's "[A Brief History of Advertising in America](#), published in *Advertising & Society Review*. Then discuss how advertising has varied by regions in America.

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

Select one of the products featured in the film, and find at least three of its advertising campaigns released from when the product was introduced until today. Try to find both print and television or digital ads from different decades. What remains consistent between the three campaigns? What do

the differences reflect about the culture in America at the time it was produced? Write a short analytical essay about how the product has been sold to Americans.

In a group of three students (one copywriter, one art director, and one account executive), select a product and create a television ad campaign. Considering how the product appeals to its target audience, pitch the ad campaign to the class using a **storyboard**. At this stage, expect to receive feedback from the class (and to give feedback to your classmates during their pitches). After your pitch has been given the go-ahead, create the final commercial with your group and present it to the class.

PROMPTS FOR CLASS DISCUSSION

Interpreting Film Content, Characters, and Themes

According to the film, what made the city of Chicago particularly important to the advertising industry?

Author Thomas Dyja describes Montgomery Ward and Sears Roebuck as “the original Amazon.” What does he mean by this comparison? How did these two companies change the way Americans shopped?

What makes the style of Chicago advertising unique? What do you think is meant by a “midwestern perspective”?

Recall the various products and/or campaigns, conceived by advertisers in Chicago, that created a new demand among consumers. How did any of these change the ways Americans lived?

According to the film, copywriter Claude Hopkins popularized the “preemptive claim” or “restating the obvious.” Which examples are given in the film? Can you think of any ads that use the same tactic today?

Discuss the changing role of race in American advertising.

Why is the introduction of black beauty products significant?

How does the introduction of new media change the advertising industry?

Discuss the distinction between the “hard sell” and the “soft sell.”

Compare and contrast Albert Lasker and Leo Burnett.

Reflect on the commercials of your youth. Which brands continue to stand out to you? What tactics did the advertisers use to attract your attention?

Chart the focus on niche markets in television advertising. Why are the “Double Dutch” McDonald’s and “Coke Adds Life” commercials important?

How does the introduction of the transcontinental jet affect the prominence of the city of Chicago?

At the end of the film, many of the advertisers lament the changes in the industry. In what ways might changes in the industry be considered positive?

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 does the filmmaker piece together the tools listed above to present a compelling documentary? How does the filmmaker transition between the different informational tools? How do these choices affect your interpretation of the film?

How do the **close-up shots** of **storyboard** illustrations function in the film?

Describe the pacing of the film. Why is this pacing particularly apt for the subject matter?

The filmmaker uses numerous still photographs of old advertisements. Recall the techniques she employs to make these visuals more dynamic.

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