


TRUE FILMS

3.0

**200 DOCUMENTARIES
YOU MUST SEE BEFORE YOU DIE**



Perfect
with Netflix

KEVIN KELLY

TRUE FILMS

3.0

This is the golden age of documentaries.

Inexpensive equipment, new methods of distribution, and a very eager audience have all launched a renaissance in non-fiction film making and viewing.

The very best of these non-fiction films are as entertaining as the best Hollywood blockbusters. Because they are true, their storylines seem fresh with authentic plot twists, real characters, and truth stranger than fiction. Most true films are solidly informative, and a few are genuinely useful like a tool.

The rise of documentaries and true cinema is felt not only in movie theaters, but on network TV and cable channels as well. Reality TV, non-fiction stations like the History Channel or Discovery, and BBC imports have increased the choices in true films tremendously. There's no time to watch them all, and little guidance to what's great.

In this book I offer 200+ great true films.

I define true films as documentaries, educational films, instructional how-to's, and what the British call factuals – a non-fiction visual account. These 200 are the best non-fiction films I've found for general interest. I've watched all these films more than once. Sometimes thrice. I haven't had TV for 20 years, so I've concentrated my viewing time on documentaries and true films. I run a little website (www.truefilms.com) where I solicit suggestions of great stuff.

What am I looking for in a great true film?

- It must be factual.
- It must surprise me, but not preach to me.
- If it introduces me to a world or subculture that I never thought about before, even better.
- There's a plot – a transformation from beginning to the end.
- It's easily available.

As dogged as I have been in tracking down great true films, I have seen only a fraction of the more than 60,000 that have been made, and the thousands now being made each year. If you know of an amazing true film that I've missed please recommend it to me: kk@kk.org.

Where to get the films:

I recommend only those great and worthwhile titles that are available on tape or DVD at consumer prices. I indicate whether a film is rentable from Netflix, and if it is purchasable from Amazon. If neither of those options is available, I will then list an alternative source.

For too long true films have been hard to find, appearing only fleetingly in theaters, or projected in school classrooms on expensive 16mm prints, or hidden on back shelves at video rental places. Now DVDs and websites are rapidly increasing the availability of true films; their prices continue to drop, and their distribution expands.

However, many great true films are still not easily seen. The British produce fantastic factuals that are shown a few times on BBC and then mothballed. A lot of older documentaries have still not been released on DVD or tape. Some of the greatest documentaries ever made are owned by educational agencies that price them according to the old model of scarce film prints. Since their customers were once only classrooms in schools and universities, these distributors set very steep fees – typically \$300 to purchase a tape, and \$100 merely to rent it. They have maintained these prices for individuals, which is plainly ridiculous. I view this as an ideal strategy to prevent as many people as possible from seeing a film. So far, I am unable to recommend any of those good films since their fees, though lowered, are still not reasonable consumer prices. And much of the BBC treasure trove is still not released, although more of it is seeping out online as electronic downloads. As they reach consumer levels, to the point that anyone who wants to see it can pretty easily order a copy, I'll add the best of those to the True Films list.

Happily, more and more recent documentaries are being released to a receptive public at consumer prices. Even better, a growing number of factuals are also carried by the emerging online DVD subscription services. Big companies like Blockbuster, WalMart, and Amazon UK offer some true films among their wide selections of fictional films. Some smaller players like GreenCine (www.greencine.com) offer interesting selections of true films that no one else may carry.

The major player in the documentaries is now Netflix (www.netflix.com).

I am a huge fan of Netflix's film subscription service. Their library of 55,000 films (including nearly 6,000 true films) is now my library. At any one moment I have over 100 documentary titles I'd like to see stacked up in my Netflix queue waiting for me to return the last one I watched.

The way Netflix works is this: the list of films I want to see is kept on my computer; the films come as DVD discs in the mail; I always hold 3 at home. As I watch them I send them back in the same envelope (no postage and no late fees) whenever I am done, and they automatically send me the next one in my queue. The service is amazingly fast, incredibly intelligent, inexpensive, and the best way to try out documentaries in a low risk way (it costs you nothing to return a disc unviewed). Give them a try (each film I review that they carry is linked to their database from my True Films site). If there is a true film you want to see that they don't have, ask them to order it.

Netflix are such great fans of true film fans that they have been releasing notable documentaries onto DVD themselves, on their own "label." These are films that were released in theaters but for various reasons never transferred to DVD. As of this printing, Netflix has released 170 such true films. Indeed, if you are the creator of a film documentary looking for a way to transfer it to DVD, you should contact them directly.

Still, some true films are hard to find. If you can't find a listed great true film for sale on Amazon, or even the used-item section of Amazon, you should check eBay, which carries a surprising number of used videos and DVDs. Don't forget your local public library either. It is not uncommon for libraries in one region to pool their videos into a decent video library, yours for the asking. Also, even the saddest video rental store should carry at least a dozen of these titles. Shopping information changes rapidly so I'm trying to keep the ordering information for each film current on my website, at www.truefilms.com. Check there if you are having trouble finding something.

Tip on watching films:

Almost every film listed here is a film made with the big screen in mind. Even independent and underground filmmakers intend (and hope) their work will be projected in a large theater. You'll get more out of the film if you can watch it on a sizeable screen. Seven years ago when we decided to migrate from our tiny 12" screen to something more appropriate for films, I choose to use a cheap computer projector shining on a wall screen. In a few years from now extremely large flat screens should be quite affordable and even better.

I bought the cheapest, smallest, computer projector I could find,

the kind of portable conference projector you see advertised in airline magazines. You can get a good one now for \$800. The quality of even the low-end projectors exceeds the quality of video, although it is not up to High Definition yet. I recommend the Epson Powerlite S1, or whatever will replace it (models obsolesce within a year). You hook it up to an everyday DVD player. The setup works perfectly fine. So many folks have discovered this trick that manufactures like Epson, In Focus and Sharp now market models for precisely this use.



If your wall is white and uncluttered you can project onto the wall, or you can find an inexpensive roll-up screen, which is what we did. In addition to the small projector we also added inexpensive surround sound to the room. You can get wireless speakers these days which make installation easy. The full experience is as about as good as our local half-plex theater.

Is it perfect? No. Our cheap home theater quality does not match the experience of viewing a good print on a large screen in a good theater. Also, because of the large windows in our room, we use the theater mostly at night. The projector has a fan in it so it is not as silent as a TV or a flat panel, but in a large room with the volume cranked up you won't notice.

All the electronic gear sits compactly hidden beneath a tiny end table, on the floor. (By design the projector angles upward slightly so it fills the screen from the floor perfectly.) Most visitors to the room don't have any idea that it can transform into a serviceable home theater in the time it takes to roll down the screen.

Enjoy. And let me know which films you like the best. Even better, tell me about one I missed. I plan to do future editions and I'll share your tip.

– Kevin Kelly
Winter 2007

10 mph

This is a mildly amusing comedy about two nerdy guys who escape their cubicles and dream up a road trip to cure their boredom – riding across America on a Segway scooter. At a maximum speed of 10 mph, it's a long trip. For 100 days they alternate drifting upright across the land with spells driving their support van right behind, also crawling along at 10 mph. The film does not maximize the drama as much as it could have, but if these hapless, unprepared geeks can make it across, anyone can.



*By Hunter Weeks
2006, 92 min.*

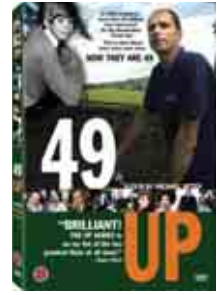
*Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix*



With batteries that only last a few hours, it was a never-ending chore to swap them out. Riding at night, in the snow, on a blind curve, is nuts.

49 Up

In 1963 the BBC filmed a set of 7-year school children and asked them what they thought their future would be. Because some of the kids were rich and some were poor, their aspirations revealed the traditional British class divide. But every 7 years since, the director has gone back and re-interviewed them, and their story has gotten far more interesting. The twists and turns of each life have been surprisingly unpredictable. With its longitudinal reach of nearly 50 years, this is one of the coolest and deepest reality shows ever made. Now the kids are 49. In their latest episode the director tries to balance an inherent tension. The film can't assume anyone has seen the earlier versions (see my review on p.180), and so it must recap the previous films, but now that the subjects' lives are so long, a recap won't leave much time for the new years. 49 Up tackles this dilemma by re-interpreting each life in view of their latest 7 years, and so if you have been following along, it feels completely fresh. If you have not been part of the journey so far, this quick life-long portrait will pull you in, and you may want to see the earlier films. If you have been watching, these will be old friends. The subjects are now into their 50s and I found myself dying to know what happens next - in 56 Up.



*By Michael Apted
2005, 134 min.*

*Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix*

Forty years after. The semblence is there as kids, but the turns their lives took could not be foreseen.



1900 House

The premise of this reality-TV program is brilliant, and seminal, spawning similar experiments in different time periods. *1900 House* takes an ordinary middle class family of the year 2000 and makes them live for 6 months like an ordinary middle class family of the year 1900. The London-based producers succeed in this transformation by getting every detail of Victorian domestic life exactly right and complete. The volunteer family is plunked down in this old era as if by time machine, and there is no escape. No shampoo, either. The edited 6-hour result is deep, instructive, and totally riveting. Kids who hate history are mesmerized by it. Because it is so visual and visceral, it changed the discussion of chores and gender roles in our household. Better than 100 essays, this video series reveals the notion of progress. It is now my favorite history "book."



By Jonathan Barker and
Caroline Ross-Pirie
1999, 220 min.

Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix

The other historical time survivor series are Frontier House, p.63, and Colonial House, p.39. Of the three series, this one is the most historical, but since it revolves around only one family, the least dramatic.



Learning to breathe while in a corset was a major challenge. Putting one on was a major undertaking, too. There was time on Sunday to don a suit and go swimming. When guests arrived for dinner they too needed to be dressed appropriately. Laundry day (lower left) was a horror that the women dreaded. It lasted all day and involved hours of very demanding physical work. The family finally got some ease by hiring a servant, which brought its own troubles.

9/11

By fantastic coincidence two young French filmmakers were documenting the life of a New York firehouse for several months when the Twin Towers were struck by planes. Their chosen firehouse just happened to be the closest one to the World Trade Center. By pure luck they filmed *both* planes hitting the towers, and the fall of the second tower, minutes after they exited it. This luck has made this film into an most amazing inside look at the hellish events as the towers burned and crashed. In addition to the expected horror, there is personal drama: you are waiting – like the other firemen in the station – to find out who did not return from the collapse. The footage is heroic and astounding and heartbreaking. I experienced a huge sense of emotional closure by watching the film because I now felt I had some idea of what happened in the offices; I felt I was there. This documentary guarantees you a journey you won't forget.



*By Gedeon Naudet,
Jules Naudet and
James Hanlon
2002, 120 min.*

*Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix*

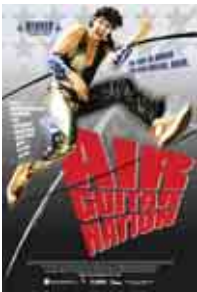


Rookies are lectured outside the station in view of the towers. Fully outfitted firemen wander through the lobby before the first tower fell (bottom left). One of the plane engines in the street (bottom right).



Air Guitar Nation

Serious fun! Follow contestants on their way to the Air Guitar World Championships in Finland. No actual guitars allowed. Features the first Americans to participate in this underrated “sport olympics.” The judges award points for “airness.” This documentary is a perfect flick to play at a party. No one will leave. Over-the-top hilarity. You had to be there.



By Alexandra Lipsitz
2006, 81 min.

Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix

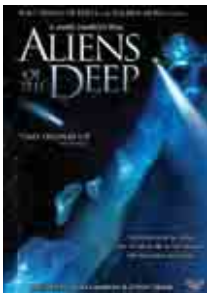


A very rare perfect score (left) sends shivers through the contestants.



Aliens of the Deep

Who knew that James Cameron, the director of the *Alien* films and *Titanic*, was a hopeless science nerd and submarine groupie? Cameron uses his extensive resources to hire four cute mini-submersibles, staffs them with good looking astronauts and exo-biologists, and then sets off to explore the bottom of the ocean as if it were another planet. And it is! There is a weird world down there, entirely separate from the solar powered ecosystems on the rest of the planet. In the oceanic deep, this alien world is chemically- and heat-powered, which makes for very bizarre creatures, seen up close and personal. Cameron makes the controversial case that archaic life may have begun in this non-solar environment first and then later migrated to the lighted world. The drama of surviving bone-crushing deep dives is just a rehearsal for future expeditions to the other moons in our solar system that may have water and underwater alien life. The science is well done, very engaging, and very imaginative. It's presented with such impeccable Hollywood filmwork that it feels like a science fiction film. Be sure to watch the extended, and not the short IMAX, version.



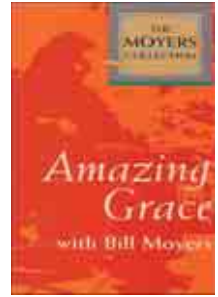
By James Cameron
2005, 47 min.
Available form Amazon
Rent from Netflix



A gossamer jelly never before seen (left). Smokers emit noxious fumes, boiling water, and alien life. The console of Cameron's submersible (above) is a cockpit of instruments and video monitors. In view is a companion vehicle.

Amazing Grace

The simplest are sometimes the best. This documentary is about one short song: "Amazing Grace." A universe can be seen through this four-stanza song. Bill Moyers follows the origins and evolution of one of the world's most famous hymns. It is part music history, part African-American history, and part song itself.



*With Bill Moyers
1989, 70 min.*

*Available from Amazon
and PBS*



The origins of the tune are unknown. There are several variants played in Appalachia (above), including a complex version sung by Sacred Harp singers (right). The lyrics were written by a reformed slave trader, all the more ironic given the song's role in African-American struggles for civil rights.



American Movie

Some people find this documentary depressing because it is about a man trapped by dreams larger than his resources. A 30-year-old slacker in a dead prairie town in Wisconsin dreams of making a horror flick. He has no money, no skills, no equipment, and no clue. Using beer money earned from delivering newspapers, he bullies his drug-addled friends into acting while he ineptly directs, often getting his elderly mom to help out as incompetent gripper. These scenes are very funny. For years his film is only talk, while he lounges in front of a TV, fights with his girlfriend in a trailer park, or tries to wheedle money from his senile uncle – all riveting in their reality. You are utterly convinced his film will never be made. Yet scene by crazy scene, filmed in his kitchen or car over the seasons, he finally completes his non-masterpiece. When finished, his friends shrug like zombies. Was it worth the incredible determination it took given his situation? He is the only one who thinks so. I found his hurdles to be real, and his delusion of success inspiring.



By Chris Smith
1999, 104 min.

Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix



His spacey buddy tries to play guitar blindfolded. A still from the emerging film (above). Our hero is never at a loss for details of his plans.



American Splendor

This odd work is a mixture of documentary film about an eccentric cartoonist, spliced into dramatic reliving of his life by actors, mixed in with scenes where both the cartoonist and his family interact with the actors playing them. Very post-modern, but it kinda works. The odd cartoonist is Harvey Pekar, a downbeat, depressed, obsessive curmudgeon, who was an early friend of Robert Crumb (they met at a garage sale collecting old jazz records). Pekar's memoir of his life as a blue-collar hospital file clerk was illustrated by Crumb as a comic book series, catapulting Pekar into hip coolness. And hence this film. Pekar and his incredibly ultra-geeky friends and family make a very offbeat story.



*By Shari Springer Berman and Robert Pulcini
2003, 101 min.*

*Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix*

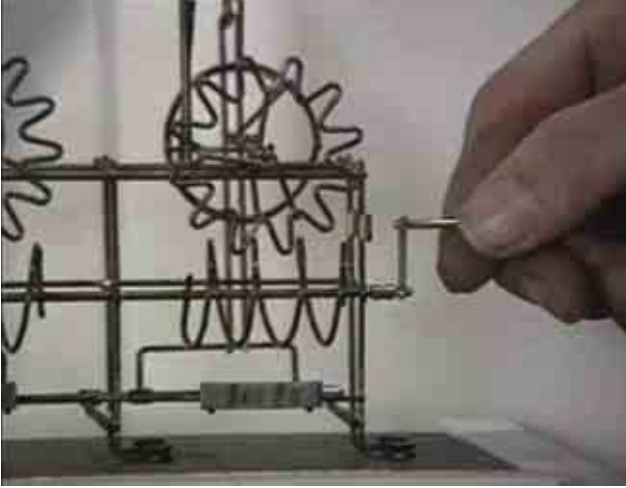


Despite, or because of, his confrontational nature, Harvey Pekar became a frequent guest of David Letterman.



The real Harvey Pekar talks to his real nerdy friend while their actor counterparts chat in the background on the set. The real Harvey Pekar sits at his station in the hospital filing room while his studio counterpart sits on stage.



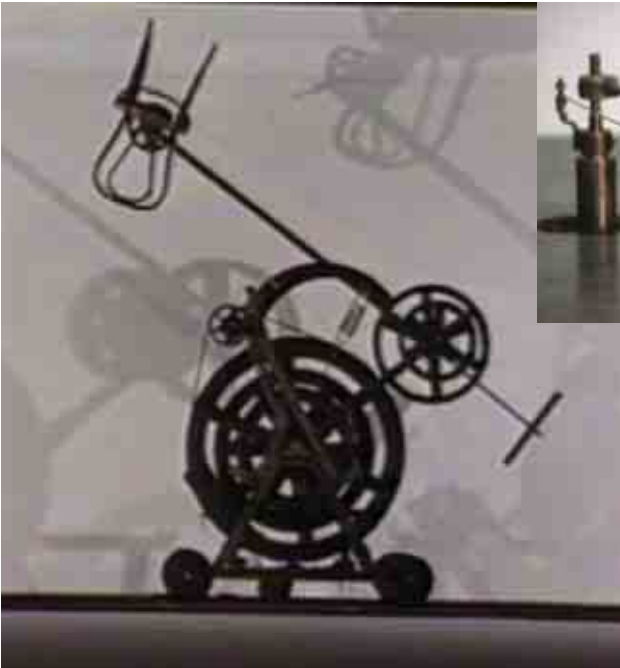


*By Arthur Ganson
2004, 70 min.*

*Available from
arthurganson.com*

Arthur Ganson Presents a Few Machines

Cool and useless. That's my definition of art. A midnight engineer and MIT professor creates totally useless machines. They are exquisitely beautiful. They do absolutely nothing. At best they whir and click and shake. A genuine artist, he also has filmed his machines obliquely, only partially seen, behind a veil of mystery. You want to know how they work, what they do, how come? No answers. Only peeks at cool and useless machines in marvelous varieties and cleverness, turning, turning, turning. Utterly riveting, supremely inspiring, and very geeky. Show this at a party, and everyone stops, transfixed.



Arthur Ganson's creations include a dried artichoke petal affixed to a brass arm which walks it slowly across a metallic disk (above). A massive machine on a wheeled-track (left) will grab a chair in its way, hoist it above itself and then set the chair down in exactly its original spot as it passes under it. Then it reverses and does the same all over again.

Atomic Cafe

This is a self portrait of nuclear bombs and atomic energy. It was assembled from unaltered documentary clips produced by governmental and industrial agencies during the 1940s and 50s and even 60s. We get inside views of this iconic technology not usually seen. The parade of images and voices are cinematic and riveting; at times nuclear is beautiful, then silly, and then horrifying. Yet the narration of the time reflects a non-chalant acceptance of atomic power as wholesome. On first viewing, this montage of found visual evidence seem ridiculous, campy, kitsch. Could anyone have believed it? But on second view the propaganda is stark and scary. There's no overt preaching in this film; only the words and images of the time. I think this brilliant documentary should be mandatory for all students.



By Jayne Loader, Kevin Rafferty and Pierce Rafferty
1982, 88 min.

Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix



US soldiers practice storming a just exploded atomic bomb in Nevada. Injuries from Hiroshima (below). A bomb is released in the Bikini atoll to measure its effect on empty navy ships (bottom).

A boy demonstrates the proper use of the radiation suit invented by his father. He'll then ride off on his bicycle.



Baka: People of the Forest

This is one of the all-time great visual anthropology pieces. It took the filmmakers two years to settle into a village of Pygmies and six months of warming up before they even began filming. All this care transforms exotic natives into next-door people. My favorite part is when the little boy tells his parents he wants them to send his newborn brother back from wherever it was that he came. Noble savages, this ain't.



*By Phil Agland
1990, 54 min*

*Available from National
Geographic
<http://shopngvideos.com>*

The extended family sits around a campfire while an elder tells a story. Mother tries to chide her young son to go help his father (right). Son points to place where the roof is leaking. He doesn't like it, and complains of getting wet (below). He gets a ride to the hunting camp on his dad's shoulders.



Baraka

A cinematic poem celebrating the human relation to the eternal. Not a word is spoken. But every person in every one of the twenty-four countries this prayer was filmed in would understand it. It's about Us on Earth Now. It's the first truly sacred film I've seen (best viewed on as large a screen as possible). Next time they send a disc into space to be viewed by aliens, this is the disc they should send.



By Ron Fricke
1992, 96 min.

Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix

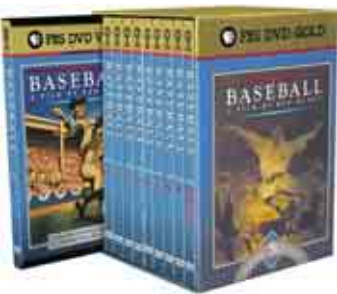


Children from an Amazonian tribe shuffle dance in a circle. The leader of a monkey dance in Bali is almost in a trance (right). Waves of arms sway in unison during the chants of the dance (below).



Baseball

Ken Burns' masterful, comprehensive biography of baseball. It busts many of the myths of baseball's origins and weaves its growth into the very genesis of the modern American life-style. As with any Burns production, you get the big picture illuminated with lovely tiny details. At 10 DVD discs, it's way longer than 9 innings. Like some games, it can go on and on, and the later history of the Yankees is not as universally appreciated. But you don't know baseball – or America – until you've seen this.



*By Ken Burns
1994, 1140 min.*

*Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix*



An early diamond (below left) with similarities to cricket. In silhouette (below) Amish and Menonite boys play an alternative form of base ball.

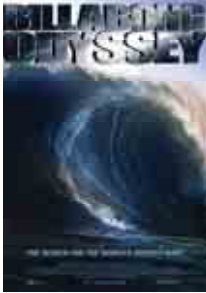


Billabong Odyssey • Riding Giants • Step into Liquid

Sons of *The Endless Summer* (p.54). All three of these recent documentaries are very satisfying overviews of surfing today. *Step Into Liquid* is actually made by the son of the filmmaker of the original *Endless Summer* surf-fest – the granddaddy of all surf movies and road-trip documentaries. It’s a fun roundup of how surfing has blossomed to become mainstream and recently technologically innovative. It presents some offbeat surfers, like the ones who ride behind oil tankers. *Riding Giants*, on the other hand, is a quick history of how surfers were seduced by bigger and bigger waves, and delves into the subculture of big wave surfers today. But for my money, the best of the three is *Billabong Odyssey*, which is *The Endless Summer* on steroids. The film follows a crack team of big wave surfers as they fly around the world seeking out really HUGE waves (60 plus feet), with the hope of (and prize for) first successfully surfing a 100-foot wave. It is hard to describe how monstrous and punishing these waves are, but with helicopters, water jets, rescue teams, and coast guard boats in support, you get an awesome view of giant wave surfing, and by all accounts a peak human moment. One gets a sense that surfing has just begun.



Surfers are swung into a towering wave via a water jet tow, which is racing away (above). Smaller waves created in the bow of incoming tankers (left) are less intimidating but will last for 20 minutes or longer.



By Philip Boston
2003, 92 min.

Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix



By Stacy Peralta
2004, 101 min.

Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix

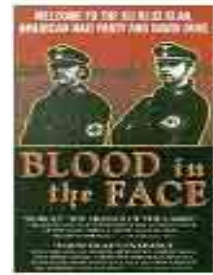


By Dana Brown (II)
2003, 87 min.

Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix

Blood in the Face

Filmed in the late 1980s when militant white supremacists were on the rise, this documentary lets them talk without comment during a rally in Michigan. It soon becomes clear what wackos and crackpots they are. For example the title of the film comes from their definition of a white person: a person who can blush; you know, where there's blood in the face. It's all downhill from there, with conspiracy theories, looney facts, secret information, unabashed ignorance, and of course, tons of blind hate. The more sincere and harder the racists try to explain as they become more intimate in the film, the more ridiculous they seem. Rather than conjuring up fear (as, say, the film *State of Mind*, p.164, about the cult of North Korea does), this one summons up pity for the deranged. Still, it's a fantastic window into a political force larger than its marginal numbers, and, now with immigration back in the headlines, well worth looking into. They are nuts, but influential nuts. Their looniness is documented here with a fine touch.



By Kevin Rafferty and
 James Ridgeway
 1990, 78 min.

Available from Amazon
 Rent from Netflix



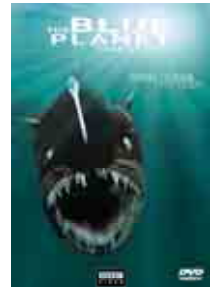
Wearing a costume of his own design (above), a wizard of his own sect tells how he arrived at his peculiar beliefs.



Blue Planet: Open Ocean, The Deep

You want life weird and strange? It's in the deep a mile down. You don't know life at all until you've met these spectacularly different creatures. I mean way different. Totally bizarre, totally awesome. Guaranteed to alter your consciousness. The filmmaking is superb and jaw-dropping. The entire series is wonderful, but if you merely want a wholly unexpected view of "what's down there," the disc you want is Disc 2: *The Deep and Open Ocean*, where life emerges different.

An Angler Fish waves its glowing fishing rod to entice another fish towards its toothy mouth. The glow comes from parasitic bacteria inside the bulb which bioluminesce on energy from the Angler. Driven by predators (bottom) small fish in the middle of the open ocean swirl into a ball to "hide."



By David Attenborough
2001, 100 min.

Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix



Bob Dylan: Don't Look Back

The iconographic rockumentary, filmed before rock musicians had handlers. This peek inside the head of a very young Bob Dylan is disturbing and exhilarating. It's clear Dylan has a rare gift for channeling sublime lyrics straight from the source; it is equally clear the divine messenger was a jerk. I kept thinking of the undeserving Mozart in *Amadeus*. Rough, tattered, blazing like a million suns, a rocket lifting off, this is an unforgettable portrait of a young artist. And the model for every rock bio since.



By D.A. Pennebaker
1967, 96 min.

Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix



Bob Dylan pounds on a typewriter in a hotel room writing lyrics, while his girlfriend Joan Baez sings sitting behind him (above). At a civil rights rally in the US south Dylan sings folks songs. He eventually stars on stage.



Bounce: Behind the Velvet Rope

Who are these guys, the beefy ones standing at the gates of nightclubs and discos deciding who gets in? Are they as beautiful as the beautiful people they control? I never tire of seeing what really happens behind the scenes, or of hearing about what really goes into other people's occupations, and with this documentary I now know more about bouncers than I thought possible. For a bit of drama, there's an opening at a hot club, so we follow a few wannabees who hope to get the job. I was rooting for the meek giant who lived with his mom. It's a satisfying journey into a world you cross but never see.



*By Steven Cantor
2000, 71 min.*

*Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix*



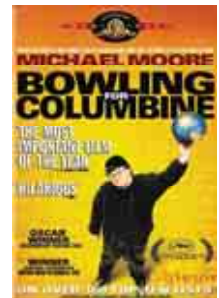
A bouncer grabs an unruly customer by the throat and throws him to the ground outside a nightclub.





Bowling for Columbine

Michael Moore searches America (and Canada) for an answer to the question of why there are so many gun murders in the US. As a card-carrying, gun-toting NRA member, Moore reveals this quest to be more complex than you might expect. Always the coyote trickster, Moore investigates with great entertainment, and does here what he does best, pressing hard when people try to squirm out of honest answers. For a subject that should be ponderously serious and somber, this is a subtle, surreal and funny trip, and one that can change your mind.



*By Michael Moore
2002, 120 min.*

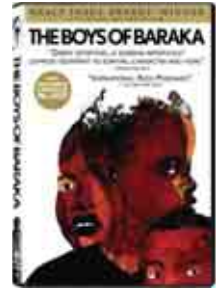
*Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix*



Michael more kills some time with teenagers in a game parlor shooting virtual guns (above). Later (top) he exits a bank with the free rifle they were giving away for starting a new account.

The Boys of Baraka

Extreme interventions in the lives of desperate kids in the hopes of turning them around are almost a sub-genre of documentaries (not to mention the two dozen Hollywood heartwarmers based on true stories). The techniques in real life are varied, and they all work to some extent. In documentaries we have heroic teachers (*A Touch of Greatness*), neglected art programs (*Something Within Me*), visits to jail (*Scared Straight!*, p.149), juvenile detention (*Girlhood*, p.67), and now boarding school in Africa.



By Heidi Ewing and
Rachel Grady
2005, 84 min.

Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix

Twenty African-American 13-year-old at-risk boys in the projects of Baltimore, MD are sent to a remote boarding school in the countryside of Kenya. There they meet people superficially like themselves (poor and black) but with a whole different set of assumptions and perspectives. They also meet teachers who invest all their talents and attention on them. Of course it changes their lives. Even though political strife closes the school after one year, those 10 months of middle school is enough to turn most of them around. Considering the neighborhood and family dynamics the kids have had to battle, it's an inspiring achievement. There's an update on the kids as they head into high school in the bonus features that I wish had been part of the film.

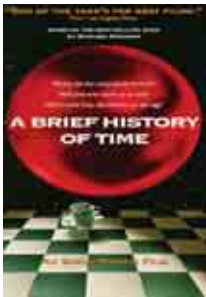


One visitor decides he has had enough and tries to leave with his luggage (top left); he doesn't get far. The kids adopt a hedgehog.



A Brief History of Time

This won't help you with physics, like the book did, but it will give you a powerful portrait of what a brain trapped in a withering body can still accomplish. Astrophysicist Stephen Hawking's ability to imagine the universe is matched only by his disheartening disability to do the most ordinary activity, including talking. His life is amazing; this film quite inspiring.



By Errol Morris
1992 , 80 min.

Available from Amazon



Stephen Hawking's face is reflected in the mirror mounted on his wheel chair, which allows him to "glance" around since he can't move his head. In the background is the computer screen where he composes his speech for his talking machine.



Brother's Keeper

Four elderly brothers share a dairy farm in the boonies of upper New York state. They are barely smarter than their cows, with some kind of genetic dim-wittedness. Without grooming skills, or reason to care, they soon are left alone in their muddy and filthy shack by their neighbors. Until one of the brothers dies. The older brother is charged with murdering him by suffocation as a mercy killing. There is no evidence – other than two of the brothers' own confessions to the police. But they retract those soon enough. Kind of. Their intelligence seems to fluctuate by whim. This story is about the subtle degrees of mental illness, what disability is (can you run a real farm for 40 years if you are retarded?), and the reach or overreach of law and its cold justice. Mostly you want to know, did the accused brother kill his brother to relieve him of his pain? An honest murder mystery. I liked it because I realized that if I were the cops I would not know what was fair.



By Joe Berlinger
1992 , 105 min.

Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix



Three brothers still living and a neighbor.
The brother in the red baseball cap shaved
before he appeared in court. The brother in
a green cap had a nervous breakdown when
he was in court.

Buena Vista Social Club

Bands and concerts easily lend themselves to documentaries; they've got a built-in soundtrack. This one follows the rediscovery of forgotten Cuban musicians as they make a new best-selling album. What works is the insight it provides to contemporary Cuba.



By Wim Wenders
1999, 101 min.

Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix



In modest rooms, the guys practice. Or they practice as they walk about town. On a stroll they pass workers moving an old refrigerator. The cleaning lady smokes a Cuban cigar, while the singer makes an offering on his home altar (above).

Burden of Dreams

Occasionally the movie about making the movie is the better movie. Les Blank's *Burden of Dreams* is the better movie which documents the filming of Werner Herzog's fictional movie *Fitzcarraldo*. Herzog imagines that his film hero, Fitzcarraldo, employs a small army of native tribesmen to haul a steamship over a mountain in the Amazon, from one river to another. For reasons clear only to himself, Herzog decides this super-human scene must not be done with special effects. *Burden of Dreams* records Herzog's 4-year obsession in trying to film native American tribesmen hauling an immense steamship over a mountain pass in the deep Amazon jungle. He becomes Fitzcarraldo, or maybe Captain Ahab. Herzog's blind determination whips him from one disaster to the next, making this journey both astonishing and incredibly mesmerizing. Like *Hearts of Darkness* (p.77), this is a peek into how a movie can drive one insane.



By Les Blank
1992, 95 min.

Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix

Fitzcarraldo in the film (left) and Herzog the director (right). The steamboat gets stuck in the mud midway up the mountain slope and is abandoned for a while (below).



Bus 174

A gunman takes hostages on a public city bus in Brazil. The bus is stopped in full view of TV news cameras who then go on to record the horrifyingly inept police response. It is not everyday you get a front seat view of a real-life disaster as it unfolds. You can also watch this as a documentary about corruption in the halls of power.



*By Jose Padilha
and Felipe Lacerda
2003, 120 min.*

*Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix*

The gunman makes his demand by poking his head out the window. An overhead view by a press helicopter of the crime scene early in the standoff while the police stand near the bus.



Cane Toads: An Unnatural History

An offbeat, kinky, tongue-in-cheek celebration of the monstrous cane toad invasion of Australia and of the people who love the poisonous creatures and those who hate them. A nature film with attitude.



*By Mark Lewis
1987, 47 min.*

*Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix*



You can get some sense of scale of the toad's size (above), although many are much larger. Toads reproducing. And a toad lover waxes purple one hot evening on how toads are his friends.



Century of the Self

This remarkable BBC four-part series tackles the invention of the “self” with great intelligence and imagination. It focuses on how Freud and his disciples invented the tools of public relations, the focus group, and psychoanalysts as weapons to control the “irrational” impulses of mass society. And it presents the 1960s’ self liberation and self-potential movement as the reaction to Freud’s control mania. You may feel you understand yourself a bit better, but you will certainly understand our culture of the self better. I had heard about the series for years from various enthusiasts, but it was unavailable on tape or DVD, either in the US or the UK. And so it still is. Thankfully, a free copy can be downloaded (yes, legally) from the Internet Archive. Though it may take hours to load, depending on your connection speed, it’s well worth the trouble.

*By Adam Curtis
2002, 240 min.*

*Available from Amazon
and from the Internet
Archive,
www.archive.org*



Freud reading in his garden. His work offered to make sense of the many images of the self later employed by his family and disciples to sell things.



China: Beyond the Clouds

A million stories unfold in Lijiang, a picturesque historic town in the mountains of southwest China. This 4-hour tale follows four local families over several years as their lives twist, turn, deepen, intermingle, and blossom. Their openness is uncharacteristically candid for rural China; a tribute to veteran documentarian Phil Agland. The universal fears and dreams of a vast continent are condensed into a tightly edited few hours of subtitled witness. So intimate is this view of Chinese life that it is close to anthropology. Highly recommended.



*By Phil Agland
1994, 115 min.*

*Available from National
Geographic
shopngvideos.com*



Small moments in an ordinary day in a Chinese mountain town. Sharing a light (above), massaging a handicap child, and (below) a thief being marched off by fully armored police.



China: A Century of Revolution

The three most important factors in the future of this planet are China, China, and China. China is the wild card. As it goes, so will the world. But the future of China cannot be glimpsed unless you have some clue of its recent past. This fantastic 3-part series is a fast-paced, extremely photogenic story of the madness that has possessed China this last century. You watch, horrified and mesmerized, as it lurches from one insane obsession to another. Is its current all-consuming devotion to commercialism and capitalism yet another bout of madness, or its final release? You'll have a better idea after this film. I have not found a better one-stop source for understanding China today than this series (and I married into the Chinese).



*By Judith Vecchione
2000, 360 min.*

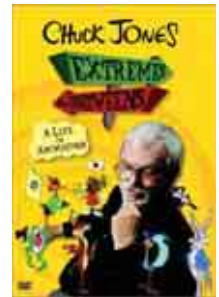
*Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix*





Chuck Jones: Extremes and In-Betweens

A lightweight biography of the guy who developed Bugs Bunny, Daffy Duck, Porky Pig, Roadrunner and the Warner Brothers style of slapstick cartoons. But that's not why this is worth seeing. On the special features menu on the DVD is a short tutorial by Chuck Jones on his rules of animation, illustrated by brilliant clips from his cartoon shorts. These spots quickly give you the best short course in classic comic animation you'll ever find. It's no more than 10 minutes but it's revelatory.



*By Margaret Selby
2000, 90 min.*

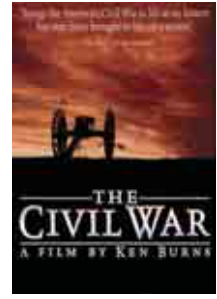
*Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix*



Chuck Jones late in life in his studio. How to stretch your limbs (above) for effect. Or stretch your neck to indicate gravity. Bugs Bunny does the windup to indicate speed. Does that guy look fat?

The Civil War

The most remarkable aspect of this most remarkable documentary is the emotional weight it carries. Comprised almost solely of slow passes across old black and white still photos (now known as a Ken Burns move) this expertly narrated film makes you weep and cringe and float with deep understanding. It reordered my notion of the deepest scar (the largest war ever) on this continent. At 11 hours it's a long journey, but well worth it. It is hard to watch this series and not come to see it as *your* view of the Civil War. And it changed the language of documentary filmmaking, too.



By Ken Burns
1990, 680 min.

Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix

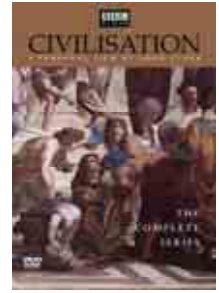


Our understanding of the Civil War is greatly enhanced by the fact that so many participants kept journals and that photography had just been invented. Portraits, battle scenes, and diaries have made this film incredibly rich.



Civilisation

Civilization as seen through the eyes of art and architecture. While art is the narrow focus, the vista in Kenneth Clark's view is as vast as 2,000 years of western history. The continuity of this long-view is a treat. I can't think of any other factual video with an equal span of attention.



*By Michael Gill and
Peter Montagnon
1969, 670 min.*

*Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix*



Host Kenneth Clark sits beneath a Roman aqueduct and in front of an ancient Irish monastery. This is mostly a view of the West, from Vikings (right) to Greece.



C'mon, Geese

A maverick sculptor imprints baby goslings to follow his homemade ultra-light airplane as if it were their mother, and in so doing he gets the flock of geese to fly alongside him, where he can film them. Hollywood turned this true story into the family movie *Fly Away*, and the great documentary *Winged Migration* (p.191) borrowed the same technique for other wild birds. But this is the original low-rent documentary made by the Canadian artist himself, wherein he films his journey of invention, with its many dead-ends, failures and ingenious solutions. You get the raw energy and details of an artist at work. It's an engaging tale, a brilliant achievement, and a marvelous act of imagination.



By Bill Lishman
1989, 28 min.

Available from
bullfrogfilms.com

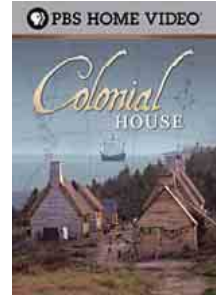


When he first started the project, ultra-light aircraft were rare. He started out with simple airfoils and invented sturdier craft as he went along. No one had ever tried to convince birds that a plane could be one of them. Success seemed unlikely. It took a while to learn how the geese thought. The whole family was involved. Once airborne alongside the airplane, the geese revealed all kinds of things (captured on this film) about how they flew that were new to science. There's a curious engineer approach to this film that supplements the obvious love of the birds.



Colonial House

The premise is familiar now. Send a modern family into the past and make them live with only the tools and resources available centuries ago. In this case, the modern Americans are sent to live in the summer of 1628, on a forested island off of Maine. Their task: build a new world colony (20 people strong) that can both survive and pay back its investors in England. Life is pretty grungy. Two families to a room; no outhouses. This is the third in a series of living history documentaries (see *1900 House*, p.7, and *Frontier House*, p.63) – only now they have fewer tools. Of the three programs this is the best, in part because of the reality-show-like drama and bickering between the colonists. Cameras record every detail as the pudgy newcomers scrounge for food, learn how to farm Indian corn, all the while slowly starving, and assuming appropriate roles such as indentured servants with astounding ease. Who knew how easy devolution was? Like the hit TV series *Survivor*, it's about how primeval people get when survival is at stake. But unlike *Survivor*, there's historical logic, authentic rituals, and significant meaning in their test. My kids, both young and teenage, are addicted to these series. If I had to choose one, I'd start with this one, the 8-hour *Colonial House*.



By Nick Brown
2004, 480 min.

Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix



Exhaustion was common. Laughter less so, but it helped to be the mayor's wife.

Comedian

A fantastic look at the unfunny business of learning to be funny. Every artist battles the fear of failing. The more successful an artist becomes, the more they fear. Whether you are writer, filmmaker, musician, painter, dancer, comedian – it never gets easier to create the next great thing. This paradox of success is made apparent in this documentary about the struggling comedian Jerry Seinfeld. After he leaves his eponymous mega-hit show, he returns to stand-up comedy as naked and anxious as a 20-year old first-timer. We follow him as he squirms, storms, and retreats while crafting a new routine, battles against getting bored, missing his timing, and being off. And yes, he harbors genuine doubts. As in anything else worthwhile, behind the apparent final ease is a journey of nerve-wrecking hard work – wisely captured in this apparently easy film. There's some good laughs, too. I recommend this highly to anyone engaged in creative pursuits.



*Starring Jerry Seinfeld
2002, 82 min.*

*Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix*

Seinfeld tries out some new jokes which get only a few laughs. Another young wannabe comedian lands a job and collapses on the sidewalk in glee.



Cool & Crazy

Mild-mannered Norwegian bachelors living in a tiny fishing village north of the Arctic Circle find companionship and meaning in life by singing – always singing – especially in their local male choir. It's fish, sing, or leave. Hoping to become world famous they travel to the depressingly polluted Russian industrial town of Murmansk to give a concert. It's a lovely film about how one's spirit can soar even when constrained by a dying small town. The title refers ironically to the mild hopes and quiet lives of these bachelors of ice. Their music, surprisingly spiritual, fills the screen.



By Knut Erik Jensen
2001, 89 min.

Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix



Singing in the bathtub is the best place to practice. Worst is singing in the arctic wind.



The Norwegians confront all kinds of emotions when they roll into Russia. The choir teases one life-long communist among them for supporting a party that causes the degradation, grime, and misery they see out the window.



Cosmos

Although it is now 25 years old, Carl Sagan's *Cosmos* still warrants viewing. I watched it again recently and it captured me. I've found no better orientation to the visible heavens and our small place in the universe than this 13-part series, now conveniently housed in one boxed DVD set. Most of the science is still valid, and Sagan's explanations and astronomical insights have yet to be exceeded for clarity and wit. When a student begins to wonder "where are we?" and asks other big questions, these are the discs to slide into the player.

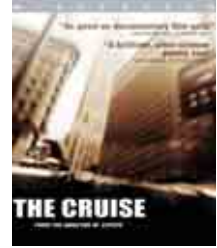


*By Carl Sagan
1980, 780 min.*

*Available from Amazon
Rent from GreenCine*



Sagan tries to explain how to imagine more than four dimensions with a clear cube (above). Sitting at a temple in India he muses on the inherent desire of humans to read the stars and predict their future course – and ours.



*By Bennett Miller
1998, 76 min.*

*Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix*

The Cruise

An unforgettable portrait of a truly original human being who happens to give tours of New York City on a double decker bus. The hero, Timmy "Speed" is either mentally ill or one of the most profound living poets. Or both. You can't tell. For sure, here is someone who "thinks different." By the end you get to see cities, society, the whole world in his offbeat, zany way, and it's a real kicker. The tour is worth repeating several times.



Timmy twirls himself dizzy at the base of the Twin Towers, which he viewed as a major sacred power point in the city. He lies on his back to view the spinning Towers (left). Atop the open double-decker he begins his mesmerizing spiel.



Crumb

This has to be the most honest portrait of an artist ever. Robert Crumb, the 60s underground comic genius, is revealed in all his pathetic neuroses and glorious brilliance. The tipping point is being introduced to his eccentric family which suddenly explains all.



*By Terry Zwigoff
1994, 109 min.*

*Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix*

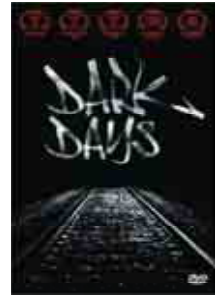


Crumb sketches almost compulsively, spending hours on the minute details of his favorite subject – himself. His fetish for riding piggyback on women is satisfied by a magazine photo shoot (right).



Dark Days

The urban legend about cities of homeless living underground in the neglected corridors of New York City's subways was partly true. For about a decade in the 80s, a colony of extremely resourceful hobos built shelters in an underground section of Penn-Central railroad beneath New York. They rigged up stolen electricity and a few even had cold running water; many worked outside as can collectors or street vendors and rifled garbage for uneaten restaurant food. This film documents their routines, their squabbles with each other, and their fight with the city to keep their plywood homes – filled with TVs, beds, and mini-kitchens. It's a fight they lost. Homelessness, like everything else in life, is not uniform. These folks were exceptionally resourceful and ambitious, and the story follows them up as they leave their eccentric handmade homes to acquire subsidized housing.



*By Marc Singer
2000, 88 min.*

*Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix*



As if it were a backyard, the space outside of the plywood huts is strung with clothesline and drying laundry. Inside, it's a makeshift version of American life, with family photos, TVs, and friends. Tito (left) is awakened by friends and urged to get up. Not every home is the same. This one is a tepee of junk.

Dead Birds

Available from Documentary Educational Resources, der.org

I've been trying to see this legendary film for years. It captures ritual warfare between tribes of farmers in Papua New Guinea. The war is played out on a weekly basis, and could almost be called sport except the warriors usually kill one person a week. Filmed in an ancient agricultural society, yet one that lacked contact with the rest of the world, it could have been shot 3,000 years ago. Visually stunning, almost poetic rather than anthropological, this record presents a timeless tableaux of distant "otherness." Yet, as the film unrolls we see the familiar as well.

It was filmed in 1961 in the very remote highlands of the Dani civilization in the Grand Baliem Valley of Papua New Guinea. At that time this valley was the last place on earth not to be colonized by Europe. Here a group of remarkable young filmmakers documented a cultural expression so strange that it seems unbelievable now that it has disappeared. Hundreds of men from each tribe would line up in sides on a vast grassy field – so everyone could watch – to have weekly skirmishes using spears and arrows. It was true war in that no one in the villages was safe. If men could kill a woman or child who wandered too close to the border field, they would. On the other hand it was ritualistic; they would not fight if it was raining or cold. Each death of a tribe member had to be atoned by another death from the other side. But to stop the game of killing altogether was unthinkable.

This film records the daily life of sweet potatoes farming, weaving, pig raising, and hut building needed to support this sport of war, and the great art, labor, love and sacrifice it required. Its intent is to try to penetrate the weirdness of this arrangement. It records the deadly battles in clear intimacy. We see their amazing surgery on the wounded, the shocking amputations of innocent women relatives, the preparations for feasts and funerals, and the daily chore of climbing the high watchtowers to watch for enemies. There is clarity and fascination in the many details – all in color – of a Neolithic lifestyle and craft.

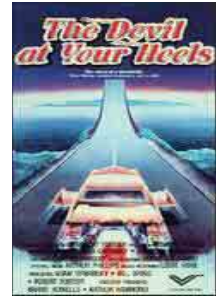
This is an unforgettable document, a reminder of who we are. I consider it one of the greatest documentaries ever made.

Surgery on the wounded in the field is quite sophisticated considering the tools available. An arrow head is backed out. The scale of the battles can be glimpsed in the overview (bottom).



The Devil At Your Heels

Another crazy Canadian. This is a guy who jumps cars for a living. He buys junkers, pops the windows out, and then with a running start, uses a ramp to see how many lined-up cars he can fly his junker over (usually a dozen). He does that twice a night until he breaks a bone as he crashes into the last car. After 20 years and many injuries this small-time circus gets boring so he is seized by a big dream: to jump a car one mile. Over a river. A river that separates the US and Canada. So for the next 5 years his life is consumed as he spends millions of dollars of other people's money building this gigantic impossible ramp 200 feet into the air on the edge of the St. Lawrence River, while every possible thing that can go wrong with his rocket car goes wrong. Even the great Evel Knievel visits and advises him to give up. Nothing stops him from trying, and nothing prepares you for the shock of the surprise ending. Oh my gosh.



By Robert Fortier
1981, 103 min.

Available from
revengeismydestiny.com

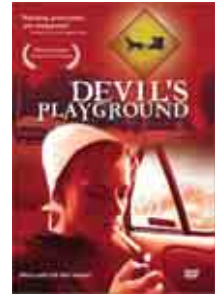


His old Chevy goes flying over buses. But often he'll miss his target (below) and it will crash. Amazingly, serious injuries are rare. The impossible jump across the St. Lawrence River begins with this humongous ramp (left). To drum up investors he fires up the jets in his jet car.



Devil's Playground

The riddle of how the Amish can maintain their population growth while choosing to live a stoic lifestyle in the middle of 21st century America is explored in this incredibly fascinating and brilliant documentary. When Amish reach 16 years old, they take off their hats and bonnets and immerse themselves into contemporary America with all its temptations, before deciding whether to join the puritanical Amish church once and for all. Many Amish teens delve deep into sex, drugs, and rock and roll (Amish parties are legendary and filmed here). Many never return home, and so are eternally shunned by their large families. But an amazing 90% of Amish kids put beer and drugs binges behind them and take up their horse and buggy. The film follows the excruciating decisions of Amish teens wavering on the edge between these extremes, and allows viewers to enter into the Amish mindset through its youth. You'll see modernity in a different light.



*By Lucy Walker
2002, 77 min.*

*Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix*



At dawn (top right) after a long night of beer drinking and rock-n-roll. Stragglers find their way back to their cars or horse buggies. One girl lights up as soon as she is out of her Amish house. Another girl (above) who decides not to return to her church but pursue college instead sadly tries on her black wedding dress, which she will never use.

Divine Horsemen

A 1950s capture of voodoo rituals in Haiti, created by Maya Deren, an experimental filmmaker. Because she was an initiate of voodoo, this film became an influential work of visual anthropology. Its value to me is in its rare portrayal of voodoo practice prior to becoming well known outside of Haiti.



*By Maya Deren and
Cherel Ito
1985, 52 min.*

*Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix*

A voodoo shaman's eyes roll back during a trance (above- and right bottom). Chickens are sacrificed and swung around in a purification ceremony (below). The priest in a white hat dances with two other initiates (right).



The Dog Whisperer

People have dogs with uncontrollable behavior. They've been to obedience school, and have tried every trick they can find, and they still can't control the dog. After years of "bad dog" blues they are ready to give up. Then they call Cesar Millan, the dog whisperer, to their home, and five minutes after he walks through the door he has the dog in perfect control. An hour later the astounded owners have reformed the bad dog to good dog. It doesn't matter how weird, ferocious, demented, and neurotic the dog is, the dog whisperer can fix them almost instantly. The hundreds of transformations in this series are endlessly fascinating, kind of like magic tricks, as the owners keep saying, "I can't believe it!" It's quickly evident the owners are the ones who are weird, ferocious, demented and neurotic, and so the series manages to be constantly entertaining (it is now up to 4 seasons on National Geographic) because you are watching people confront themselves. As the dog whisperer says, "I rehabilitate dogs, and I train people." Of course, there are tons of insights into dog behavior and guidelines for keeping you sane and your dog lovable.



By Cesar Millan
2004, 662 min

Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix
cesarmillaninc.com



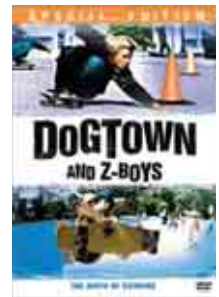
The dog whisperer's chief trick is to exert himself as the alpha male dog, pushing the head of the subservient dog to the ground (above). He ignores the bite and bark of a small dog in order to dominated him. So who is crazy? The dog or the owner, shown pampering her neurotic lap dog.





Dogtown and Z-Boys

You wouldn't expect a documentary about the slacker origins of skateboarding culture to hold your attention for more than 10 minutes, but *Dogtown and Z-Boys* certainly does. It unleashes a steady stream of surprises, beginning with a small band of juvenile delinquents and outcast school kids who were so downtrodden they were kicked out of good waves in Santa Monica California. They then began to surf dorky skateboards. Soon they were amusing themselves with breaking into vacant backyard swimming pools and "taking on air" with zany skateboard antics and a lot of attitude. How this small-time obsession became an international sport, entertainment and merchandising complex is the rest of this amazing and well-made story. I consider it a key document of contemporary American culture.



By Stacy Peralta
2002, 90 min.

Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix



Instead of surfing the unbelievably dangerous area beneath the piers, the z-boys discover you can skateboard on air.

Downside Up

Let's say your regional industrial mill town is rusting away, bypassed. Main street is boarded up, windows in the old brick factories broken beyond repair, fine homes abandoned, and the last employer in the old company town long gone. The stagnation is lethal. As mayor, you need something to sell in the global economy. You need some new economy commodity. You need..... modern art! This very personal, but very smart documentary is the uplifting story of how the dying rustbelt ghetto of North Adams, MA gambled on building a modern art museum to resurrect itself. Crazy, but it worked. It proves the current adage that artists and bohemians lead economic growth. The museum attracted starving artists, who immediately found uses for the empty factory hulks, who then demanded nice restaurants, which dragged in workers and so on. Ten years later the local yahoos who would "not cross the street for funny art" are discussing the merits of upside down trees on the promenade – from whence comes the title of this very heartwarming film. It's a simple message: *art works*.



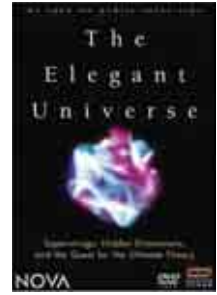
By Nancy Kelly
2002, 54 min.

Available from
newday.com



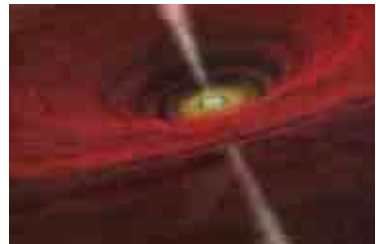
The Elegant Universe

A crash course in string theory – the possible theory of everything. Fast-paced, crammed with high-street graphics and the best visualizations money can buy, this four-part Nova series does a fantastic job of making sense of something which inherently doesn't make sense – as everyone in this show will tell you. Great pains are taken to keep things as simple as the honor of physicists will allow, and the host Brian Greene, physicist and author of the book of the same title, offers state-of-the-art explanations for weird ideas. I learned a whole lot. It's the best science teaching format yet.



*By Joseph McMaster
and Julia Cort
2003, 180 min.*

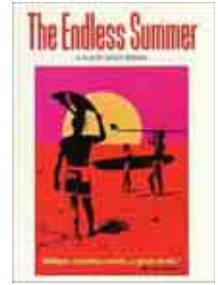
*Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix*



Five Brian Greenes demonstrate the notion of a multi-verse (top). At the core of matter are vibrating strings somewhat like sound vibrations (left), but much much smaller.

The Endless Summer

The granddaddy of all road trip films and extreme sports extravaganzas (those millions of surf, ski, motorcycle chronicles) is still charming 50 years after it was made. A few moments of cultural insensitivity now makes us cringe, but the constant good humor and pure adventure overwhelm any doubts. You go with the flow. More than any other surfing film since, the boundless sunny innocence of this classic makes you want to get a board to hit the waves, and see the world.



*By Bruce Brown
1966, 96 min.*

*Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix*

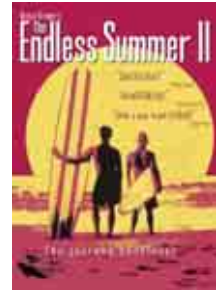


It's almost a cliché now: old truck, surf boards and aimless wandering, but it wasn't back then. The surf kids pit themselves against a fishing boat trying to catch a small wave (right). Getting their boards to the hotel in Africa (below). Note the suit!



The Endless Summer II

Bruce Brown repeats a world-wide surfing safari similar to one he pioneered 30 years earlier in his classic road trip documentary *The Endless Summer* (p.54). This time he follows two young energetic kids as they bumle around remote reefs, get lost on the road, ride some awesome waves and have a jolly old time following the surf on four continents. Surfing is just an excuse to see some exotic places in the world closeup. This lightweight film has the same sunny cheerfulness, corny jokes, amusing high jinks, and silly quotient as his first. It's fun, fun, fun. Nothing world changing; just world enlarging. Chill out and enjoy.



Bruce Brown
1994, 100 min.

Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix



Wheweee! A new generation sails off an unnamed reef. Riding ostriches (left) is what you do when you are not surfing. A snapped board is the usual price for rough waves and a unfamiliar beach. But nothing prepares you for a drunk pilot crash landing your small plane on the beach (above, right).

Enron: The Smartest Guys in the Room



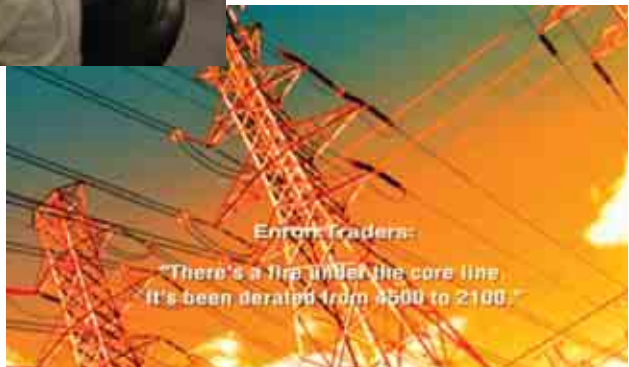
*By Alex Gibney
2006, 110 min.*

*Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix*

This was not what I expected. I thought it would be a predictable leftist documentary screed against the evils of capitalism as represented by the biggest corporate scam ever – Enron. Instead it was a very intelligent, subtle and fascinating portrait of the three principle leaders of Enron, and how their dream came back to kill them. Completed a year before the trial and guilty verdict, the film does a fabulous job of making the complexities of this intricate business case understandable, and the personalities behind the events real. And make no mistake. The disaster stems from the personalities. What I learned: Enron did deliver some great innovations, some of which will likely have to be invented again. But they also unleashed a company culture where competition and greed was paramount and not tempered by any other value, and in the end this unbridled greed ate them all up and destroyed the fortunes of many innocents. It's a great film and should be shown in every business school.

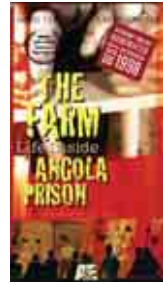


Jeff Skilling testifies before Congress, but can't wipe that smirk off his face. Electricity traders at the Enron desk (left) try their hardest to make a buck during the California heat wave. Tape recordings of the traders' banter reveal their intent to "rob grannies."



The Farm: Life Inside Angola Prison

A straight-on view of the legendary lifer's prison on an old slave plantation in Louisiana, where few leave alive. The surprise is that some lifers find truth and happiness inside the hell. Depicts the anguish lifers can expect (I'll be good, I promise) and of course it stirs up outrage for the innocent (expected) but what I find worth recommending is the inspiration it plants as you see humans blossom in the most inhumane place.



New arrivals peek apprehensively out of the bus window (above) to see where they will be spending the rest of their lives. The fear and dread of every prisoner is to die inside. The unlucky are buried in the prison yard (right). Not too different from a chain-gang, prisoners are rewarded for good behavior by being allowed to work in the fields.

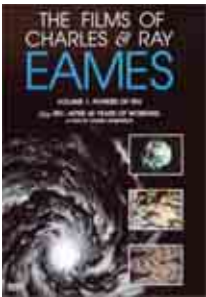
*By Jonathan Stack and
Liz Garbus
1998, 100 min*

Available from Amazon



The Films of Charles and Ray Eames

Their ingenious *Powers of Ten* film which zips you through the universe in ten-fold scale jumps is justly famous. Not as well known are their other short films which exhibit their pioneering sensibility (now mainstream): the marriage of technology and design. Try the Eameses' short ode to toy trains, a review of their early industrial-chic home, and a *Mathematics Peep Show*, among others. All reward re-watching.

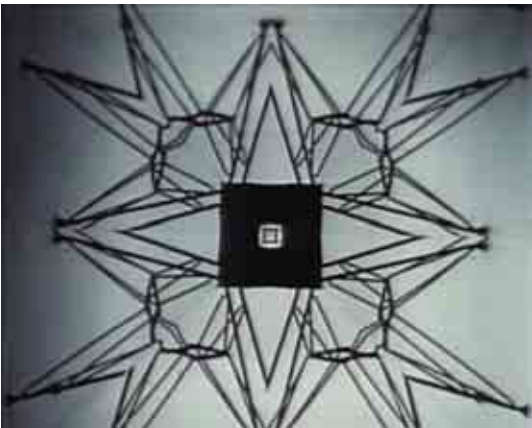


With Charles Eames
and Ray Eames
2000, 6 Volumes

Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix



A wonderfully charming
view of toy trains (top).
Overhead shot of a
picnic, then the same
view 10 times higher
in the fantastic *Powers
of Ten*. A kaleidoscopic
view of the Eameses'
metal chair (left). One
slide (bottom) in their
atlas of power timeline
for Europe shows how
power flows and ebbs in
history.



Fire on the Mountain

In the pre-dawn of WWII, an ambitious outdoorsman convinces President Roosevelt to fund an elite army corps who are expert in mountain skills – to compliment US water and amphibious forces. They round up all the ski bums, mountain climbers and wilderness die-hards in America, long before such activities were mainstream. Among those who respond to this call is Sierra Club founder-to-be David Brower. The soldiers camp and train in Colorado, near the then unknown Aspen. They develop the snowmobile, the snow cat, early versions of modern camping, and modern ski techniques. Then off to the Alps in Italy where the US mountain unit defeats Nazi troops in a key mountain battle. Then they return to the US to invent the ski industry, Nike shoes, and run most of the ski resorts in the West. What holds all this together is the intense camaraderie of these outdoor fanatics. As one old soldier said, “This wasn’t an Army unit. It was a fraternity.”



By George Gage and
Beth Gage
1996, 72 min.

Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix



The first Snowcat was developed by this group (below). Maneuvers with snow shoes and guns (left).



Fire Within: Cirque du Soleil

The pain and agony of creation. An extensive 6-part window in to how to craft a world-class acrobatic extravaganza piece by piece. The sacrifice that each performer must pay is revealed. Cirque du Soleil is the best show on earth these days; here is how they create it, from first pitch to opening night. The human drama of this series – which acrobats or acts will stay in, and will they make the cut? – captivated my family. They devoured the very addictive 5 hours in a couple of sittings. If you ever wanted to run away to the circus, you need to see this first. The message I took away was this: every great work arrives only after continuous near-death experiences of the whole project.



*By Christopher Dyson
2004, 286 min.*

*Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix*



Daily strength building is required even during rehearsals when you have clownish makeup on. Two brothers premier their swinging rope routines as Twin Icarus figures (left).

The Fog of War

Strictly a talking head – this one of Robert McNamara. Considered the chief strategist of the Vietnam War, McNamara recounts his personal history of how the war began. There are many lessons to be had from his belated candor as an insider; the one I took away reflects the title of the documentary: not only was the public kept ignorant of all that was going on, but even the brass in charge did not fully agree on or understand what was happening; thus the fog of war. And 10 other lessons as well.



*By Errol Morris
2003, 107 min.*

*Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix*



McNamara dines with his former enemies in Vietnam (above), where they tell their version of the war. He also meets with Fidel Castro long after their standoff and recounts what he learned.



For All Mankind

What a marvelous treat! This exquisite documentary transforms the hugely institutional (if not imperial) Apollo journey to the moon into something very intimate and personal. Sort of a home movie version of “my trip to the moon and back.” The film score by Brian Eno assists the liftoff. This film really made me proud to be a human.

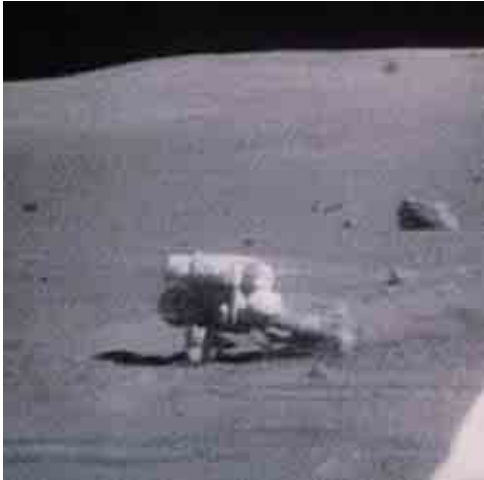


*By Al Reinart
1989, 79 min.*

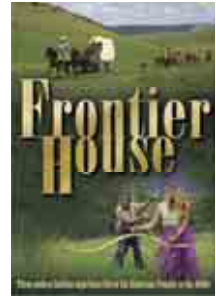
*Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix*



Liftoff from Cape Canaveral (above).
An astronaut trips and eats dust after
jumping around on the moon.



Frontier House



By Maro Chermayeff
2002, 360 min.

Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix

The success of the BBC documentary *1900 House* (p.7) spawned *Frontier House*. This BBC factual transfers the experiment of inserting modern folks into old times to the edge of Montana during homesteading days. It ups the challenge by requiring the participants to build their homes and raise all their own food while sticking to period tools and the lifestyle of pioneers in 1893. The three families who settle in a beautiful valley need to stockpile enough food, shelter and firewood to last a Montanan winter. Instead of cooperating, they compete against each other, with lots of bickering and backstabbing, making this remarkable 6 hours series into what *Survivor* should have been – an authentic test of surviving. By the way, the men and boys loved being pioneers, while the women and girls were imprisoned by it.

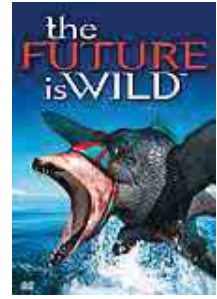


After camping in a tent and cooking outside, one mother rejoices as their log cabin takes shape (above). They have to finish their shelter before winter starts. At the start of the families' covered wagon journey to their homestead a pair of draft horses are spooked and bolt (below), nearly running over one of the women pioneers.



The Future is Wild

A wonderful series of cinematic speculations on what animals could evolve into in the next, oh, 500 million years. The same skill and techniques that resurrected dinosaurs of old and made them seem real and natural (see *Walking With Dinosaurs*, p.182) are applied here to possible animals millions of years into the future. You witness these hypothetical creatures in their full 3D glory, accurately animated in their natural lifestyle – eating, mating, fighting, being preyed upon, and surviving. It's a fabulous job of scientific imagination and a great example of following the logic of evolution.



By Victoria Couled
2003, 328 min.

Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix



An hypothetical bird/dinosaur creature (top). It has the speed and agility of a dino with the feathers of a bird. A marsh critter (below) like an alligator/porcupine/armadillo.

Genghis Blues

What a wonderful adventure. A blind blues singer in San Francisco hears some strange music on a shortwave radio, and tracks it down as Tuvan throatsinging. It sounds like a whistle and a groan at the same time, and most people can't believe it comes from one human mouth. Our hero, Paul Pena, not only learns how to do it by reinventing it himself, he also learns Tuvan language by translating English to Russian to Tuvan in Braille! He then winds up getting invited to perform in the first Tuvan throatsinging contest allowed after the breakup of the Soviet Union. (Tuva, near Mongolia, is a small autonomous republic within the Russian Federation.) The film starts here as it follows this blind black man into the heart of Mongolia to try to win a horse by singing the Tuvan national anthem while groaning two notes at once. It's a wild and strange trip.



*By Roko Belic
1999, 88 min.*

*Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix*



Since Paul is blind he uses his hands and fingertips to “see” how his Tuvan host sings the two simultaneous notes (left). After he won the competition, Paul is obliged to try out his prize – a horse (bottom). He is incredibly uncomfortable on any horse. Without vision he feels very vulnerable, and asks to dismount immediately.



Gimme Shelter

Woodstock gone bad. With poor planning this free Rolling Stones concert in 1969 spun out of control. Given the rampant drug highs, a quarter million kids, the presence of the Hells Angels as guards, and the Rolling Stones own "Sympathy for the Devil," it is amazing that only one person was murdered in the chaos. This classic documentary offers two things: footage of the young Rolling Stones in concert at their peak, and a lesson of the underbelly of self-organization – when anarchy takes over.



*By David Maysles,
Albert Maysles, and
Charlotte Zwerin
1970, 91 min.*

*Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix*



Mick Jagger struts for the crowd. A free Stones concert brought out hundreds of thousands in a quickly assembled city (left). The audience was ready for a really mellow time, and happy drugs were part of what they expected. But the Hells Angels were not. Two of them beat an unfortunate guy who wanted to get on the stage with baseball bats (above).

Girlhood

Girlhood follows two young girls, arrested for crime in Baltimore, MD, as they journey through adolescence and the juvenile justice system, two of the most difficult transitions one can think of. One girl murdered a friend when she was 12, the other has a mother in jail herself. As the years pass their institutionalized lives diverge, and the girls' futures are hard to predict or even imagine, which is what gives this film its satisfying drama. Surprisingly one girl reforms, goes to high school and graduates 4th in her class; the other continues to battle demons inside. This film captures almost 5 years of their lives; the girls are almost adults by the end. We get a good sense of who they are, what it takes to make it in their world, and who and what helps them.



By Liz Garbus
2003, 82 min.

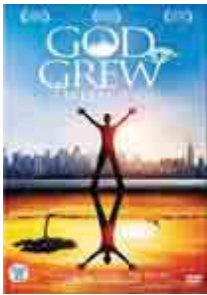
Available from Amazon
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Displaying all the contempt and boredom a teenage girl can manage (above), one inmate has to listen to the warden give her a lecture about her "future." Her home life is just as harassing; her mother (left) screams at her before she also returns to prison.

God Grew Tired of Us

Twenty years ago 20,000 orphaned and displaced boys began streaming out of Sudan. They languished with no future in poor camps in neighboring countries. In 2001, about 3,000 of them were resettled in the US. This doc is the true story of a few of those boys, almost men, as they leave their very stark pastoral life (zero electricity or running water) and slip unnoticed into frantic, crazy urban America. This is not the only documentary about this dramatic transition. *The Lost Boys of Sudan*, for instance, has many fans. But by following the immigrants for a longer period, both before they arrive and after their shock immersion into American culture, *God Grew Tired of Us* is the most rewarding and the deepest. One thing I learned from this film: no matter how amazing modern amenities are, people will take them for granted after about 5 minutes. But as these really remarkable and likeable “boys” show, it’s people and relationships that really count for wealth.



By Christopher Dillon
Quinn
2006, 89 min.

Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix



Orphan boys straggle in to a refugee camp after a hellish trek across desert and war zones (left). A mentor in the US instructs them in the use of dishwashing detergent and the grocery store (below right). In camp before they leave, a lost boy points out on the map the village of New York, his future home (lower left).





Good Stuff

Supremely bored skydivers go for thrills. They push trucks and cars out of planes and ride them down. They recline on a living room couch and watch TV as they plunge to earth. They sky surf. They don wings and glide across the horizon at 90 miles and hour. They perform every antic while free falling you can think of. One loser jumped out without wearing his parachute, on purpose. Yeah, he lived but it's definitely a stupid trick. Boredom is enemy of the sane and the mother of entertainment!



By Joe Jennings
2001, 125 min.

Available from
skydive.tv



In wonderful style, two skydivers lounge on a sofa watching TV as they plunge earthward (above). They jettison quickly while the sofa/TV/den set crashes to the ground. Just for sillies, a group dives headfirst, and then inverts the picture, as if they were hanging from the globe.

Gotham Fish Tales

True stories from the most unlikely fishing hole ever – New York City. Because New York is an island port there are far more places to fish than most folks would imagine. Now that environmental laws have cleaned the Hudson's water, the fishing is actually great. This lighthearted, cheery film reveals the many ways New Yorkers fish, and why. And being New Yorkers, everyone has a story.



By Robert Maass
200, 74 min.

Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix

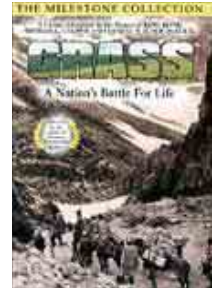


The Manhattan skyline in the background. Taking the subway early morning to reach the waters. This guy (below) is on the bridge fishing every day. A guy gets a big one on Coney Island (right).



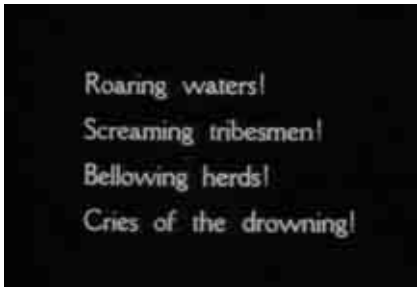
Grass: A Nation's Battle for Life

You think your job is tough? Try this one. In this very early documentary from 1925 – made in extremely harsh photographic conditions – two pioneering filmmakers (who went on to make King Kong) follow 50,000 Bakhtiari nomads as they set off on their annual 100-mile migration from the desert lowlands of Iraq over the snowy Zagros mountains, then into roadless pastures in Iran, all the while driving 500,000 (!!) goats, sheep and horses. Instead of riding on the backs of donkeys, small children will haul ailing donkeys *on their backs* as they scale cliffs, cross glaciers bare-foot, or ford immense white water rivers with goatskin floats. And then 6 months later they return to complete this unbelievable feat of endurance again. It's an eye-witness glimpse of a truly nomadic lifestyle which forms the archetypes of the Bible and the mid-east today. It is also a clear picture of the mind-boggling hardship of early nomads. Like *Nanook of the North* (p.126) this rarely seen movie is the both the first and the last photographic capture of this distant world.



By Merian Cooper and Ernest B. Schoedsack
1925, 71 min.

Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix



A Bakhtiari man inflates a sewn goat skin to create one of hundreds of flotation devices the tribe will need to cross very large rivers (right). Descending into a snow covered valley in bare feet is the easy part after getting over the glacier behind them. The sounds have to be imagined (above) since this was filmed before sound in film was possible.



Grizzly Man

The joy of the wild can melt our hearts so that we feel completely at one with nature. Sometimes that joy is so great it can send us over the edge into madness. That's what happened to Trevor, who fell in love with the Grizzly Bear. His zeal to protect them from other humans led him to spend 14 summers in their feeding grounds where he became their friend. He came to see his defense of them as heroic and began filming himself as the star of his own movie while living among them. On his own intimate video tapes, we hear his confessions, dreams, and scripted scenes as gonzo nature host. We also watch close up as he gradually becomes unhinged in his connection to the bears. Late one fall, Trevor is eventually eaten by one of the grizzlies he was filming. Trevor's footage was later masterfully edited and supplemented with interviews by documentarian Werner Herzog into one of the most memorable true films in years.



*By Werner Herzog
2005, 100 min.*

*Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix*



Trevor hangs out with his Grizzlies along the banks of his favorite watching place. Some young Grizzlies sniff him out (left) while Trevor uses his hand to keep them back as he films. In a scary moment, Trevor pokes a Grizzly as it exits the stream.

Guns Germs and Steel

An all-out five star dramatization of Jared Diamond's best selling non-fiction book of the same name. His main argument – that geographical differences are responsible for the unfair and uneven distribution of wealth among nations today – is compressed into three very intense hours, with as much quality as one could hope for. Much of the book's subtlety and continuous barrage of evidence is lost, but for readers and newbies alike, this polished series is a great survey of one of the most important ideas in a long while. I read the book carefully and enjoyed the emotional delivery of the logical argument in this documentary.



*Narrated by
Peter Coyote
2005, 108 min.*

*Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix*

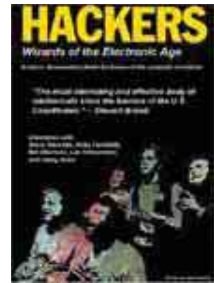


Jared Diamond (below) tries to shoot a Papua New Guinea tribesman's hunting bow and finds it is far more difficult than he thought.



Hackers

In this short film “hackers” is used in its original MIT meaning for someone who comes up with an ingenious or daring “hack” or invention, shortcut, or prank. Not coincidentally, some of the hackers here are legends in the digital era: Steve Wozniak, Ted Nelson, Andy Hertzfeld. This records the first time three generations of hackers meet each other. They gather in a camp to relieve old exploits, show off recent hacks and plot the future. I was involved in organizing the event in 1984 and appear briefly in the part about the first multiple player game.



*By Fabrice Florin
1986, 26 min.*

*Available form Amazon
Rent from Netflix*



Andy Hertzfeld (left), one of the programmers on the original Mac, shows off his “switcher” hack. It allowed you to switch from one open program to the next, without having to close the current program. Hackers map out the heritage and cross pollinations of various programming languages (below).

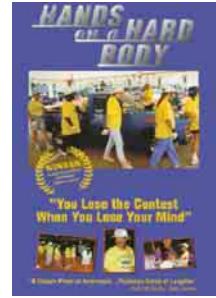


The Woz, co-founder of Apple (above), rants on how hacking is good for society. That’s me playing the first social network game (right). I am the bearded guy on the top right.



Hands on a Hard Body

In the South of the US, where getting a new truck is a type of rebirth, there is a little-known contest whereby a truck dealer, as a publicity stunt, will offer a new truck to the person who can keep his/her hand on a truck the longest. Typically these endurance tests run 80-90 hours, or almost 4 days. During that time, contestants must stand awake, with at least one hand on the vehicle. Each hopeful is absolutely sure they will win (what does it take besides desire?) and the candid stories of their desires are wonderful. As the hours pass into days, fatigue and derangement take over so the outcome of the test is completely unpredictable. This small gem of a film is a testament to the indomitable spirit and outright brittleness of the human mind.



By S.R. Bindler
1997, 85 min.

Available from Amazon



To prevent sweat from marring the paint of the new truck everyone must wear cotton gloves. They can change hands but only if at least one hand remains on the truck.



This contestant (above) not only needed a truck, she needed front teeth. For another (right) it was one hand on the truck and one hand praising the Lord. She had earphones and would listen and sway to worship music.



The Heart of the Game

The great draw of this film is the marathon span of filming. For seven years a solo filmmaker followed a high school basketball team as it tried to mold suburban girls into state champs. That perseverance pays off with deep portraits of individual girls and the coach. The inspirational genius behind the team is an unlikely college tax professor who moonlights as the team's coach. He has a heart for the game, and can touch the hearts of everyone around him. The film follows a few girls as they rise, fall, sidestep, jump ahead and mature. In particular the film stars one remarkable girl who manages to overcome incredible obstacles. It's like the great documentary *Hoop Dreams* (p.80) in some ways, only better. There's more play-by-play of actual games, which ratchets up the excitement and drama at least two notches. After seven years the film concludes in a nail biting climax that seems so unlikely you'd disbelieve it if it came from Hollywood. Despite all the flashy sport, theres a golden heart of wisdom at the center of this film.



By Ward Serrill
2005, 103 min.

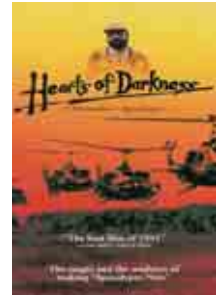
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Rent from Netflix



The ups and downs of winning and losing as state champs. The bald-headed guy (left) is a tax professor in his day job.

Hearts of Darkness

A film is like an invasion. Vietnam War's most memorable film, *Apocalypse Now*, like the war itself, nearly did in its creators. Francis Ford Coppola's wife filmed the director as his project sank deeper and deeper into sheer, irretrievable chaos. This movie about the movie is just as good as the movie.

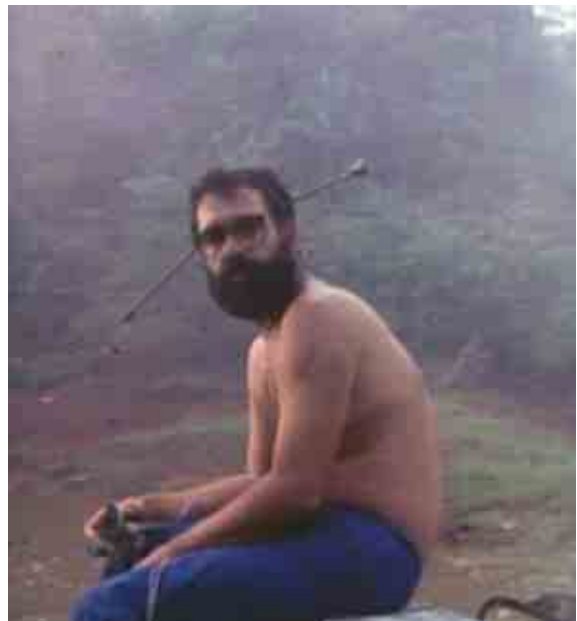


By Eleanor Coppola
1991, 96 min.

Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix



The despair and hopelessness of the endeavor is evident in a snapshot (right) of the director, Francis Coppola, as he battles the broken arrows of set-destroying typhoons, actors with heart attacks, and a script that won't end. The battle scenes were actual battle scenes with a squad of helicopters, napalm, explosions, and things going awry.



Hell House

A weird form of evangelism that is slowly gaining among fundamentalists. Churches in the Midwest construct vast “hell houses” to scare visitors to Jesus. Originally begun as a response to Halloween haunted houses, these elaborate stagings, crammed with theatrical effects and high-school actors on October 31, try to outdo each other in their ultra-realistic depiction of sin and horror. This documentary follows one church as they embark on another year of creatively presenting depravity – a labyrinth of rooms each seeded with a different sin (suicide, drug addiction, prostitution) realistically reenacted. Innocent kids scare themselves sick by how realistic they’ve made their own hell. The film works because it is sympathetic to those possessed by their enemy, and because it doesn’t overdo the obvious irony that hell houses are so spooky in concept that they scare in the wrong direction. On the other hand, nobody creates such amazing haunted houses like they do.



By George Ratliff
2001, 86 min.

Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix



A mock bullet wound in the forehead in a mock gun murder, a mock botched abortion, a mock suicide via slit arm, a mock goth, and opening day!



Helvetica

At their best, documentaries focus on some tiny overlooked corner of life and enlarge it to fill the world. By bridging the micro and macro, a great documentary helps the world make sense. This great documentary focuses on one typographic font, Helvetica. It traces the history of how Helvetica was invented, how it became a default font on most computers, how that popularity catapulted it towards ubiquity in our environment, and what it means that we can find it everywhere, even though we aren't aware of it. Along the way, we are educated in what fonts do, and how they work. Using interviews with the most renowned typographers living today, this film illuminates the world of fonts – a world we rely on more and more – and the universe of typography and design. Like Helvetica itself, this portrait is trim, radically visible, smooth, and refreshingly modern. It is nearly perfect.



*By Gary Hustwit
2007, 80 min.*

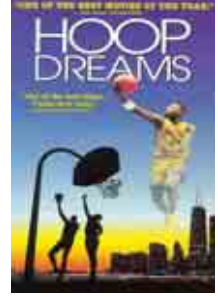
*Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix*



The type face Helvetica set in Helvetica in old fashioned lead type and printed in ink (top left). In contrast to home-made lettering on a fence (top right). A typographer points out the ubiquity of Helvetica on a street in London. It's on every other building. The art of typography begins on a computer screen (left).

Hoop Dreams

The thrill of a really great factual is you don't know how it is going to end. Here we follow young inner-city kids trying to escape their dire circumstances by making it big in basketball. We see how hard it is, and how big the dream can be. I came to root for them as if they were family.



*By Steve James (II)
1994, 170 min.*

*Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix*



Playing basketball is easy. Showing up for practice, for school, with homework completed is much tougher. The dozens of forces working against each kid are made visible and real. It's an Olympian task to overcome them. We can't predict who will prevail.



How Art Made the World

This fancy BBC series reveals art to be not the product of culture, but the producer and shaper of culture. It's a wonderfully creative and imaginative show of how great art changed our world, our ideas, and even our humanity itself. Each episode tackles a big idea using the latest state-of-the-art documentary techniques and special effects. It's brimming with news and consequential notions, but presented clearly and with wit. I think the series succeeds admirably. It does so in part by expanding your concept of what art is - without ever bringing up that boring debate. I like that they often focus on underappreciated artworks. In the end you see that art, like science and technology, has altered our environment and our identity. We are art.



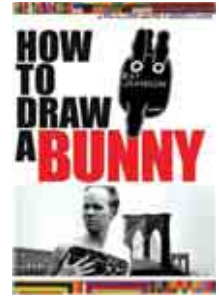
*By Robin Dashwood
2005, 290 min.*

*Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix*



Perfect proportions for
a Greek statue (left)
and why Egyptians
painted humans from
the side.





By John W. Walter
2002, 90 min.

Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix

How To Draw a Bunny

A pointed film about a most peculiar artist – an artist too peculiar even for the New York art crowd. Ray Johnson had as much talent as Andy Warhol (a friend and colleague) but he *really* didn't want money or fame. He just wanted to make mail art and rubber stamps and to amuse himself at home with whimsical and sly collages. (A goofy Kilroy-was-here scribble bunny became his signature.) Soon, like Picasso, or a naive folk artist, everything in his grasp became art. Real artists grokked his stuff – if they ever got to see it, which few did. So Ray Johnson came by reputation to be the most famous unknown artist in America and then mysteriously disappeared. He left behind a huge master collage – one clue pointing to the next in a complex recursive joke – which turned out to be his life. In a delicious way I really enjoy, this documentary itself became an integral part of his grand collage to keep us guessing.

Artwork by Ray Johnson found crammed in his house after his death (above). The artist (below) shows off his strange sensibility to appreciate simple things like paper, holes, and hands in vintage footage. An artist friend (right) does a Ray Johnson imitation using white binder stickers on his sunglasses.





*With John Cleese
2001, 195 min.*

*Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix*

The Human Face

The most common, most potent, and most universal symbol is the Human Face. There's much that science can report about dissecting this image, but no one will ever say it in the same witty, intelligent and silly way as John Cleese and his Monty Python friends. You get Einstein, Freud, and fart jokes. This series is all you hope a BBC mini-series would be: educational and entertaining, shifting the way you see things, including your own face. Five stars.



John Cleese practices the variety of expressions one face can make. Muscles of the face are digitally superimposed on a model (top) to show how we create expressions. The woman with the distorted face (lower left) is real and she is very adamant on keeping her face the way it is. In Japan where smiling is not culturally encouraged, employees are given smile lessons. They grip chopsticks in their mouths and grin.



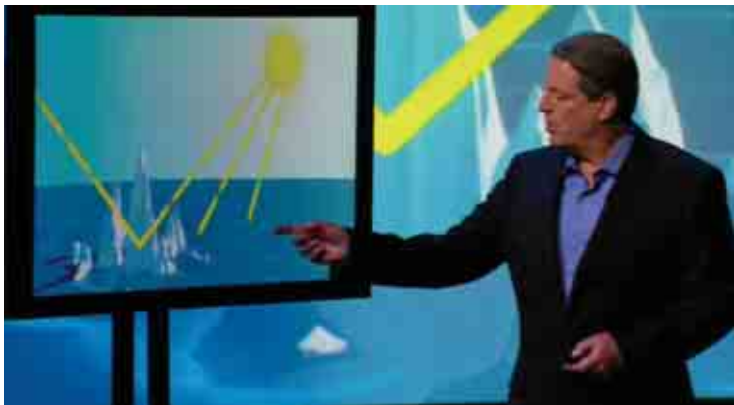
An Inconvenient Truth

Much to my surprise, Al Gore makes a very compelling host for his short course on climate change. With simple graphics, clear evidence, and well-honed examples, he gives the speech of his life. And it works. His argument is aimed at an intelligent lay person, and I believe it succeeds in making a conservative, non-hysterical case for the reality of global climate change, and why it is important to us. He then suggests possible responses, which are less inarguable, but still pretty convincing. Almost everyone who has seen this film – even those who don’t agree with his conclusions – has been impressed with Gore’s presenting skills and engaging personality. It’s not the Al Gore we saw as Vice President on TV. Part of the difference may be due to Gore’s personal journey in this mission. Turns out he has been researching climate change since college, long before it was remotely fashionable, or even scientifically accepted. He weaves his history on the subject (including his high-profile loss in 2000) into his remarkable slide show. I’ve seen a lot of PowerPoint presentations in my life, and his use of this new medium (using Apple’s Keynote) is the coolest I’ve seen. It probably helps that he’s delivered this slide show thousands of times before. Here it is amplified, expanded, and made even slicker with this film recording. It is far less “political” and far more persuasive than I expected.



*By Davis Guggenheim
2006, 96 min.*

*Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix*



Al Gore makes his points with dazzling graphics, including several where his own body becomes a reference point (below right).



Ile Aiye (The House of Life)



*By David Byrne
2004, 51 min.*

*Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix*

An arty documentary made by musician David Byrne about a personal fascination of his, Candomble, an African cult practiced in urban Brazil. There's little narration, but much music, multiple windows on the screen, and lots of dancing. Think of it as visual anthropology about a voodoo-like spiritual practice which blossoms in Brazil and is now an indigenous religion. For example, there are 7,000 followers of the Sons of Gandhi, a bizarre amalgamation of Gandhi pacifism, Sikh costume, voodoo, Brazil machismo, and Carnival band. The film provides an impressionist view of their exotic celebrations, heavy with music. You have the option of hearing David Byrne's commentary on one track, and this is by far the best way to view the film. His narrative is quirky, personal, informative, and essential, and really should be the default mode of this film. It is one artist interpreting and introducing a new folk art.



A Brazilian Gandhi figure (right) leads his troupe in a Candomble-inspired dance. Mothers dressed in their best priestess outfits (below) shuffle and sway until a few of them are possessed by their spirits.



In the Footsteps of Alexander the Great

This program is how classical history should be taught. Amateur historian Michael Woods demonstrates the power of knowledge gained when you live out the past exactly. Forcing himself to follow the actual footpaths of Alexander the Great on his 10,000 mile march – at least as much as politics, research, and geography would allow – Woods uncovers insights into Alexander’s personality and tactics, while providing viewers an amazing journey of their own – starting with caravans in the Sudan and ending with caravans in Pakistan, gliding across river crossings in Russia and in river boats down India, stretching from the mountains of Macedonia to the mountains of Afghanistan. Beautifully written, expertly hosted, magnificently filmed, and wonderfully enlightening, this BBC-produced film is simply the best short course (3 hours) in ancient history that I’ve yet seen.



*By David Wallace
1998, 240 min.*

*Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix*



Host Michael Woods scrambles up a ladder to scale the fortress where Alexander was attacked in what is now Pakistan (left). Just like Alexander, he needs to cross the Indus river on a bridge built over floating boats (bottom left). In the Chitral Valley of Pakistan he meets a blue-eyed tribe (bottom right) which claims to be descendants of Alexander the Great.



In the Realms of the Unreal



By Jessica Yu
2005, 82 min.

Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix



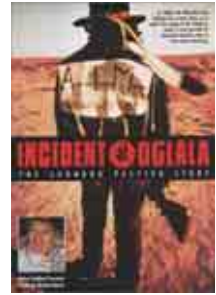
Rare image of Darger (top). One of thousands of pages of his single-spaced manuscript (left). Images from his fantasy.

A poor old man lives 50 years as an absolute recluse without a single friend. He speaks to no one; he talks only to himself in his room. Using different voices, he acts out his rage at the mistreatment he experienced growing up in orphanages and institutions for the mentally handicapped. When he finally leaves his room to die in a hospital (where he once worked as a janitor), his landlords discover in his room the longest novel ever written – a towering stack of 15,000 pages. His tale recounts an imaginary, nearly endless series of battles between evil adults who wage war against innocent children – specifically seven angelic sisters. Despite its stupendous length, this story and the man's life would have been utterly forgotten except for one amazing wrinkle. The man, Henry, painted hundreds of scenes from his "realms of the unreal" on long scrolls in amazing detail. His paintings were immediately recognized as a work of art. He had gift: an exquisite sense of color, an eye for composition, and a true artist's vision. There was a touch of genius in him, one that not a single other human had ever known about. This clever film manages to digitally animate Darger's scrolls so their enhanced scenes represent the battles which consumed Darger, and through his zany colorful images you enter into his strange world, which he spent 50 years building in complete secrecy. His is not an welcoming world, born out of the pain of his own history; it's truly weird. But instead of spending 50 years in his room consuming TV, he spent 50 years producing his own fantasy, in great curious detail, and for that achievement, he deserves this worthwhile journey into his world and back.



Incident at Oglala

This classic documentary treats the political awakening of Native Americans in the 1970s by dissecting the unjust arrest and imprisonment of several Amerindians after a shootout in the reservation village of Oglala, Dakota. You can follow the ins and outs of the evidence, trial, and re-trials, which make their injustice a lot clearer now, in retrospect. Or you can use the interviews and cross-accusations among themselves to see what the world looks like from the dirt roads of the rez.



*By Michael Apted
1992, 90 min.*

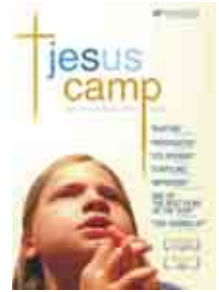
*Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix*



In a re-enactment of the "incident", Native Americans ride in a car with rifles ready. The settlement today from the air (left). Some of the principals recount what happened that day many years later.

Jesus Camp

This film succeeds in making you afraid of Evangelical Christians. You get an inside look at a zealous summer Bible camp, filmed with the full participation of the eager director and very young participants. There are a lot of things to be scared of: talking in undeciphered tongues, an unholy mix of politics and religion, lots of blind intolerance, the brain-washing of kids, and seriously misguided zeal. As a devout Christian I am ashamed. However, its success rubs me the wrong way because stirring up fear – whether justified or not – makes people stupid. We already have a government stupefied by Fear of low risk terrorism, of Muslims, and the like, with no attempt at understanding. This film, although honest in its portrayal, feeds that republic of fear. I'd like it a whole lot better if it would have revisited the kids when they were mature (as 49 Up, p.6 does) to see how this camp changed them. The film, as is, makes no attempt to understand the strange things its sees - only to drum up fright. But because the documentary of these common Evangelical/Pentecostal scenes are not very common in mainstream media, and because the glimpses are direct, intimate, unflinching, real, and honest as far as they go, I recommend it. Christians, take heed.



*By Heidi Ewing and Rachel Grady
2006, 84 min.*

*Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix*



Raising arms to pray, and sobbing (left) after an intensely emotional session. Weirdest moment: a cardboard cut-out of President Bush is brought up to the stage and given veneration and prayer.





A younger Abby and Brittany ride a bike as easily as one kid would. At 16 they show off their two driver licenses, one for each.

*By Advance Medical Productions
2006, 50 min.*

*Available from
Figure 8 Films
figure8films.tv*

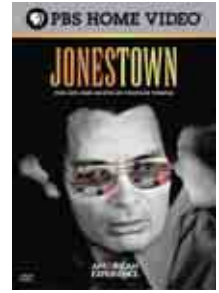
Joined for Life: Abby and Brittany Turn 16

OK, sure, I admit there is a base fascination with freaks. But conjoined twins, particularly this pair who share one set of legs and arms, raise the curiosity in interesting directions: What does it mean to be an individual? This pair's unusual arrangement means that unlike many conjoined twins, Abby and Brittany can do almost anything that a normal pair of twins might do. Except.... well, except there are two people in one body! Endless questions ensue from this documentary about their suburban life. If each girl controls only one arm and one leg, how can they ride a bike? Hit a baseball? Swim? When they drive a car, how do they decide where to turn? And do they get one licence or two? That particular question is answered on their 16th birthday, as this film follows them to the driving test center, where they pass the driving test (both turning the wheel). Their local DMV decides to issue them each a licence. On school tests, some teachers make each of them take the test – but they use both of their hands – and some allow them to take it once. As 16-year-old girls, they are clearly very different personalities, and distinct people sharing one frame. Despite their different tastes in fashions, they have to negotiate and cooperate on what to wear in the morning, what to type when instant messaging (each controls one hand), what to eat, and when to do — everything! The issues of identity and boundaries of self are wobbly. When IM'ing the girls say "I" instead of "we". But what happens when they date? Or, even more mind boggling, marry? Most of these philosophical and medical questions are left unasked. Their family is intent on not letting them become medical subjects or media celebrities, so they have spent their lives in a very small town in Minnesota, going to high school and trying to be as normal as one could be – if you have two heads. This film won't scratch all the itches provoked by this extreme form of embodiment. The filmmakers have been given exclusive access to the pair, but it is obvious they are not pressing hard; they specialize in medical subjects. The girls, their families, and the film aim to convey how "normal" they are. And yes, it is amazing how humans will adapt to almost anything. But if you want extraordinary normal, if you want hyperreal challenges to the self, if you want a prime example of transhumanism in action, get this film.

Jonestown

It's so bizarre. On the command of their minister, nine hundred extremely happy people drank cyanide-laced Kool-Aid and killed themselves and their children in group solidarity. The scale of this discombobulation is so huge that "to drink the Kool-Aid" is now shorthand for believing what the group says. But how could this happen? How could a black church led by a white man build a model, indeed admirable, interracial commune in the jungle and then kill themselves overnight? This very disturbing story is told in the words of members who survived. It's about the dark power of faith and hope. It's about cults and authoritarianism. It's about how evil slips away from good, so that good people become monsters. It almost explains the Nazis. It's a wrenching true film.

I find that the bonus deleted scenes on most DVDs are better off remaining deleted. But on *Jonestown*, some of the most telling interviews are inexplicably in the deleted-scene bin. I am thinking of the ones where the surviving members say, "If I had been there that day, there is no doubt in my mind that I too would have drunk the Kool-Aid," and then explain why. No student of the human condition should miss seeing this story. This film might even save us from some future despot.



By Stanley Nelson
2006, 86 min.

Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix

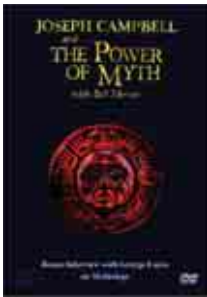


The horror. Hundreds of dead lay on the grounds hours after they drank poison (above). In better times, church members were happy, well-adjusted and integrated (right). Jim Jones (below) under questioning a few days before the disaster.



Joseph Campbell and the Power of Myth

Proving that even an interview format can succeed if done with passion, this famous set of conversations between Joseph Campbell and Bill Moyers on the power of myths still delivers a very powerful punch.



*By Bill Moyers
1988, 360 min.*

*Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix*

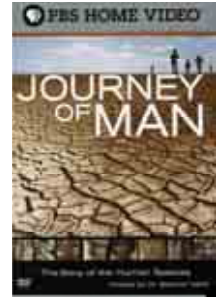


In some ancient myths a scary shaman points the way (top). He's a fool, but speaks the truth. Wise Joseph Campbell speaks to Bill Moyers, no one's fool, in the library at Skywalker Ranch. Luke Skywalker plays out one role in modern myth, that of "the hero of a thousand faces." He meets all that he fears in his confrontation with Darth Vader.



The Journey of Man: A Genetic Odyssey

A fantastic documentary tracing the earliest human migration on this planet, as shown by our genetic roots. This informative film, full of surprising news, is based on the work of Spencer Wells, who is both innovative scientist and enthusiastic host. He and crew scour the world for indigenous people with deep roots in one place, asking for samples of DNA to test, in order to piece together our “big family” genetic tree. In Indiana Jones mode, Wells tacks down common ancestors and comes up with some surprising candidates which he interviews. The best parts are when he returns with DNA results and we see the diverse ways in which people and tribes react to the news of what science says about their arrival and relations. View this as adventure travel or as a painless way to begin your genetic literacy.



*With Spencer Wells
2003, 120 min.*

*Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix*



In a carpeted hut in Central Asia, Wells meets a man that his own genetic research points to as the nearest descendent to a common ancestor to both Europeans and Asians. The man is not sure what to make of this news based on his blood sample. Later, Wells takes his scientific results to Native Americans (right), who are openly skeptical about the story of Asians walking to America in the long past. According to their cosmology, their tribes were born on the continent, no matter what genes say.



Junkyard Wars

In this nerd favorite, two teams of tinkerers race against each other to construct a working submarine, or an airplane, or a cannon, or deep-sea diving gear, all assembled from scrap found in a junkyard, and all built within a day and a half. That both sides usually succeed at some level (although only one side wins) is the first surprise of this TV series. More amazing is the easy course in physics and engineering each episode brings. By watching how a pump is cobbled together from motorscooter tires, one gets a visceral sense of how a pump works. By watching how geeks think around impossible obstacles, one catches the confidence to tackle an impossible project. They are educational enough that some science classes show them.



*By Chaz Gray and
Andrew Greenberger
1995, 78 min.*

*Available from Amazon
and
shopping.discovery.com*



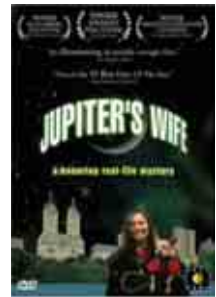
Team blue (above) give a trial run for their torpedo submarine; the rear propeller encased in a safety cage (top right). Sighting down a heavy pipe (right) which will be used as a cannon. The wheels of a car are scavenged, transmission and all. A junk-built tractor (below).





Jupiter's Wife

A sophisticated New York City filmmaker meets a homeless woman in Central Park, and finds her to be unusually smart, vivacious, and seemingly happy to camp year-round with her dogs. How does she get by with so much enlightened contentment? It's soon obvious the attractive woman is certifiably crazy, operating on another plane of reality. Voices tell her she is Jupiter's wife. But rather than flee, as any sane person would do, the filmmaker decides to unravel her story. He does this by taking her irrational claims as coded messages which he learns to interpret from her outrageous clues. He uses his investigative skills in New York to piece together her submerged life, and he then tells the fascinating story she is no longer capable of telling. It is a remarkable achievement. Although he tries to help her, in the end she returns to the park. But the film completely changed my understanding of what the voices say to the afflicted: they are a code that tries to explain. In the middle of the film you'll want to bail because you are completely focused on someone's derangements, but its worth hanging through to the conclusion as the filmmaker completes his amazing decipherment.



*By Michel Negroponte
1995, 78 min.*

*Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix*



Sometimes the voices come from a transistor radio clipped to your headband (above). They are clearer and easier to hear that way. In addition to many layers of clothing, Jupiter's wife also packs all her belongings in a huge backpack, rather than a shopping cart, giving her the aura of a long-distance camper. Her one dog grew into many dogs very quickly.

Keep the River on Your Right

As he nears old age, a New York City artist decides to revisit the adventures of his youth in distant lands. In the 1950s, while on an art fellowship, Tobias Schneebaum walked alone and unguided into the Peruvian Amazon rainforest to make first contact with some Indian headhunters. He shed his clothes and old ways and went native with them. But after his clan raided a neighboring tribe, murdered the villagers, and then ate their enemies in a victory feast – and he ate too – Schneebaum decided to return. Later he ended up collecting the art of headhunters in New Guinea, where he lived with another tribe who were also cannibalistic, and subsequently partners with one of the hunters. Forty years later he is persuaded, despite having an artificial hip, to leave his now well-worn routines in NYC to see if he can find the tribesmen in the Amazon and New Guinea again. He gets them to talk about their former eating habits. This is a complex weave of the weirdness of nostalgia, the subtleties of cross cultural communication, and the attraction of Otherness.



*By David Shapiro II and Laurie Shapiro
2000, 94 min.*

*Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix*



Returning to old friends and lovers in New Guinea (top left). Today one of the Amazonian headhunters holds an old photo of himself (top right) when he wore no clothes and was nomadic, a lifestyle he gave up decades ago. Rubbing chins, a sign of affection. Tobias, on a boat down the Amazon in the 1950s.

Kestrel's Eye

Nature photography doesn't come much purer. Filmed over several years from and in a church tower in Norway, this unadorned film of hawk life, from birth to death, is seen from the birds' eye view, with no human narration. Extreme filmmaking, extreme birdness.



By Mikael Kristersson
1999, 89 min.

Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix

With one view toward field and another down to the village, the Kestrels in the tower have a commanding view of the human realm. Mother returns with a lizard to feed her chicks. A small platform in the tower afforded the film makers easy access to her eggs as they hatched. Eventually the birds enjoy the first beats of their own first flight (top).



Kintaro Walks Japan

A restless young Californian sets out to walk the length of Japan in order to impress his half-Japanese girl friend, whose father walked the length of North and South America. What makes this autobiographical travelogue worth watching is the sheer fun and exuberance of the hero, nickname Kintaro, as he pulls everyone he meets into his movie. Smile, you are part of my adventure! Walk all day for months? Life is beautiful! Kintaro inspires fun every step of the way, in every frame of the movie, as he plays with film and life, and jokes, bonds, learns, and shares his walk. His joy is incredibly contagious. Once in your life you should do what this guy did. Make a fool of yourself and see what's down the road. Feeling low? Watch this! And as a bonus, this light-hearted documentary shows a mellow side of Japan very few gaijin ever see. (It doesn't say anywhere in the film but Kintaro – real name Tyler MacNiven – won the \$1 million Amazing Race 9 reality TV program.)



By Tyler MacNiven
2005, 67 min.

Available from kintarowalksjapan.com
and from Google Video



Walking across the country often meant walking across bridges that outlawed pedestrians. Kintaro gets a ticket (middle right) for trying to cross one bridge. It also meant walking in the rain. Or getting a massage from massage students.

Koyaanisqatsi

A mind-tripping impressionistic view of how the collision between nature and technology has birth an apocalypse on earth. Using very innovative (in 1970s) time-lapse footage, the ordinary rhythms of civilization are made alive and mesmerizing. Unlike the film *Baraka* (p.17), which later borrowed the same time-shifting and space-scanning techniques to create a prayerful ode to humanity, this documentary despairs about the consequences of our encroaching machinery. It shows we are seduced by the bright flashing lights of the city, while underneath run all kinds of explosions and destruction, captured in slow motion! If you like this surprisingly beautiful dystopia, then you should know this is the first of four films by the same director, all similar in design, all ending in “Qatsi”, and all of which get increasingly darker. Setting aside its sermonizing, the film is a wonderful kaleidoscope of modern life on this planet, for better or worse.

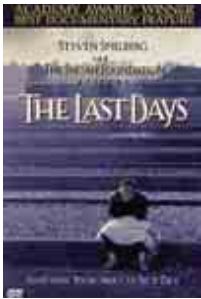


By Godfrey Reggio
1983, 87 min.
Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix



Last Days

The gruesome truth about the Holocaust is that it was very cinematic. There must be hundreds of documentaries about this lowest point in human affairs. This is one of the best views to examine that evil. It encapsulates the entire horror by following five survivors from Hungary in the last year (the last days) of the “final solution.” Because of the desperation of the Nazis in their final months these Hungarian camps were the most horrendous. The survivors tell their personal stories while they return to their Hungarian hometowns and death camps 50 years later. It’s the factual counterpart to *Schindler’s List*, all the more dramatic because this documentary was produced by Steven Spielberg.



By James Moll
1998, 87 min.

Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix

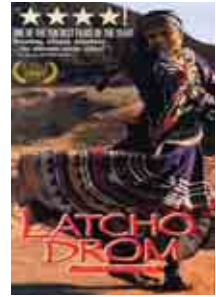


Starving survivors from the camp, like the walking dead, as they were found at war’s end. One who escaped returns with his son to confront the prison camp today.



Latcho Drom

This one is very hard to explain. It's hypnotic. There is not a spoken word in it. The film is a feature-length ethnic MTV video. A continuous song 103 minutes long. Sung in the language of gypsies. Starts out in India, where nomads dance in the magnificent Rajasthan desert, and then pass their music – without losing a beat – onto their roaming singing cousins in the mid-east and Egypt, and then onto their Roma relatives in Turkey and eventually into the heart of old Europe as gypsies. They sing about the joy of life and their predicament (all lyrics subtitled). The most marvellous thing about this unusual film is the authenticity of the local singers, and their stunning locations and landscapes. You can't tell how staged the performances are, or if they are. One feels like a gypsy on foot who just happens to meet some cousins as they sing their hearts out. This film works as ambient music video – stunning, mesmerizing scenes from some archetypical past. Except for the film *Baraka* (p.17), which this resembles because of its eerie lack of dialog, I can't think of anything like this operatic trance.



By Tony Gatlif
1994, 103 min.

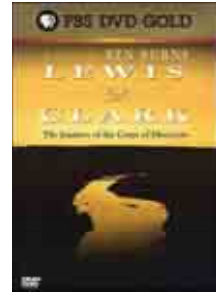
Available from Amazon



Lewis and Clark

Well done reconstruction of Lewis and Clark's scientific/exploratory expedition to the northwest by master historical documentarian Ken Burns. Thorough, fascinating, important.

Heavy canoes filled with years' of supplies were towed upstream by the brute strength (bottom). The soldiers almost mutinied. Lewis and Clark were among the first Westerners to see tepees and the plains tribes who lived in them.



*By Ken Burns
1997, 240 min.*

*Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix*



Life in the Undergrowth

Amazing! Astounding! Utterly cool. Hi-tech photography makes this the best David Attenborough nature series ever. The subject is earth's invertebrates, or in other words, the creepy crawly things that fill the woods, bushes and undergrowth. Insects, spiders and their kin. The diversity of these beings is vast, and their bizarre stories untold. Attenborough and the BBC spend a lot of money and time traipsing around the world using really cool infrared cameras to see at night, or pinhole cameras to see up close, or ultra-fast cameras to catch wings flapping. The view they capture of these unnoticed critters is absolutely stunning. They invert the usual view of bugs by filming them from their level or below. It turns out that when you can place your camera so that you literally look up to an ant while seeing it in its environment, then you look up to it with new respect. The bugs seem more like the animals they really are. When all their hairs, scales, and whiskers are visible, their true animal nature can be seen. As usual Attenborough's very biological organization of what you see and his crisp insights make this journey unforgettable and an instant classic. I've seen it twice already.



*By David Attenborough
2005, 250 min.*

*Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix*

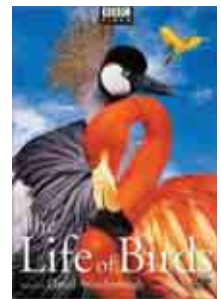
World's largest
insects, and slugs that
shoot sticky poisons
(below right), as well
as largest worms.





The Life of Birds

Of all of David Attenborough's famous and fabulous surveys of life, this one on the life of birds is his best – perhaps because Attenborough loved birds the most. His look at winged creatures is quirky, intelligent, deep, and memorable. It nicely serves as a brilliant short course in ornithology, or as a mesmerizing way to keep restless human young tamed for hours because he reveals one amazing thing after another. You can find nature films round the clock on cable; this series is simply in a class by itself, worth re-watching many times. *Intense Birds* is how I think of it.



*By David Attenborough
1998, 540 min.*

*Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix*



That's a huge nest (above) constructed by a colony of birds who use the communal heat to stay warm in the cold desert nights. Delivering his heady lectures standing adjacent to the wild energy of animals is Attenborough's signature.

The Life of Mammals

I've long marveled at how David Attenborough's films overshadow all other nature documentaries, of which there are many. Attenborough's *Life of Mammals* is no exception. First, he organizes the mammalian world by big ideas (Chisellers, Opportunists, Return to Water, etc.). Then, he is there – right next to the animal as he expounds – transmitting vibes in a live 220 volt connection. Finally, he elects to show details of mammal life that are quirky, not usually seen, and always with a point. This kind of deep intelligence and love for his subjects rewards re-viewing. This 10-part series (about 9 hours) is a family favorite.



*By David Attenborough
2002, 200 min.*

*Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix*

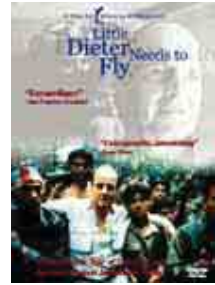


Jumping, gliding, soaring mammals. Attenborough “interviews” an orangutan while they both hover high above the ground in a treetop, Attenborough wearing a safety harness.



Little Dieter Needs to Fly

Few lives are as dramatic as Dieter's. Born dirt poor in Germany, he was starved to eating wallpaper during the bombing of his village in WWII, endured beatings as an apprentice blacksmith, arrived penniless in America in the hopes of being a pilot, peeled potatoes for two years in the Air Force, enrolled in the Navy, got to fly in Vietnam, was shot down in Laos, endured torture and starvation in Vietnam, and escaped in a series of unbelievable adventures to return to the US as a purple hearted hero. This documentary by Werner Herzog retraces Dieter's life, including a journey back to Laos, where Dieter re-enacts his capture, and months of torture in a mountain prisoner of war camp. Naturally, Dieter is quite a character, and his charisma is evident in this excellent portrait of an unusually observant and hardened survivor.



*By Werner Herzog
2002, 74 min.*

*Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix*



Film footage from Vietnam bombing runs (above). Dieter returns to the prisoner camp which he escaped from and sits in the leg stocks (left). He shows how he defeated their locks and the way they escaped. He also re-enacts his rescue using clothes to spell out SOS on river rocks (bottom left). His return to his shipmates (bottom right) was national news.



Long Way Round

What vicarious fun! Two actors (one, the young Obi-won Kenobi from Star Wars) decide that what their comfortable lives need is a motorcycle adventure. How about going from London to New York – the long way around? As in across the channel to Eastern Europe to the Ukraine, Kazakhstan, a few other ‘Stans, Mongolia, Russia, Siberia, Alaska, Canada and finally across the US. Somewhere in Kazakhstan they and you realize that this is not going to be ride in the park. There are only 80 miles of paved road in all of Mongolia. And on the Road of Bones in Siberia, built on the lost lives of 2 million prisoners in the Soviet Gulag, there are no real roads at all. It takes nearly 4 months of much mud and bad food. Their ride is filmed by a third hapless companion, and is hilarious, educational, thrilling, and above all, very entertaining. The curious mix of global Star Wars celebrity fame, medieval nomads, Russian Mafia bad taste, incompetent officials, and near-death accidents make it irresistible.



*By David Alexanian and
Russ Malkin
2004, 360 min.*

*Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix*



Right before he puked, we see the dread of trying to politely sample boild goat testicles (left). A typical Siberian river crossing doesn't stop a VW van (below). Typical road in Mongolia (bottom left) is mere piles of sticks and stones to mark the way over dirt.



Looking for Richard

What a little-known gem! Actor Al Pacino initiated this film to increase the awareness and appreciation of Shakespeare. His intent was to merge the making of a Shakespeare play, with the play itself. So in this documentary all the embryonic stages of play are woven unfinished into the finished play. For instance, the table readings for the cast, the rehearsals, the director's research, the arguments with the producer about how to stage it, are all mixed into the final sequence of this Shakespeare movie. It's a wonderfully weird hybrid, which optimizes the medium of film. The brilliance stems from Al Pacino's experience as a Shakespearean actor, where he discovered that the making of the play provided far more understanding of the text than the audience ever got, so his big idea was to let the audience in on the construction and development. As the actors grapple with the play's text – what does this old word mean? Why does the character do this at this moment? What is going on in this scene? – they (and the audience) begin to unravel the play's meaning. The play in this case is one of the most challenging of all Shakespeare plays, *Richard III*. There's tons of people, with multiple names, cross-cutting relationships, and lots of historical references. Usually, audiences are lost. However, in *Looking for Richard*, you get centered and oriented as the final film switches from full period-costume location, to location scouting, to the same actors reading around a table and then debating what it meant, then switching to an annotation by a Shakespearean expert, or insightful comments by other Shakespearean actors, then a visit to a historical footnote, and then back to the ongoing scene on stage. *Looking for Richard* is the most intense and rewarding Shakespeare I've ever seen. Heaven would be one of these interpretations for everyone of Shakespeare's plays.



By Al Pacino
1996, 118 min.

Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix

Blocking out the scenes during a rehearsal, scripts in hand (left). Scenes from the costumed film. A shot of Pacino and director discussing the filmed parts, still trying to figure what Shakespeare meant (bottom right). This too is part of the play.



Lumière & Co.

What would world famous film directors do if all they had was the naked simplicity of the very first movie camera? Could they produce anything as interesting as the first movies made? Twenty modern directors try. They load up an original camera with new film and deliver an unexpected variety of very short (3 minutes) film vignettes. Constraints yield creativity; this is a very cool way to teach history.



*By David Lynch
1995, 88 min.*

*Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix*



*A view of the camera
(left), in use by another
director (above), and
a still from one film
(below).*





Mad Hot Ballroom

Fifth graders in New York City overcome their natural distaste for the other gender and learn ballroom dance after school. They are average kids, with no real desire to dance. But their schools compete for the grand championship dance-off with all the seriousness of any sport. Clumsy boys and precocious girls battle their bodies and overcome many personal hurdles to advance to the final round of tango, foxtrot and swing. This documentary follows a wide spectrum of kids as they contest. You hear their individual dreams and troubles. It's nicely constructed so the drama of who wins is a nice surprise that pulls you along for the grand dance.



*By Marilyn Agrelo
2005, 120 min.*

*Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix*

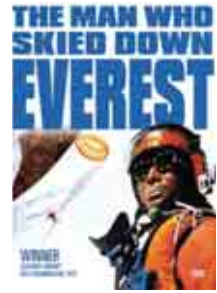


With a look that sums up his "I'm just doing this because I have to" attitude, one student practices a new dance (above). Other students proudly show off their moves in a nearby park.

The Man Who Skied Down Everest

Why not? Skiing down is no sillier than climbing up it. In fact it brings a nice symmetry to Everest's mad dream. One could say it sort of justifies the deadly and unnecessary climb up. In 1970, long before conquering Everest was a routine leisure event, Japanese champion ski racer Yuichiro Miura decided he needed to climb up so he could ski down. He became obsessed with the idea. It took years of preparations, a huge team of scientists, and 600 overloaded Nepali and Sherpa porters to haul all the gear, food, and cameras needed to make this crazy wish come true. It wasn't an expedition, it was an invasion. Higher into the snow Miura's obsession to ski down Everest cost the lives of 6 men on his team.

This film is hypnotic and meditative. What starts out as a gonzo prank turns into an introspective zen journey, in part because of the cost of his achievement. This moody film is the complete opposite of any ski movie made since. There's no exultation, no hurrah, no high-five grandstanding. Instead Yuichiro Miura grapples with his own will, fear, and ambition. He begins to wonder whether any achievement is worth the sacrifices, even when freely given. He escapes the circle of questioning by skiing down. This film might be better titled *Zen and the Art of Daring*. It's powerful, spooky.



*By Bruce Nyznik and
Lawrence Schiller
1975, 90 min.*

*Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix*



The mile-long train of porters ferrying up supplies to base camp (left). The insane angle of descent (below). The parachute does not stop him in time. The body of one of the porters who died is bundle up and dragged down to base camp (below right).



The Man Who Wanted to Classify the World

This French film (with English and German audio tracks) is about Paul Otlet, a Belgian Utopian little known in America. Otlet invented an international classification scheme called Universal Decimal Classification used for books, photographs and other documents. He invented microfilm. He invented the ubiquitous index card catalog used in most libraries. But as he says in the film, "I think in terms of the universal," and his ambitions were much larger. Otlet began organizing existing international organizations into one grand inter-organization – the Union of International Organizations – which inspired the League of Nations. His one failure was to build an ultimate World City in Europe, but it was not for a lack of trying.

But his most amazing invention (in retrospect) was his invention of hypertext, multi-media, and the web. He didn't use these words of course. He called it the International Network for Universal Documentation.

Otlet's early universalism was part of the reason he became forgotten and obscure. When the Nazis invaded Belgium in WWII they were intensely skeptical of his pacifism and internationalism. They destroyed his archive. Because he wrote in French, and none of his major works have yet been translated into English, his work was never part of the standard English history of the web. This short film will help to change that.



By Francoise Levie
2002, 60 min.

Available from
Memento Productions
mementoproduction.be



Clerks file notes into the universal library. A half million index cards are readied for indexing every known document (left).

Man With the Movie Camera

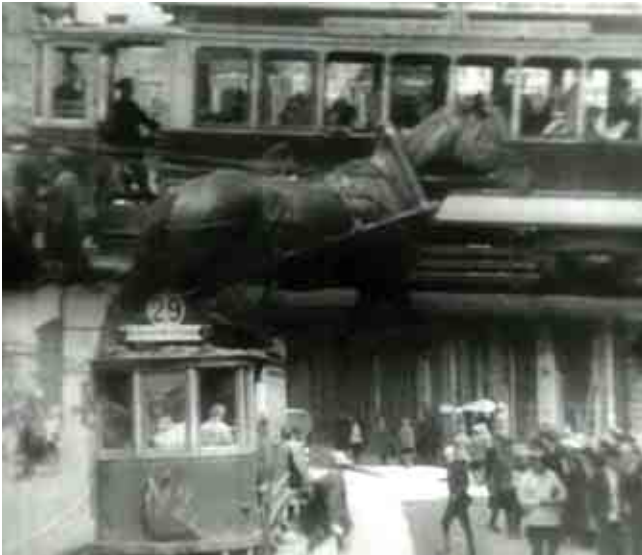
Think of this as a very early black and white version of the cinematic poem-films of *Koyaanisquatsi* (p.99) and *Baraka* (p.17). Filmed in Russia in 1929 it records the hustle and bustle of ordinary life. In filmic style it foreshadows many of the techniques used in *Koyaanisquatsi* and *Baraka* – time lapse clips of city traffic pulsating organically, montages of people working, fighting, loving, living, and since this is Russia, a photographic celebration of machines at work. But unlike the later films, this one has a curious recursive dimension. The man with the movie camera (the filmmaker himself) appears throughout the film, busily making the film as one of life's many activities, and the film ends with an enthusiastic theater audience watching this very film. At a distance of 90 years, I found the particulars of everyday life in Russia more interesting than the general ode to life. But both work. The silent film has been smartly and modernly scored from notes left by the filmmaker.

There are three versions for the sound track of this film on DVD. The original film was silent with a score suggested for live orchestral accompaniment. In the version I watched – the one offered by Netflix – Alloy Orchestra used those original musical notes to create a vigorous new score with appropriate sound effects. There are two other contemporary versions, including a score by Michael Nyman, available for sale. The film's entry on Wikipedia can help you sort these out.



*By Dziga Vertov
1929, 68 min.*

*Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix*



An avant-garde multi-window view of a street scene from St. Petersburg. Firemen speeding on a fire truck (above).

A Map for Saturday

Don't watch this film unless you are ready to quit your job. Seriously. It's about the emotional challenges and sheer joy of long-term travelling – as in backpacking around the world for a year. This kind of vagabonding is more a state of mind than a state of motion. The film explores the mellow subculture of (mostly) young people who trek along an invisible international traveller's circuit. There's a kind of endless distributed global party going on every day of the year (plainly visible here), and to join it all you need is a ticket to any country and the address of the local hostel. I was part of this mind-set for many years and boy, does this film nail the peculiar delights of perpetual cheap travel. Not just the highs (everyday is Saturday, each new person an instant best friend), but also the lows (always saying goodbye, and loss of connection). Something weird happens when you travel longer than 10 days, and that wonderful transformation (which no one can explain to their family when they return) is what this superbly written, fabulously edited, deeply personal and wonderfully likeable documentary is all about. But this bug is contagious. It is impossible to watch this fun film and not confront the fact that you are here instead of there, on the road, soaking up the world of all you-can-eat \$3 dinners and \$5 rooms, traveling the world for a year, as the filmmaker did himself. If you are headed in that direction, this disc will also work as a great orientation course, offering advice. It's the Zen and the Art of Long-term Travel.



By Brook Silva-Braga
2006, 90 min.

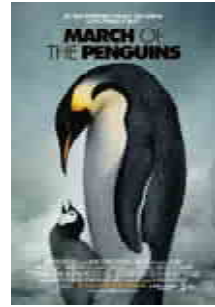
Available from
amapforsaturday.com

The romantic ideal is found: a volleyball game on the beach at sunset. Place: Thailand. Room cost is \$5 per night (below left). The other cost is a primitive squat toilet. Better get used to it.



March of the Penguins

It must be the two feet. Plenty of other creatures in the animal kingdom endure mind-boggling hardships, as do the stars of this movie, the emperor penguin in the Antarctica. But none look like little people as they do it. Waddling like overweight suburbanites in line for a concert, they trudge across 70 miles of frozen ice to search out their devoted mates, who if all went well, have spent the last 3 months standing in 80 below blizzards holding an egg on the top of their feet without eating. These little being's lives are totally focused on that one egg, and they move heaven and earth to keep it alive. (Yeah for good parenting!) I've found that women in particular find this movie romantic, perhaps because once the egg is laid, the responsibility for its survival through the harsh dark winter is passed 100% onto the fathers. There's plenty of other aspects about the penguin's life cycle which make it easy to project our humanity onto them. Whether you find these penguins sweet or pitifully trapped in a horrendous cycle of striving just to stay alive, this is remarkable film. It is expertly crafted to inform you and to touch your heart.



*By Luc Jacquet
2005, 80 min.*

*Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix*



The long march home to nest (above). An unlucky egg is dropped and sadly freezes almost instantly (right). The critical moment of the egg's transfer from mother to father (below).



Mein Krieg

In English: *My Private War*. Home movies shot by six different Nazi youth as they marched toward the Russian front as German soldiers in World War II, some of it in color. They narrate the footage later as older men. What you get is the everyday details of their life then, and how they saw the world, what they found important, or new, and what they were thinking. It smells true.



By Harriet Eder and
Thomas Kufus
1991, 90 min.

Available from Amazon



The soldiers take time out to relax with music (top). The Germans celebrate, helmets waving, after they take down a plane with a bazooka (above). More common is the need to dig foxholes (right).



Michael Palin: Himalaya

I love personal, quirky, off-beat travel, and Michael Palin, one of the original Monty Pythons, has his own eccentric travel down to an cinematic art. His BBC credentials give him access to odd little corners of the former British Empire, and so he takes us to many remote places across the breadth of the Himalayas – one the most exotic and peculiar regions in the world. I spent many years traveling in the Himalayas myself, yet Palin would turn up in places I had not even heard of. And of the places I did know, he got the spirit of the place just right. It doesn't hurt that spanning the Himalayas are several of the most interesting countries of the moment, including the essential and complex giants India and China, but also tiny Bhutan and Nepal, as well as hyper Pakistan and forgotten Bangladesh. Palin is very funny, extremely witty, and warmly intelligent about what he sees. He is the ideal travel companion, and in these 6 hours, he'll introduce you to the incredible diversity of culture hidden in the folds of this greatest range of mountains. I'd follow him anywhere.

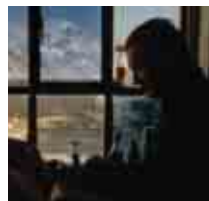


*By Roger Mills and
John-Paul Davidson
2005, 352 min.*

*Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix*

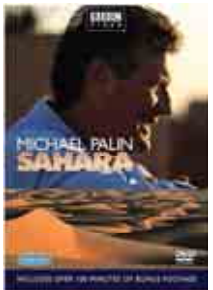


Palin narrates in front of the palace in Lhasa, or in a tiny guesthouse with a view of Mt. Everest from the north side (below). In Nepal a saddhu places his foot behind his head (bottom).





Michael Palin: Sahara



*By John-Paul Davidson
and Roger Mills
2003, 236 min.*

*Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix*

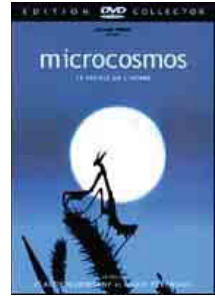
A charming, gritty, real journey into the Sahara. You piggyback on Michael Palin's arduous trip via freight train, land rover, camel and foot. Palin is fun, intelligent and the perfect host for taking you to a remote area the size of the US, filled with tons of cultural diversity and most of it seldom seen. Palin has a wonderful knack for focusing on the real and informative. Not your usual travelog.

Nothing like walking in the desert, following a small caravan on their way to tribal festival (top). After Palin hurts himself playing soccer with kids he gets a surprisingly intimate and harsh massage treatment in a "turkish" bath in Morocco (above).



Microcosmos

It begins as a small nod to the insects in your backyard, but soon becomes a wide-opened window into a previously unknown microcosm of little beings, plant species and other creepy-crawlies. How is it possible we've never seen this world before with this much clarity? Scientifically, it is solid and new. The film captures strange behaviors rarely witnessed by non-scientists. With scarce narration this better-than-usual nature film is more poem than documentary. It is the real-world version of the animation *Antz*. Filmed by the same Frenchman who later did *Winged Migration* (p.191).



By Claude Nuridsany
and Marie Perennou
1996, 80 min.

Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix

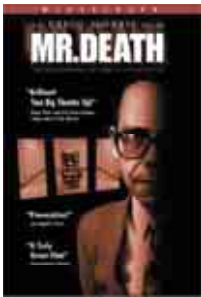


Spiders wrap prey in a silk cocoon, while bees reach down a blossom for nectar, an inch worm inches along, and snails mate. The close-to-the-ground view gives the creatures the same presence as large mammals.



Mr. Death

Let's follow an odd fellow as he strives to perfect the electric chair for the death penalty. By his calculations, the quicker the more humane. He shows us how he does this for various prisons in the US. He then goes on to "perfect" the lethal injection machine, the gallows, and eventually the gas chamber – all for humanitarian reasons of course. His expertise in the gas chambers leads to an invitation by revisionists to examine the gas chambers of the Holocaust. Once our hero does his naive engineering analysis in a stealth visit to the death camps ruins, he comes back converted as a Holocaust denier. And then his life gets really interesting. This is a story about the consequences of expertise without context or guiding morality. Like all of Errol Morris documentaries, it is extremely well done.



By Errol Morris
1999, 91 min.

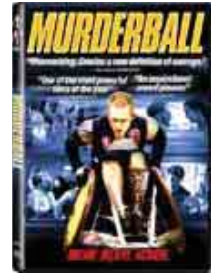
Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix



Mr. Death has no hesitation in trying out his contraptions, at least in jest. In the center he shows off his seat-belt like harness for his electric chair, which enables a guard to untie the executed prisoner more easily. He serendipitous chips samples from the death camps gas chambers (center below).



Murderball



By Henry Alex Rubin
and Dana Adam
Shapiro
2005, 85 min.

Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix

Man, these guys are tough. They play take-no-prisoner rugby in wheelchairs. They are rams with wheels. No special allowances or protective gear for these quadriplegic cases, even though a lot of them broke their neck once before. They overturn each other on their way to the Olympics in a sport called affectionately, murderball. Several of the more colorful characters on the US team are featured in depth. We hear the story of how they wound up severely disabled (thrown from a car, crushed in a brawl, crashed a motorcycle), and what they've done to transform their lives since. It is clear that for this team, most of them are living fuller lives than before they were chairbound. The serious competition through the Olympics is great fun. Their success in living, inspirational. It's an entertaining documentary.



Tipping over the other guy's wheel chair (above) is considered a great feat. Many players have surgical incision scars (left bottom) on their neck or spine. One quad in the film also lacked hands.





My Architect

The illegitimate son of a famous architect seeks the father he never knew. The architect is Louis Kahn, who co-founded modernism – naked concrete, glass walls, etc. Kahn was a late bloomer, an unemployed artist who was 50 years old when, on his first trip to Rome, he had a revelation of how to create an entirely new monumental style of architecture: make it look like ruins from the future. Kahn was an elusive nomad, traveling constantly and fathering three separate families, with three “wives,” each of whom was weirdly (even delusionally) faithful to him. After a few decades of sleepless striving to make great buildings, Kahn died bankrupt, alone and unidentified in Penn Central Station, New York. His son Nathan, whom he rarely saw, was only 11. Now an adult, Nathan sets out to find out who his mysterious father really was by investigating the only personal thing his father left behind – his buildings. In a very emotional and satisfying climax that takes place in Dacca, Bangladesh of all places, Nathan finds what he is looking for. At this same climax viewers see that his father Louis really was as great an artist as his contemporaries believed. Along the way in this odd family saga, you get a fabulous orientation in modern architecture.



*By Nathaniel Kahn
2003, 116 min.*

*Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix*

The son and father (right), and the father’s greatest work in a government building in the capital of Bangladesh (above).



My Voyage to Italy

Famous film director Martin Scorsese annotates clips from his favorite Italian films and discusses their influence on him and his art. You get a 3-hour crash course in Italian films, and an appreciation of older films in general. The professor in this case is brilliant. Every great artist should do this: outline and celebrate their influences. Two things this obviously well-made documentary did for me: made me realize how important Italian filmmaking is, and made me want to see the many legendary ones I have not yet seen. But even if all you see are the excerpts and commentary by professor Scorsese in this film, you'll have a new level of film understanding.



*By Martin Scorsese
1999, 123 min.*

*Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix*





*With Jamie Hyneman
and Adam Savage
2004, 13 episodes*

*Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix*

The all-purpose crash dummy is blown up when an airplane window seat explodes, or when pierced with a trombone projectile.

MythBusters

This super educational series from the Discovery channel is now on DVD. The two hosts, veteran Hollywood effects experts, test urban myths. You know, folklore such as: you get less wet if you walk, not run, in rain. Or, you can kill someone with a bullet of ice that leaves no evidence. Or, a small hole in an airplane at altitude will rupture into a large one and suck everyone out. If it involves explosives, all the better – can a cell phone cause an explosion at a gas station? In each episode they build elaborate equipment to recreate the conditions of the myth in order to determine if the myth is remotely possible. Sometimes the apparatus is formidable. They bought a steel ship to test whether sinking it would suck you down if you were swimming nearby (a la Titanic). Their comprehensive recreation of the myth that a penny dropped from the Empire State Building will kill you is brilliant and probably the final word on the subject. The cool part is the techie way they approach the problems: make stuff yourself. As in the series *Junkyard Wars* (p.94), you learn a lot by watching tinkerers quickly build things that really work. But here, they are not just engineering. They are actually doing an entertaining kind of science experiment, with controls, measurements, and results. Once the defined experiment is completed they push it to the limit. In other words their approach to investigating an urban legend is this: first they test the conditions as stated in the myth, and then if that does not work, they try to recreate the results of the urban legend. For instance, if they can't get an ordinary cell phone to ignite overflowing gasoline at a gas station (and they couldn't), they'll keep modifying the phone, gas supply, voltage, whatever it takes until they can get results – a spark from something like a phone that blows the station up. Cool! My entire family, including teenage girls, watches these with glee, and more than once, since there's a lot going on. And as a bonus, you wind up with a fairly good grasp of which urban legends have any veracity. Now on their fourth season, they cover three myths per episode.

The Mystery of Picasso

Astounding time-lapse photography of Picasso painting. You chiefly see his paintings (without him) as if they were organic organisms evolving, growing, and mutating. Picasso's relentless energy is overwhelming. You quickly realize that beneath every painting of his are 100 other paintings that have been painted over. As one image morphs into another – all equally riveting – you wonder, what is Picasso searching for? He seems to be hunting for something as he layers one variation over another. He's said elsewhere (not much dialog here; just time lapse film) that he is not looking for beauty but truth. I decided he keeps painting over until he does something he's never done before. In the spirit of this layering, the two independent commentary tracks by two art historians are worth listening to and much preferred to the corny music soundtrack. It's not often we get to see greatness at work. This film, made by a French director in the 1950s, is a stroke of genius.

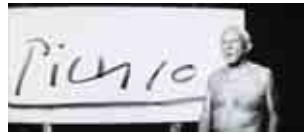


By Henri-Georges
Clouzot
1956, 75 min.

Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix

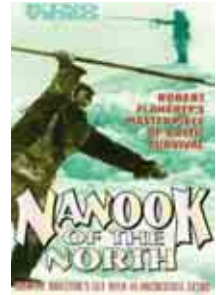


The magic moment when an artist confronts a blank page (left). A bull's head (below left) gradually exfoliates to become the colorful eruption below it. A seaside scene (below right) is overpainted 50 times to morph into the final scene (bottom right).



Nanook of the North

One of the first film documentaries in history, and still unrivaled for clarity and amazement. Shows how Eskimo (Inuit) survived in a Mars-like environment with traditional ways. These skills are long gone, and if you did not see them recorded here you would not believe they were possible.



By Robert J. Flaherty
1922, 79 min.

Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix

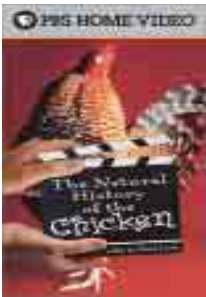


Nanook inspects the first phonograph record he's ever seen by biting it (above). He adds a few arctic fox furs to the inventory at trading post (below). Nanook waits patiently and hides low at water hole for fish (right).



The Natural History of the Chicken

An offbeat look at chickens and the people who love chickens way too much.



By Mark Lewis
2001, 60 min.

Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix



A lap chicken (top); it wears a diaper. Auto advert for fried chicken (middle). A pet rooster (bottom) in his palatial quarters in a suburban yard.



The Navigators

*By Sanford Low
1983, 59 min.*

*Available from Documentary Educational Resources
der.org*

Once upon a time Polynesian sailors could cross 6,000 miles of open ocean and land on a tiny pinpoint of an island using only the stars and waves as guides. Most of those navigators have died, and their secret knowledge with them. This film records one of the last navigators as he teaches his art to fairly clueless students. To demonstrate his skill for the benefit of the students and skeptical Westerners, he navigates across the Pacific with a film crew. The last navigator uses an oral ballad handed down through generations and encoded with instructions as the compass, and without sleeping much he watches the complex interactions of the waves to gauge speed and direction. At the end of weeks he arrives in Hawaii on schedule. A simple film showing what the human mind can do. It also honors the sophistication of supposedly simple societies.



Student navigators are taught the patterns of waves using a model of an outrigger boat in a circle of water spirits (top). Rope is braided by hand (right above) in preparation for the long trip.

New York Doll

Not many documentaries make me cry, but this one did. It recounts the unlikely rise, the predictable fall, and the final resurrection of a little-known rock musician. The Dolls were an early glam punk band partly responsible for reviving rock'n'roll in the 1970s by being outrageous and raucous. During their short-lived fame they inspired the Sex Pistols, the Stooges, and all the rest. But three of the six band members drugged themselves to death, and the fourth, bass player Arthur Kane, nearly drank to death. While Kane sank into alcoholic destitution, the other two survivors went on to rewarding musical careers, embittering Kane further. At a low point Kane saw an ad for a Bible and converted to Mormonism, eventually working as a white-shirt-and-tie clerk in a genealogical library of a Mormon temple. In his new-found spiritualism he had one prayer he refused to stop believing – that the Dolls would reunite. Thirty years later, somewhat miraculously, the band did reunite (with substitute new members) for a gala performance in London. This documentary follows Kane's improbable come-back. We start with his humble job as a meek, almost angelic clerk. He's so broke he can't buy his own pawned guitar back. As his prayer comes true, he is suddenly catapulted onto the London stage in his place in the rock band that invented punk. To Arthur this was a divine appointment to make amends with the surviving members. The concert was a smash hit, and the guys were reconciled. Then in a cosmic ending, Arthur died within days of the show from undetected leukemia. Above all else, this is a film about how every now and then someone does the impossible; they change.



By Greg Whiteley
2005, 78 min.

Available from Amazon
Rentable from Netflix

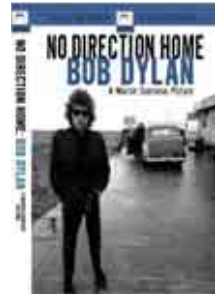


His face showing his mixed emotions, Kane hugs the guy he blames for the band's breakup (above). At his peak with the required punk haircut (top right). Two sweet Mormon ladies who are now his colleagues. On stage after the great reunion in London, still not sure of himself.



No Direction Home: Bob Dylan

The first Dylan documentary, *Don't Look Back* (p.22), revealed far more about Bob Dylan's character, but this one fills in more of his history. It covers his transformation from an unremarkable wannabe musician from Minnesota into a prophetic, enigmatic, world-class poet and artist in the late sixties in Greenwich Village, New York. In future centuries I think Dylan will come to be regarded as a genius on the order the greatest poets of all time, and this documentary will be a near-official record of his genesis.



By Martin Scorsese
2005, 207 min.

Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix



The young Bob Dylan as he first appeared in New York, in concert and (right) spoofing for a photo shoot. Nearly a half-century later, the old Dylan recounts his legendary story.



Off the Charts

You know those tiny ads for “songs wanted” in the back pages of magazines? This is the story of the people who succumb to this siren by sending in money with their late-night poems, and of the professional musicians who record them for a few hundred dollars, and of the avid collectors who prize this “outsider” art. Song-poems, as they are called, are a weird hybrid of silly lyrics and professional recording. It’s like having one of your telephone doodles turned into a giant city-block mural. There’s something inherently lopsided about them. The wannabe songwriters are of course, a wonderfully bizarre and sometimes clueless cast of characters. But just as interesting to me are the weathered musicians who make their living playing these stupefying songs. I was impressed by how serious they took each creation, giving it their utmost – well, as much as they could give in a half hour. Incredibly, many of the songwriters were repeat customers happy with the results. The third leg of this unusual triangle are the collectors, the fans who find this outsider music more interesting than the smooth releases of pros. This film does what I always hope a documentary will do: it respectfully immerses me into a world I had never heard of before and changes my view. I came away with more sympathy for the folk writers and the professionals who serve them that I would have thought possible. While the business may be a scam, it’s a willing scam for all the parties. Nice piece of work.



By Jamie Meltzer
2003, 132 min.

Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix



One stanza of song by a repeat customer flashes while he bikes and practices karate (above). Meanwhile the producers of the music work hard, and try not to make fun of anyone’s attempt at creation.



Okie Noodling

You simply have to see this one to believe it. A weekend fisherman in Oklahoma crawls along the bottom of a creek, head submerged under the muddy water, wiggling his fingers in dark holes and crevices. When a huge catfish hiding in the muck swallows his hand, the man yanks the 60 pound beast up out of the water, suckered to his fist. It's call noodling and your average Okie redneck thinks this stupidity gives rednecks a bad name. The noodlers think its the only fair way to fish. The filmmakers decide to hold the first national Noodling Contest for cash, which brings to light more noodlers than anyone knew were alive. After a while, sticking your hand into a dark underwater hole to let a monstrous fish bite it seems like a perfectly reasonable way to fish.



*By Bradley Beesley
2001, 57 min.*

*Available from Amazon
and from
okienoodling.com*



The haul after one noodling expedition (left). The small sandpaper teeth of a big catfish can cut up your hand as you struggle with it.

On Any Sunday

By the same guy who did *The Endless Summer* (p.54). What that classic documentary did for surfing, this one did for motorcycling when it was released 35 years ago. It made a somewhat fringe activity appealing to the mainstream. And like *The Endless Summer*, this film is almost as enjoyable now as it was in 1971 despite the many decades of technical improvement in equipment and the film's jaunty oh-so-seventies soundtrack. It's hard to remember that motorcycles were once esoteric, rare, and underground. This film recaptures the sudden exhilaration and freedom that regular people discovered by zooming along on two powerful wheels. *On Any Sunday* was the first of all motorcycle films, and may still be the best. It features some obsessive and legendary motorcyclists, as they became one with their bikes, practically living on them. They were some new kind of creature, human above, wheels below. Their relentless search for new ways to ride a cycle, and new races to join, keep this vintage film fresh and fascinating. Obsessive passion never ages, and never fails to fascinate me.



By Bruce Brown
1971, 96 min.

Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix



Mud is not reason to stop. Slat flats is a reason to go really fast (right). And metal plated and toed shoes made rounding sharp curves possible (below).



Planet Earth

This series should be required viewing by all inhabitants of Earth. Nearly every shot in this extravaganza 11-part BBC documentary is new, dazzling, and jaw-dropping wonderful. "Is that really on this planet?" you ask yourself. "How come we've lived here so long and no one ever showed us that before?" Because they didn't have 4 years and 25 million dollars. This fortune was well spent on ingenious high tech cameras (slow motion, night seeing, telescopic, high definition) placed in the hands of photographers of infinite patience who provide a view of this earth that will both warm you up and wise you up. As a celebration of where we live, this true film won't be outdone soon, if ever. And it is not just me who's gaga for it. This is the first item I've encountered on Amazon that had an almost unanimous 5-star rating for 280 reviews.

You have a choice of formats for the DVD. You can get it in regular display mode, or in true high definition TV mode. (If you've been waiting for something to warrant purchasing a hi-def TV, here it is.) You can also get it with American narration (Sigourney Weaver), or in the classic David Attenborough British version. I recommend the Attenborough narration for his dynamic passion.



*By David Attenborough
2007, 550 min.*

*Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix*

A jump into one of the world's largest caves. A shark rises in slow motion. The aurora borealis shimmer at night.





Project Greenlight

Should the desire to go to film school ever seize you, buy this 4 disc CD set instead. You'll learn about as much and save many thousands of dollars. HBO sponsored a contest where the newbie winner – selected from 10,000 entrants after intense auditions – gets to direct and film their first-time screenplay. Of course HBO gets to film *them* as they thrash and burn. Naturally the documentary about the making of is better than the first-time film, called *Stolen Summer*, also included. (I actually liked it.) There's plenty of drama in the 13-part "making of it" – back-stabbing, flameouts, hysteria, betrayals, and the uncertainty of whether the final film will be watchable. As a bonus, after 10 hours of this insider's view, you'll know how films are really made, and you'll be certain you could do better.



*Starring Ben Affleck and Matt Damon
2001, 500 min.*

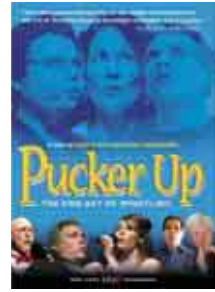
*Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix*

Filming in water at the magic hour (above). What could be more difficult? Doing it with children which triggers regulations, additional handlers, etc. The director addresses a star's needs privately (right).



Pucker Up

It's about the fine art of whistling. How whistling once was a serious musical genre, and even a language in some parts of the world. There is an international whistling champion contest, and as we follow amazing whistlers of different styles compete for the bragging rights as the world's best whistler (Who will win? The turkey farm guy who whistles like a bird, or the fund manager who does beat box whistling?), we enter the history, curiosities, and delightful beauty of human whistling. A simple film that is 10 times more interesting than it first sounds. This film is a perfect example of what documentaries do best: take a niche passion and fill out the details until we feel passionate about it too.



*By Kate Davis and
David Heilbroner
2006, 76 min.*

*Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix*



Great whistlers, from birds to
the Seven Dwarfs.



Project Grizzly

A Canadian outdoorsman who fancies himself a survival expert crosses the wrong side of a grizzly bear. The grizzly begins to attack him, but our hero stares the bear down, nose to snout, inches apart. In that moment of eye contact, our hero has a cosmic connection with the bear and vows to return to meet grizzly face to face again. But he's no fool, so he decides to invent a grizzly-proof suit. For the next seven years he spends hundreds of thousands of dollars developing the wackiest series of full-body armor outfits, each one stronger, stranger, and more invincible, but less mobile. In a perverted logic he tests the suits by having speeding trucks knock him down or by swinging half ton blocks of concrete into his head. In his obsession to face grizzly he becomes a deranged captain Ahab, and you are horrified, uplifted and transfixed as you watch him sink. It's filmed as it happens; you couldn't make this one up.



By Peter Lynch
1997, 72 min.

Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix



Our hero re-enacts his meeting with Grizzly in the snow. He inserts himself into the 7th generation of his bear protection suit (above), only to find that it has to be helicoptered into place (top right). He figures the best way to test it against the power of a grizzly is to have a truck run him over while he is wearing it.



Project Runway

This series is primarily about the drama of competition. Twelve unknown clothes designers race to win a slot as a newest fashion star. Like a lot of reality shows it features camaraderie, acts of genius, betrayals, and toxic doses of ambition, but mixed into eye-tickling colors and the stunning visuals of clothes being made. In parallel with the mystery of who will survive increasingly stressful hurdles, we also get a front-seat perspective of how clothes can become art and what it takes to survive in the cutthroat business of high-end fashion. I found every one of the first season's challenges to be brilliant and the whole series very addictive; I'm guessing the other seasons are just as good. As someone who likes to make things, this 8-part film also made the craft of fashion something that inspired me.



*With Heidi Klum and Michael Kors
2004, 509 min.
Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix*

Auditioning his wares for a real client, a contestant wears his own bright yellow fashion (top left). The stress of large projects, little time, hostile team members and the uncertainty of the rules breaks down one participant before she is eliminated (bottom right).



Pumping Iron

Filmed more than 25 years ago, long before weight lifting was considered healthy and fashionable, this dramatic 16mm film introduced the world to professional muscle men. These misshapen guys were assumed to be outright freaks, whose fandom was fringe and tiny. But I was surprised how much appreciation for bodybuilding as art and sport I gained in just one watching. But most fascinating is the film's focus on an unknown young champion from Austria, Arnold Schwarzenegger, whose ambitions and manipulations are naked and unbounded. Looking back now from his later destiny as governor of California and international movie star, this classic documentary is doubly mesmerizing.



*By George Butler II,
Robert Fiore
1976, 85 min.*

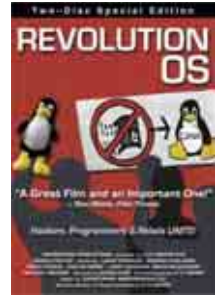
*Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix*



Arnold takes girly-girl ballet lessons (top) to improve his muscle presentation moves. In exhibitions its not hard to see why he won.

Revolution OS

Two themes that normally don't intersect in true films come together surprisingly well in this simple documentary: history and the last five minutes. *Revolution OS* explores the significance of trendy open-source software by going deep into its short history, acting as if open-source technology was a world-changing event of such magnitude that everyone will someday demand to know how it began. Which they probably will. Here is the film they will show later this century. The stress is on the political, not the technical. No drama, either; just clean geek history of a big idea when it started out small.



By J.T.S. Moore
2002, 86 min.

Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix

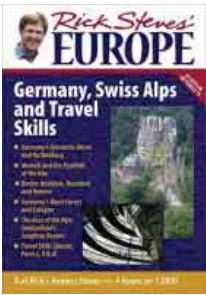


Software for the earliest commercial computers (above) was passed around on paper tapes. The business of software is so huge now, guys in funny hats try to sell it (right). The pioneering founder of free software politics, Richard Stallman (below).



Rick Steves' Travel Skills

I rely on Rick Steves' masterly command of travel minutia to guide me in Europe. The guy spends 3 months there every year keeping his advice updated in his expanding line of eponymous named books. Rick has the drill down perfectly, and he has a real gift for teaching what he knows. Yet as great as his books are, the very best way to get educated in how to travel Europe with ease and grace is to watch his short course in *Travel Skills*. I am a hardened veteran traveler and I picked up some great tips. If you are just starting out to Europe, I can't recommend this enough.



With Rick Steves
2003, 150 min.

*Available from Amazon
and from ricksteves.com
Rent from Netflix*

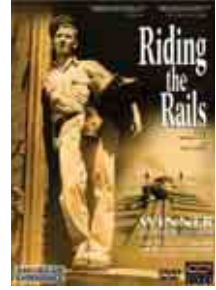


Rick Steves explains how to get the best from money exchangers (left), and how to rent a bike in Holland.



Riding the Rails

I learned something I didn't know. In addition to the millions of men who became hobos during the Great Depression in the US, this disruption also unleashed 250,000 teenagers onto the roads. These teenage hobos were in many ways like the hippies who would follow them a generation later. Almost on cue from some hidden silent signal, they left the farm at age 16 and hopped a freight train to anywhere. They were dropping out. Exploring. Seeing what was down the road. Looking for something. On the rails they met thousands of others exactly like them with the same idea. They were vigorously unwelcomed around the country; there wasn't enough work or food for the unemployed adults; as kids they were "urged" to move on. Their time on the rails and in rail camp "jungles" was harsh and sobering. In response to this tremendous social problem, Roosevelt set up the CCC, a kind of boot camp that turned these restless kids into an army that built many wilderness parks in the US. This brief season of freight hopping youth didn't last many years, but for the quarter million kids who rode the rails then, it was the experience of their life (until WWII came along). This documentary gives some idea of what that young life on the rail road was like.



*By Lexy Lovell, Michael Uys
1998, 72 min.*

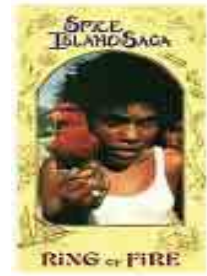
*Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix*



Then and now. As soon as a train pulled in, dozens of boys would jump off and begin their quest for work.

Ring of Fire: An Indonesian Odyssey

The best travel documentary series ever made. For ten years two brothers lived in, adventured throughout, and mastered the islands of Indonesia. They delve into this truly esoteric culture with reckless enthusiasm and true love. And they film a lot of bizarre events. This is travel as art.



*By Lorne Blair and
Lawrence Blair
1999, 240 min.*

*Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix*



To demonstrate his powers a healing shaman lights a pile of newspapers with his bare palm (above). In Irian Jaya, cannibalistic tribesmen row out to meet the brothers (above left). The filmmakers achieve a life-long dream when they document the twilight dance of the rare Bird of Paradise (above right). The Boogey men are pirates who still sail black sailed ships in the outlaw seas of Indonesia. The brothers negotiate a ride to an outer Boogey island.



By Thomas Riedelsheimer
2001, 90 min.

River and Tides

Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix

One of the best films about art, by one of our best living artists. Drift in and out of the dreams of Andy Goldsworthy as he summons a mesmerizing cornucopia of temporary monuments – an arc of icicles, a train of flowers, a hive of sticks – from bits of leaves, twigs, rocks, ice and mud. He makes things you could easily make – if only you saw the world as he does. By the end of this beautifully lyrical film, you *do* begin to share Goldsworthy mystical vision of a world swimming in energy and flows. More than anything else Goldsworthy celebrates childlike play, a playfulness which this film radiates. The most profound moments catch the artist despairing as his painstakingly constructed pieces fail before they are finished. Later he watches in boyish glee as they naturally fall apart. I feel angelic when I watch this.



Stems, driftwood, autumn leaves, raindrops (middle), icicles (below) and yellow blossoms are the medium.



Roger & Me

More guerilla theater than a documentary, this is a road trip by trouble-maker Michael Moore as he chases down an unwanted interview with the remote head of General Motors. Moore resorts to a bag of tricks and subterfuge to dispense his political message on the way. The result is funny, infuriating, verbose, sly, arrogant and hilarious all at once. If you like to watch the little guy tweak the big guy, you'll like this.



By Michael Moore
1989, 90 min

Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix



Sign in a depressed Detroit area. Moore interviews women who raise rabbits (top) to sell as meat in a working class area. Moore waits as security grapples with his demand for interview. He films a family out of work and unable to pay their rent forced to vacate by a sheriff (left).

Rough Science

A very cool BBC series (over several seasons) wherein the crafty producers take a bunch of scientists and technicians to a remote location and have them recreate sophisticated tools and inventions using only the primitive materials on hand. Vines, wood, bits of metal, shells. Here: make a clock (with bell), or a device to record sounds, or how about a camera, microscope, soap and sunblock; or go survey and map the island – using tools of your own construction. You don't know science until you can roll your own. This 10-part program is highly instructional because you get to see technology reduced to its essence – and because not everything works.



*By Sarah Topalian and David Shulman
2002, 90 min.*

*Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix*



A hot-air balloon (left top) made from taped together garbage bags lifts a camera to record an aerial view. The beginnings of a wax phonograph in the workshop (above). Making a light bulb with homemade vacuum equipment (left).



By Albert Maysles
1973, 282 min.

Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix

Running Fence / Valley Curtain

The deep pleasure in this DVD is watching an artist work, from concept to final execution, on two of America's finest modern art pieces: Running Fence and Valley Curtain. Running Fence was a 24-mile 18-foot fence of white fabric zig-zagging across farmland in northern California, till it ran down into the Pacific ocean; Valley Curtain was a huge orange drape hanging across a canyon in Colorado. Both extravagant structures were deliberately temporary – 2 weeks. Nonetheless the relentless political opposition to these ephemeral public works, an opposition conducted primarily by misguided over-zealous environmentalists, became in Christo's hands, part of the artwork itself. This pair of documentaries spends much time on Christo and his wife's frustrating campaign to convince landowners, politicians, greenies, engineers, and even other artists that their work was art. Understanding this resistance elevates your appreciation of the magnificent land-art pieces when completed.



Both documentaries are on the first DVD of a series of three containing 5 documentaries about Christo's work, 5 Films About Christo and Jeanne-Claude.

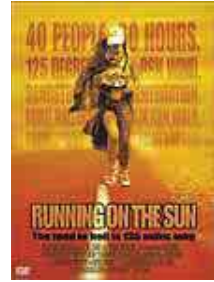


The running fence runs in Marin. Christo prepares the renderings of his curtain project. The final creation matches it perfectly.



Running on the Sun

This film marries three of my favorite genres: fringe characters, tales of endurance, and a contest. The contest is a 135 mile footrace – essentially five marathons back to back – held annually in Death Valley, during the brain-frying furnace of July. It ends up high on Mt. Whitney after a killer climb. The runners shuffle through the nights and don't sleep for days. The black asphalt road is about 150 degrees. Everyone succumbs to heat exhaustion; the trick is to avoid heat stroke and death. In this year's event there are two amputees, who hobble the entire 135 mile run on their flesh-gnawing prosthetic legs. In Death Valley in July. Why? Because the memorable characters are compelled to. The tough guys and gals puke ceaselessly and are carried away on stretchers. Surprisingly, most of the winners are in their 50s and 60s; something about pacing and knowing yourself. Even more surprising, by the time you finish watching this irrational race and the characters it attracts, you are thinking to yourself, hey, that's so stupid it's inspiring; I wonder if I should do this?



By Mel Stuart
2000, 102 min.

Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix

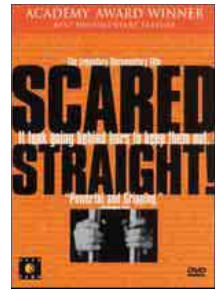


Fresh socks on your stump aren't enough to keep it from blistering (above). Another runner's foot after a few hours on the road (left). At certain moments, like this one (right), after a rain shower, in the evening, the lonely run seems beautiful.



Scared Straight!

In 1978 a bus-load of cocky juvenile delinquents are given a day off from school and sent to visit a federal maximum prison for an afternoon as a field trip. They are locked up for in a cell a half an hour. Then the designated "lifers" in jail proceed to scare the air out of the kids with a most graphic, explicit and X-rated picture of what awaits them inside and what their lives will be like if they stay on their current path. The kids, all hardened punks by 17, come out shaking. Like the documentary *The Farm: Life Inside Angola Prison* (p.57), it's a picture of what to avoid. But unlike most films, it doesn't stop there. The filmmakers return 20 years later. They track down each of the 15 kids and all of the convicts lifers and re-interview them to see what effect this encounter had. It is simply astounding that all but two of the kids turned their lives around 180 degrees after that one afternoon. It was the most important hours of their lives. Each person attributes the fact they are still alive to that brief meeting. It changes the lifers too. Even those who backslid have remarkable stories about what happened in those few minutes. The film is moving. It gives hope. And the movie itself is almost as good as a visit by lifers. Show it to a kid at risk that you know.



By Arnold Shapiro
1978, 90 min.

Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix



On the way in, the kids are full of themselves, ready to mock the dumb cons. Then they meet the one-eyed grunt who screams in their face.



Scratch

It ain't news that kids play the turntable as if it were a musical instrument but this fast-paced history of how DJ scratching was invented is pretty cool. Profiles of four famous "turntable-ists" give a clear picture of how remarkable their scratching skill is; they can essentially sing by deftly oscillating appropriate portions of several records. With fine detail the film reveals the scratchers extreme dedication to innovation, constant practice, and an obsessive knowledge of records. It's quite a trip, very geeky in many ways, but it increased my respect and admiration for this weird little achievement 1000%.



By Doug Pray
2001, 92 min.

Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix



The sliding knobs that scratchers twiddle to create their voices. In his basement, one scratcher (middle) and his buddies practice on a mutli-turntable setup. Endless stacks of old vinyl in a used record store (below) is the nirvana for many scratchers.



Searching for the Wrong-Eyed Jesus

This off-beat tour will take you to the other side of the railroad tracks. Our host – a musician – shows you his homeland in the rural Deep South. He buys a used car, hauls a wrong-eyed Jesus statue in the trunk, and circles around trailer parks and BBQ joints listening to genuine contemporary musicians – and their many stories. Everyone has a story. The host has a story. It would be a wee misguided to suggest this was a two-eyed look at poor white trash culture, but not too far off either. This film has great music, authentic characters, and an honest gaze. It's an amusing trip.



*By Andrew Douglas
2003, 82 min.*

*Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix*

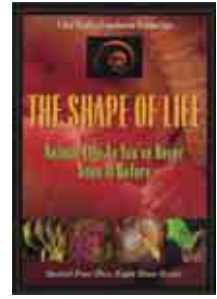


The wrong-eyed Jesus statue is not really explained, but this mystery is central to the idea that not everything has to be explained, or can be. Therefore let's make more music. An old timer sings some great songs in the studio. Or how about some music (below left) in the barbershop?



The Shape of Life

This 8-part (4 DVD set) series is the most taxonomic of any presentation I've seen. *The Shape of Life* addresses the 8 major categories of animal life – phylum by phylum. Starts with sponges, heads toward round worms, and so on. You get the full diverse view of life – all intelligently organized around a taxonomic framework (without the vocabulary), and expertly illustrated with great (mostly undersea) BBC-type footage. Despite the wonderful nature photography, the creators work really hard to convey the innovations offered by each phylum, and it works. This series cured me of a rather vague notion of animal diversity. I'd love to ingest the same mind-opening treatment for the plant world, as well as the other 3 kingdoms.



Narrated by Peter Coyote
2002, 480 min.

Available from
shoppbs.org



Nudibranchs and sea worms organize life in very different ways. Most of the animals we don't pay attention to have more diverse schemes for their bodies.

Shape of the Moon

A magical work. This perhaps the most authentic and non-cliched immersion into the third world urbanity I've ever seen. Let's say you wanted to know what it would be like to live in a self-built squatter city. How do the residents make of a life's arrangements work with so little? What do they dream about? This beautiful film perfectly captures the texture of a slum as home. No romance, no pity – only quirky complexity. You know how when you first visit a foreign place your eye focuses on small details that seem to embody the total essence of the place's strangeness? This film is like that. It's all attention, fascination and vibrancy. I can't recall a documentary more intimate; certainly no reality show comes close to a sense of "being there" – especially when "there" is an edge city in the middle of one of Earth's largest pools of human chaos. The cinematography is off-beat, original, and lyrical – almost poetry. The story is too odd to make up: The wayward son of a lone minority Christian widow converts to Islam to marry a girlfriend. Here's a glimpse of the mother and son's lives. It's about family, the slums, and Indonesia in transition. It also provides one of the keenest insights – far more revealing than you'll get by traveling as a tourist – into what Islam feels like in the street, where religion is culture and not belief. What a memorable trip!



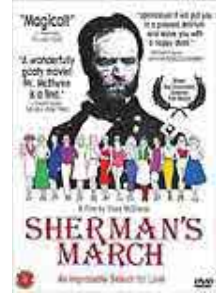
By Leonard Retel
Helmrich
2005, 92 min.

Rent from Netflix



All the neighborhood men rush to put out a fire in the shanty town (above). The Christian son is blessed by the Imam in a public ceremony (right) as he converts to Islam.





By Ross McElwee
1986, 155 min.

Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix

Sherman's March

This film is not about the civil war, nor Sherman's March. It began with those ideas, but the filmmaker quickly diverts his grant money to film his own autobiographical march through the south where he grew up. As he visits old girlfriends and finds new ones, his camera is running. He films himself painfully asking women why they won't marry him, or in private to himself, why he won't commit. This extremely internal journey sounds like a recipe for cinematic disaster and by every expectation this film should be a boring wreck. But it isn't. The film is saved by the women he meets. Each southern belle he records is more fascinating than the last, each looming larger, each unforgettable in an almost Dickensian way. While the filmmaker hides his anxieties behind his camera, a strange beauty erupts out of the intensity and passion of his girl friends. There are more interesting strong women in this film than any film I've seen. Nothing else visibly happens in the film. If you stare hard enough at normal life it begins to wiggle, and in this film an introspective guy keeps staring until the ordinary become astounding. The film is sweet and funny and oddly endearing.

Nothing happens as the filmmaker's former girlfriend floats in her pool. Another old girlfriend rollerblades circles around him.



Short Cut to Nirvana

This film lacks a compelling narrative, but it's worth watching because it gives you a nice comfy seat to view the world's largest gathering of humans. The parade is totally wild. Every 12 years pilgrims in India congregate on the beach at the confluence of two holy rivers. This meeting is called the Kumbh Mela. Officials estimate up to 70 million people came to bathe at the last Kumbh Mela in 2001. 70 million is larger than 95% of the countries of the world. Among those millions of pilgrims are tens of thousands Sadhus, holy hobos, wandering saints, faith healers and naked misfits. Every guru in India and beyond sets up a camp and side-show tent. There's too much of everything. The event gets an instant infrastructure to accommodate the largest city on earth for only several weeks. There's dust, constant loudspeaker noise, weirdness everywhere, It's sort of like Burning Man, but enlarged 100,000 times. I attended the Kumbh Mela in 1977, before it was "popular," when a mere 14 million souls turned up. It's pretty gritty (imagine the sanitation problem) but also the cheapest way to visit another planet. This film captures a tiny bit of that alien weirdness. Hopefully this is not the last film to grapple with this incredible spectacle, but right now it's the only one I know of.



By Maurizio Benazzo
and Nick Day
2004, 85 min.

Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix



Yes, Indian holy men
still sit all day on a bed
of nails. And use nail
sandals as well.



Sicko

As usual Michael Moore parades a series of on-camera publicity stunts to make a larger point: universal health care in the US is possible, desirable, and even all-American. Health care insurance may seem like the least likely fun subject to have to sit through, but as usual Moore is so hugely entertaining, you won't regret it. I have no idea if this film has changed anyone else's mind, but it moved mine a bit. It doesn't take much to blow holes in the current system. If you keep in mind that Moore makes agitprop films – films that are not meant to be evenhanded and balanced – then his jeremiads against the failures of this large health system make great watching. It is theater in the best sense of the word.



*By Michael Moore
2007, 123 min.*

*Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix*

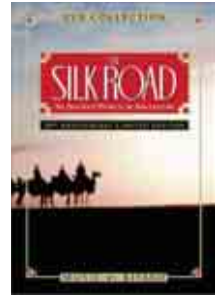


Moore assigns the amount of donations from the health care industry received by each member of Congress voting for a favorable bill (left). At his most prankish moment, Moore beseeches the sentries at Guantanamo Bay to give the ailing and insurance-less heroes of 9/11 the same quality of health care as the “evil doers” in detention. The Cuban doctors (lower left) who finally treat them for free.



Silk Road

Even in Marco Polo's time the Silk Road between Europe and China wove through vast desert wildernesses and sparsely populated steppes. It was a tough and lonely journey then, and unlike most travels in 2004, it still is a journey through grand nothingness. Because it has always been so remote, the ruins of those ancient days lay near our modern touch now. One can still find bits of silk hundreds of years old fluttering in the sand at ruins on the old road. In 1979 the Chinese government and NHK, the Japanese TV station, teamed up to make a well-financed expedition to explore the Silk Road within the Chinese borders, and the resulting documentary remains the best orientation to what remains of that ancient route. The big surprise is the extent of Buddhism in the lands we now imagine as classically Islamic. Think of those Buddhists' statues in Afghanistan. At times this 12-hour (!) extravagant travelogue plods as slow as a Chinese propaganda movie, and the soundtrack is inexplicably scored by the new age celebrity musician Kitaro, but Central Asia is looming on the horizon as the political hot-spot of this new century, so better get your maps out as the caravan trudges along.



*By China Central
Television
1990, 600 min.*

*Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix*



Razor sharp stones slash tires in one part of the Gobi (above). A caravan of army jeeps and supply trucks snake across the dusty playa (right). Tied and dyed silk is the first step for garments woven in Kashgar (below left). Ancient Chinese coins lie at the surface of long-vanished desert towns (right below), ready to simply be picked up.



Sing Faster

A quick look at the work of stage hands on the very elaborate set of the epic Wagner Ring Cycle opera. Stage hands are like sailors (all that rigging). These guys seem to date only ballerinas, and they endure long spells of boredom between intense physical coordination. The title of the film comes from their eternal desire to close the last act: “Come on, sing faster” they mutter. The best parts of this short peek behind the scenes are the interviews wherein stage hands give their New York street version of the convoluted plot of the Wagner operas playing endlessly around them.



*By Jon Else
1999, 60 min.*

*Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix*

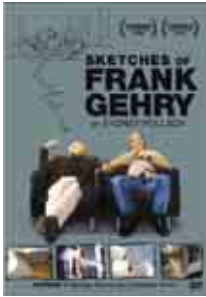


Get ready to roll, another set piece slips into place in a matter of seconds. All hands (below left) are needed to hoist a new backdrop piece. One scene in the final opera.



Sketches of Frank Gehry

A famous movie director (Sydney Pollack) documents how a famous architect works. As Pollack struggles with his first documentary, Gehry struggles to be amazing again as he plays with paper models. Gehry is the renowned architect who designs the swoopy, crumpled, and absolutely non-rectilinear buildings such as the Bilbao Guggenheim museum. But he is almost an accidental architect, and certainly an accidental superstar. He started out driving trucks and wanted to be a pilot. The theme of this documentary is the fragile nature of creativity - how difficult it is to sustain for anyone, but especially for the already successful. Gehry is unexpectedly candid about his fear of failure and even lets his therapist profile him. Best of all is his openness to let us watch him as he comes up with lame ideas and stupid suggestions, on the way to finding something that works.



*By Sydney Pollack
2005, 84 min.*

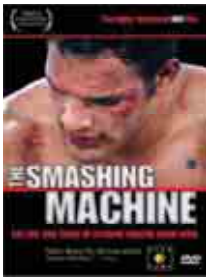
*Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix*



A just-finished building that swoops like a fish. The original sketch for Gehry's Bilbao museum is superimposed over the final built structure (right). We see Gehry in action as he twists cardboard and paper while designing a new building (below).



The Smashing Machine



By John Hyams (II)
2003, 92 min.

Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix

Ultimate fighting, where almost any move (kicking, knee to the head, etc) is permitted and blood encouraged, is as brutal as it sounds. Banned in the US, the high-purse contest moved to places like Brazil and Japan, where an international cast of scary characters try to make the championship. This gory story would be unwatchable except for the remarkable hero it follows. Like the Hulk he is huge, gentle, intelligent, and introspective. He hates hurting people, but does it because he needs money, and eventually this internal conflict does him in. He rises to greatness, is pummeled and falls low, and then is redeemed. Few people would have the courage to let a film crew record them at their low points in life, but that access makes this film great. I knew nothing about this sport or its world, and found many surprises in this strong film (with a great and unexpected music score). Recommended.

It's pretty hard to watch men head-butt each other till the other gives up (above). Blood from cut eye sockets flows freely (right). Even winners get hurt (below left). The rewards could be \$10,000 and a moment of celebrity – at least in Japan (below right).



Sound and Fury

Many deaf people reject the idea that deafness is a handicap. To the shock of the rest of us, the hearing, they view the *loss of deafness* a sin. The passion to remain deaf is brought into conflict with conventional norms in this amazing documentary when two brothers – one deaf and one hearing – must decide whether to give their deaf children cochlear era implants. Complicating this decision are their unusual families. The deaf brother married a deaf woman and they have 3 deaf children. They refuse to let their incredibly bright 5-year-old deaf daughter get the cochlear ear implant which she wants. They are afraid she will lose the joys of deaf culture. The hearing brother married a hearing woman of two deaf parents, and they have a deaf son. His and his wife's decision to give their newborn synthetic hearing, in opposition to his wife's two deaf parents, puts their families in turmoil (the conflicted parents of the brothers pivot in the center). The fighting escalates till it riles both the proud deaf community and the fix-deafness medical community at large. Everyone hand signs in the films; you follow along with narration, so your immersion into deaf culture is total, deep, shocking, and extremely rewarding. As impossible as it is to believe before you start this great film, for a brief moment you side with the *remain forever deaf* folks.



By Josh Aronson
2000, 80 min.

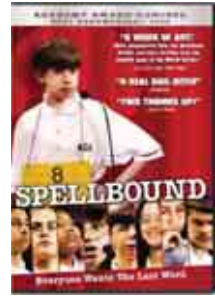
Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix

Mom shows off where her daughter's new cochlear implant sits. A particularly smart, lively deaf girl signs (below). Should she or per parents decide whether she remains deaf or not?



Spellbound

An amazingly spellbinding drama. You follow a dozen elementary school students who memorize the dictionary and beyond, practicing for years in order to spell words they – and you! – have never even heard of. Their ordinary parents are awestruck, the kids are driven, and the outcome is totally unpredictable. Only one kid will survive the National Spelling Bee. Will it be the one whose Indian parents have hired three foreign language coaches, or the girl whose dad does not even speak English? Or the boy with the stutter? It's a fantastic journey into a subculture that is uniquely American, yet invisible and marginal. Since you are on the edge of your seat most of the film, it even changes your ideas about spelling.



By Jeffrey Blitz
2002, 97 min.

Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix



Their faces say it all, as they halt and search for the correct next letter. One father, whose village back in India is praying for his son, adds his own prayers as his son's turn arrives.

Startup.com

Boy, did this documentary of a dot-com startup and meltdown resurrect old memories. It's been what, six years? Internet stock hysteria was so inflated that there are few families in America who were not touched by it in some way. Hundreds of thousands of urban workers had direct experience in this madness, but little knowledge of how the particulars worked. This fly-on-the-wall view of the birth and flameout of an Internet startup is the real thing, and should be prescribed as a catharsis if you ever owned stock in the last decade. Do you wonder where you pension money went? Watch this.



By Jehane Noujaim
2001, 103 min.

Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix



You've made it when the media interviews you on financial TV (above). But you're dead meat when you get the phone call (left) from your investors backing out.



A young girl (middle left) volunteers to serenade her athletic club with rousing patriotic songs . A young boy (lower right) flips colored pages in a book to produce the appropriate colored pixel at the precise moment.

State of Mind

One of the most amazing films I've seen in years. Welcome to the world's largest, weirdest cult: the nation of North Korea. The entire economic engine of this country is aimed toward producing a yearly religious spectacle of unimaginable scale. This film follows two school girls and their families as they practice up to 6 hours per day for 9 months in order to preform a "mass game" for their Dear President. Some students are pixels in a vast moving stadium picture. The resulting images and performances are utterly perfect. Not a single speck is out of order. After the ten-day event, the North Koreans go home and watch their flawless work on their one government channel and marvel to themselves about how superior their discipline is, how delighted they are to surrender everything to the greater group. What's frightening is how deeply they buy into the cult. The kids eagerly graduate from the sports spectacle to the military spectacle, which shares the same mentality of the perfect machine. Without saying anything (there's almost no narration) this film reveals what group insanity would be unleashed in military action against North Korea. I'm so glad this incredible film has been made, because in 50 years from now, when the cult is gone, no one will ever believe it was possible on the scale we see here.



By Daniel Gordon
2004, 94 min.

Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix

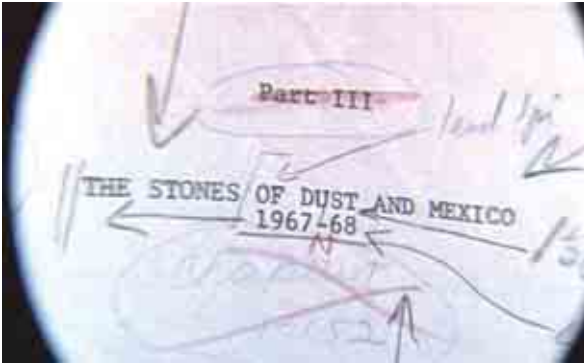
Stone Reader

Everyone has a book they read as a teenager that changed their life. When he was 17, the guy making this documentary read a book review in the *New York Times* that heralded a new first novel by a young author as the voice of his generation, and one of the greatest novels written. Our guy never finished the book, but later in his 50's (that's now) he finally reads the whole thing and decides that it was indeed one of the greatest novels ever written. But there's not a trace of the brilliant author anywhere including the web. How odd! He writes one of the best books ever, which no one reads, and then disappears. None of the teachers, critics, editors who worked on the book, or even his agent knows what happened to him. The film then becomes a quest for this disappeared genius. The obsessed director travels all around the country trying to track him down. Along the way, he interviews book-nerdy friends, famous authors, librarians, wise old professors, writing teachers, and anyone else with something to say about the meaning of reading and novels, and maybe some clue on the destiny of this one-time genius. Perhaps he is still alive secretly writing great unpublished books in his drawer? The more elusive the author becomes, the deeper the filmmaker gets into the power of books to change our lives. This is a film about the love of reading, and the difficulty of making something worth reading. It's quirky, vibrant, personal, and original. As a reader and devourer of books, I loved it.

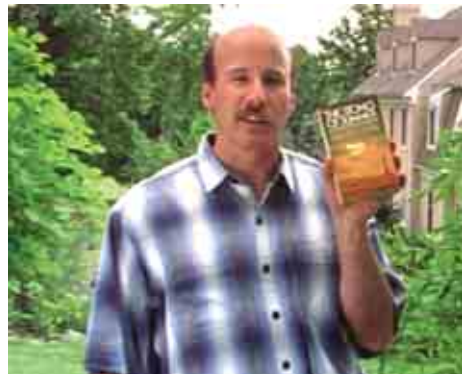


By Mark Moskowitz
2002, 128 min.

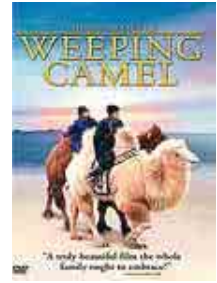
Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix



The original manuscript of the elusive book (left). The original paperback copy that set the whole quest in motion (below).



The Story of the Weeping Camel



*By Luigi Falorni and
Byambasuren Davaa
2004, 87 min.*

*Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix*

A quasi-documentary about a family of camel herders in Mongolia. The family almost loses a rare white camel colt because its mother rejects it and won't nurse the calf. Mom and child are re-united by means of a special ritual conducted by a local violin player who serenades the mother camel. Music cures what ails her. Mother camel weeps on film as she finally suckles her newborn colt. Yeah, it's odd and unusually haunting. The story is held together by the family's youngest boy. This unique film is as minimal as the desert, as melancholy as the sweetest nomad ballad, and as authentically detailed as a really fine hand-woven carpet – which it is.

Warming up his instrument, the visiting musician plays a traditional tune in the family's yurt between Grandma and Grandfather (below). The white foal refuses to suckle (above).



Style Wars

Made in the early 1980s, this film was the first to celebrate urban graffiti as true art – at a time when everyone else considered the creators vandals, and their works a crime. We meet some of the kids and hear what they were thinking and why they “tagged.”



*By Tony Silver
1983, 70 min.*

*Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix*



This film originated as an effort by an artist to collect still photographs of the graffiti on subway cars and then hunt out the kids responsible for this art (top). The kids, often from the suburbs (above), believed they were bettering the dilapidated trains. At one point the graffiti inside the cars reached saturation point which New Yorkers took as signal of the demise of law and order in the city. In reaction cops were sent to ride the cars (right above). The tagging artists were not deterred and would rendezvous at good viewing points and celebrate together as one of their works paraded by (right).



Supersize Me

Sure, it's a foolhardy stunt, to eat three meals a day at McDonald's for 30 days, just to see if it would wreck your body. But the perpetrator is extremely entertaining, and his hi-jinx are not as fanatical as you might think. His prank diet is also far more informative than any serious expose on bad nutrition. I'll continue to eat at McDonald's, but I really think every school kid in every country of the world with fast-food should see this movie. It's fun, brilliant and more memorable than any health class. Real gonzo science video, enjoyable no matter what you eat.



*By Morgan Spurlock
2004, 98 min.*

*Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix*

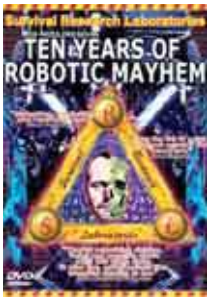


Any time a McDonald's clerk asked him whether he wanted to "supersize it" he always said yes (top). He'd then have to eat the whole large meal, giant soda and all. At the end of a month a nutritionist reveals (above) the volume of sugar he personally consumed, mostly in drinks.



Survival Research Laboratories: 10 Years of Robotic Mayhem

Who wouldn't want to see machines destroy other machines? Long before *Battle Bots*, *Terminator* and the *Matrix* series, Mark Pauline and his collective of avant-garde engineers have been staging demolition derbies featuring custom built mechanical monsters. They spit fire, explode, squash metal, whack off parts and grind each other up – within feet of onlookers packed into a parking lot or highway underpass. The aim is to create danger and provoke the audience out of its passivity. This compendium of four past performances is the best of their influential grunge theater and robotic art.



By Jonathan Reiss
2004, 60 min.

Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix

A sonic cannon blows down a shack (below left). The audience cowers as the sonic cannon is turned on them (right). Machines eat machines (bottom).



Survivorman

This reality series ceaselessly re-runs on the Discovery Channel, but is also available on DVD for those who are tv-less. The seven documentaries pit a dour Canadian survivalist against various extreme live-or-die situations. For instance our hero finds himself in a life raft adrift at sea, or stranded in the middle of the desert with a broken bike, or alive in a crashed plane in the arctic. In this show the survivalist is all alone with minimal gear (a competing survivor man has a film crew with him). This survivorman carries a multi-tool, a snack or two, and some odds and ends – and two complete sets of video cameras and tripods. With these he'll film himself as he barely survives for one week eating bugs, starting fires with sticks, and finding his way to rescue. Backpacking the 55 pounds of camera gear and keeping the film going turns out to be almost as hard as keeping the fire going. Despite his constant whining about how hard everything is, the series is entertaining and slightly educational. He never slows down enough for you to learn exactly how to roast a snake, but you'll pick up the survival principles he constantly harps on: don't panic, keep warm, get water and look for food last. Just knowing that you really can start a fire by twirling sticks if you persevere for 20 minutes as he did might come in handy someday.



*By Les Stroud
2007, 405 min.*

*Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix
lesstroudonline.com*

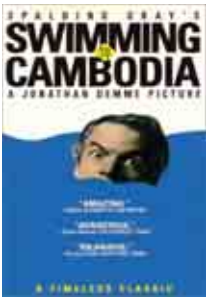


A quick make-shift shelter to keep the warmth of the fire near. Even in jungles, you need heat at night. A snake can make a good meal. The way to catch small game is to build a fall-trap using stones and twigs (below).



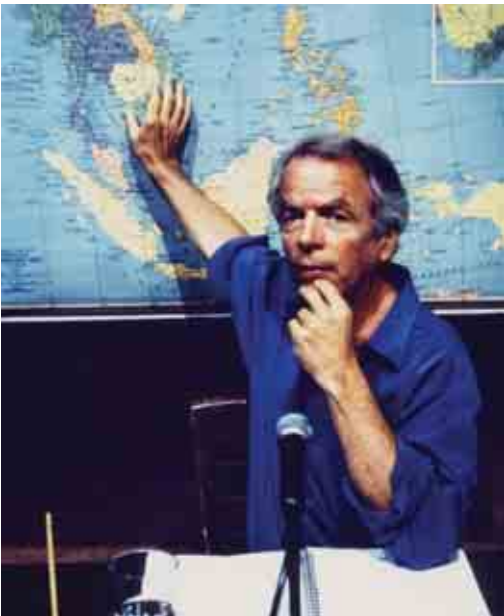
Swimming to Cambodia

This monologue performance by the late Spalding Gray can be considered a documentary because threaded through funny satire is a lecture on the geography of Cambodia and a journalistic report of the civil unrest, revolution, and incursion by the US that occupied that country. It's comedic history. It's also about him. You'll learn a lot, while laughing.



*By Jonathan Demme
1987, 85 min.*

*Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix*



Spalding Gray gives a geography lesson on where exactly Cambodia is. The show is just one man on a stage with his stories, based on his real journeys in southeast Asia.



Theremin

That woo-woo sound during the scary parts in old science fiction films was generated by a Theremin, an odd musical instrument invented by the Russian Leon Theremin. The futuristic device is operated by waving your hands without touching it, and was the inspiration and precursor of all electronic music today. The story of its unlikely creation is wrapped in mystery and drama, including the disappearance of Theremin, who may have been kidnapped from the US by the Soviet KGB to work on sonic weapons back in the USSR. This documentary reveals the strange characters who orbited this strange instrument. You've got Jerry Lewis, stage dancers, a Russian diva, the Beach Boys, and nerds like Robert Moog, who invented the electronic synthesizer. It's a strange story.



*By Steven M. Martin
1995, 82 min.*

*Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix*



A Russian girl who learned to play the Theremin eventually becomes a professional Theremin diva (top). Robots at the end of the world (top right) speak in Theremin noises. Even Jerry Lewis goofs around with a Theremin in one of his films (above). The inventor in his Moscow apartment after his re-discovery.





Thin Blue Line

This unforgettable and legendary documentary relives a real crime from multiple viewpoints. You get many versions of the event, each told from the perspective of a different persuasive person. You don't know who to believe. As variations of the day's events are replayed over and over again, your sympathy is whipped back and forth from one plausible person to the next. Eventually, after many changes of mind, the truth dawns on you, as the director Errol Morris hopes it would, and it doesn't jibe with the verdict. But because you've gone down so many alternatives, the final conclusion is hard to shake off. After watching this brilliant film the pertinent judges ordered a retrial which generated a new verdict. This documentary has the unique distinction of being an artwork responsible for freeing an innocent man wrongly jailed. Not many films can say that. The film is heroic, and more entertaining than the best fictionalized crime show. However, the way the film influenced the courts, and the bizarre events it unleashed in the lives those it touched, including the director, demand a film of its own, a film that sadly has not been made. You'll have to read about it online. In any case, *Thin Blue Line* is the canonical crime documentary, impeccably crafted, as it artfully plays upon your belief, and shows how hard it is to discern the truth. It's a great ride.



By Errol Morris
1988, 103 min.

Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix

Is this the guy (right) who did it?



Touch the Sound

Evelyn Glennie, from Scotland, is a virtuoso percussionist. Her musical performances are stunning and original. She also happens to be profoundly deaf. While we all can hear low vibrations with our body, Glennie has learned to hear high sound vibrations (and music) with her body instead of her ears. She literally “touches” sound, and what a touch! In constant motion and with infinitive child-like curiosity, she plays with sounds everywhere she goes, even though she has to lip-read to hear people talk. This unexpectedly visual film explores the soundscape. You begin to hear things you’ve not heard before, and then see things not seen before. The cinematography is so in tune with the sonic explorations, that you even begin to see the sounds as well; in fact, to hear sounds as bodily things as Glennie does. This is an art film in the most accurate use of the term: it is a work art about artists. Two artists: Glennie and her incredible music, and the filmmaker, who has made the invisible visible and beautiful. As the film progresses, Glennie emerges as original visionary and world-class inspirational hero. I hear the world differently now because of her and this great documentary.



*By Thomas Riedelsheimer
2004, 99 min.*

*Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix*

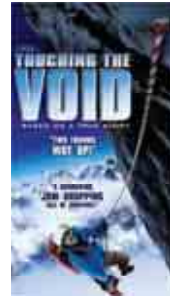


Rake. Rock. Sandal. Wind. Listening to the musical silence of a Zen garden (above). Evelyn drums on the back of a collaborator (below), as they set up a studio in an abandoned sugar factory.



Touching the Void

This true film re-enacts a harrowing adventure by two mountaineers on a remote peak in the Andes, still unclimbed today. Near the top one climber breaks his leg, disappears over the edge of a cliff in a storm, hangs by a single rope tied to his buddy for hours. After hours of no movement the buddy cuts the rope to save his own life. Miraculously the injured man falls into a deep crevasse, lives, and crawls out without use of his legs, rolls down a glacier and creeps back to camp on his elbows. He arrives almost dead 6 days after they set out. Together with two stunt men, the two climbers re-live their nightmare by re-climbing the route and revealing what they were thinking the first time around. As an act of honesty, bravery and endurance, it's staggering to watch. At every junction you are sure this is the end! But it isn't. In the climbing community this is considered one of the best mountaineering films ever.



*By Kevin MacDonald
2003, 106 min*

*Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix*

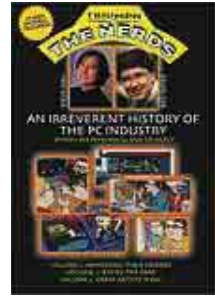


Face blistered by sun and dehydration. That's after he gets out of a deep ice crevasse (above) despite a broken leg. He drinks from mud.



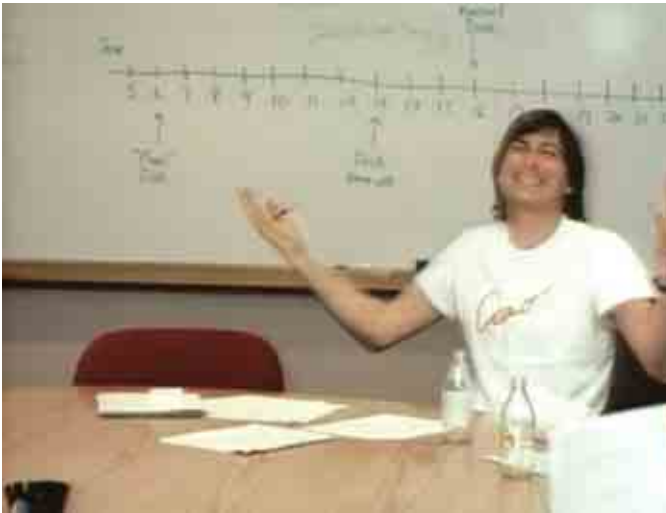
Triumph of the Nerds

A superb genesis story about that most essential invention, the personal computer. Before it was an industry, the personal computer was a strange hobby for nerds, who were definitely not cool back then. In three parts, tech gossip columnist Robert X. Cringely gives a very personal, breezy, witty, and remarkably lucid technical summary of the origins of Microsoft and Apple. Even better, he focuses on the forgotten founding companies and figures who did not make it. Cringely turns this story about hardware into one about humanity. By taking you step by step through the process of invention, counter-invention, claim of theft, bankruptcy, and bad timing, you see how accidental success was for the winners. And how vital their ability to listen to the technology. This classic documentary series should be required watching for anyone who uses a computer – that is, everyone. It's that good.



*By Robert X. Cringely
1996, 165 min.*

*Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix*

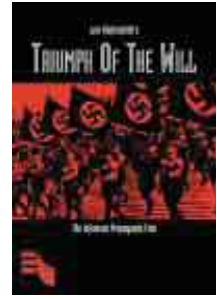


Steve Jobs hams it up in front of a white board in the very early days of Apple. Cringely soaks in a hot tub overlooking the Pacific with Jim Warren, pioneering computer conference impresario. Cringely demos the first personal computer operating systems taken from his personal collection of old computers stored in his garage (below).



Triumph of the Will

A prime record of the 20th century. This 2-hour documentary was created as a propaganda film for the Nazis, to introduce Germany and the world to Adolf Hitler and his deputies Heinrich Himmler, Joseph Goebbels and other now infamous men. It was filmed during the Nuremberg Rally in 1934 and features amazingly vivid scenes: stadiums of hypnotized youth, infinite marching columns of black-booted soldiers, and the awesome spectacle of precision mass rallies. All these now-cliche cinematic images were invented by this true film. The access is so close, the shots so artistically designed, that one feels as if were a scripted Hollywood movie, which it kind of is. Each shot is staged with supreme drama. At the climax, Hitler delivers his Third Reich speech, and we can see each drop of sweat roll down his face. For a full understanding of how this film captured (and disseminated) the Nazi ideology, listen to the historian's commentary track, in addition to the English subtitles.



*By Leni Riefenstahl
1934, 110 min.*

*Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix*

Disciplined crowd scenes timed to the second, without a person out of place. A soldier in ecstatic reverence (below right) as the Fuhrer passes by.



Troublesome Creek

A gentle, polite and very mid-western look at how a hard-working Iowa farm family loses their farm and sells it off in a mid-winter auction. Sounds boring, but the filmmaker manages to make it dramatic and insightful, because it is the filmmaker's own family losing all they have. This very intimate window makes this film a real ticket into the deepest crevice of heartland America.



*By Jeanne Jordan and
Steven Ascher
1995, 88 min.*

*Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix*



Neighbors go through the family's possessions and junk (above) as they sell their farm and move to the city. Pressed as they are with never ending chores, the filmmaker's dad still has time to watch as a kitty is rescued from the barn roof (right).



Unzipped

The concept is simple. Reveal what really happens as a world-class couture designer develops, in fits and starts, his fall line. Show the factual side of a fashion show. The result is both hilarious and mesmerizing. Unexpectedly I came to appreciate fashion designers as artists, even though I have zero fashion sense. (After this film was made the designer, Isaac Mizrahi, went on to produce his own TV fashion show, *Isaac*.)



*By Douglas Kieve
1995, 73 min.*

*Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix*



Isaac Mizrahi despairs (top) when he is told another designer is, improbably, working on the same theme as he is – Eskimo and Inuit style. Designer clothes are often not practical. An assistant yanks off the high boot of a model (middle). On the catwalk, color highlights the collection.





*By Michael Apter
2004, 576 min.*

*Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix*



The subjects at 7, then 14, then 21. As they age, three of the upper class students retain many of their distinctions. Not all of the original students agreed to continue into adulthood. (The 49 Up edition has been filmed but not released on DVD yet.)

Up Series / 42 Up

What started out as a British documentary exposing the role of class in a child's destiny has turned into one of the most satisfying works of cultural anthropology ever made. It is now a showcase longitudinal study. Every seven years, starting at the age of seven, we visit the same group of children as they grow up, have dreams, are lost and remade, and in many cases see their lives take the unexpected turn as they age. Because each new film is created to be understood by itself, each recapitulates all the others before it, so there is a lot of repetition from issue to issue, but a lot missing if you only see the last one.

Waco: The Rules of Engagement

This documentary has grown on me. At first I thought it a biased view of a minor argument between a rinky-dink kook and an edgy government agency which doesn't know how to deal with a messiah. The film reconstructs how in 1993 the US government burnt down (accidentally?) a commune of 74 men, women and children after an inexcusable 2-month siege. All dead were followers of David Koresh, a cultish pastor of a messianic Christianity, who stupidly, recklessly, selfishly (and criminally) put his entire commune in the line of fire and likely death. Yet it is clear that the childish behavior of the US government as it reacted to a bully was far more reckless, stupid and wrong than Koresh's. Over time this film didn't fade away as many activist films do. Rather it has only grown in import as the US has begun to deal with extreme religious believers elsewhere. The events of the standoff and incineration at the church in Waco shows that regardless of who is president, there's no return from hatred once you demonize the antagonist. This film includes revealing home videos made by the believers trapped inside, new aerial film of the crazy bombardment, and first-hand accounts of terrible misunderstandings. If your government hasn't enraged you in a while, try this film. Works for both lefties and right-wingers!



*By William Gazecki
1997, 136 min.*

*Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix*



David Koresh expounds the meaning of the Bible to his congregation (above left). His teachings were often about how he and his followers would be persecuted. ATF agents hide behind their own vehicles during the siege (above right). The fire spreads through the compound remarkably fast within minutes of starting (right).



Walking With Dinosaurs Collection

What if you could film dinosaurs on location, like in a nature documentary? That's what this four-hour BBC extravaganza does with advance digital technology. The final footage in *Walking with Dinosaurs* is utterly convincing. Home movies of Ornithomimus. As far as science can presently tell, this is what dinosaurs were like. These videos are better than any textbook: scientifically sound, technically astounding. Even better is *Walking with Prehistoric Beasts*. This sequel expands the variety of creatures brought back to digital life. You get saber tooth tigers, giant sloths, and a two-ton armadillo, among other extinct species – all with the same verisimilitude. One continues to believe they were merely filmed. *Walking with Allosaurus* features one species of dino in depth. The “making of” portion by the zoologists is just as educational. We watch these films quite often. Worth four hours of your time.



By Tim Haines
2004, 240 min.

Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix



Dinosaurs prey upon each other, or gather around a drinking hole. The series was filmed in parts of New Zealand whose plant life in areas is similar to that of the age of dinosaurs.



The Way Things Go

This supremely demented documentary by two German artists presents a continuous chain reaction that runs for the length of the film. Old tires, ladders, shoes, flames and explosions trigger the next piece of precariously balanced junk. This art-piece is greatly appreciated by nerds for the amazing chemistry and physics required to keep self-generated chaos on track. Science teachers play the video for lessons in equilibrium and causation, while artists roll the film at parties for an irresistible and mesmerizing spectacle. I like it for the illustration of the never-ending chain reaction that seems to take over the world. A Mr. Wizard science demonstration that takes on its own life.



*By Peter Fischli and David Weiss
1987, 30 min.*

A rocket car carries flame along rails to the next station. When a ladder is tipped over (bottom left) it releases a tire to roll into the next item. A bottle holding a liquid is tipped (bottom right) pouring its content into a cup, which lifts a candle to light a fuse.

*Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix*



What the Bleep Do We Know?



This is a wonderfully peculiar combination of a PBS science program meets new age self-help video. That's right, a part how-to, part drama, part talking head special spiced with interviews with real philosophers. It delivers practical advice on how to deal with this philosophical bomb-shell: that the reality of atoms is something we construct in our heads. This movie is shot straight and sincere but I can't remember a film more trippy. It's an odd kinda-documentary. In addition to very well-edited interviews with world class physicists and cosmologists, and classy NOVA-ish special effects, we get the meaning of things as channeled by the legendary psychic Rama – all the while weaving through a fictional story of a deaf photographer coming to terms with her handicap. Yep. Bizarre! Corny! Magical! Thought provoking! The bottom line of the film is the late-night thought that we're making reality up! It needs all kinds of strangeness to keep this argument going in daylight, but it is worth the ride.



*By Betsy Chasse and Mark Vicente
2004, 90 min.*

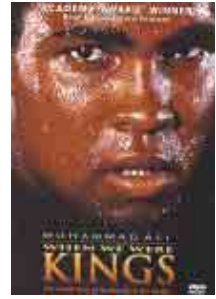
*Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix*



A hundred bouncing basketballs indicate the hundreds of multiple alternative pathways, or universes, that each decision could lead to (above). All these alternatives exist simultaneously in multiple universes (left).

When We Were Kings

This is the most popular documentary in print. I recently did a survey of industry awards, best-of-lists, and reviewer favorites: *When We Were Kings* was on more lists than any other documentary. It tells of the triumph of Muhammad Ali, the first global celebrity athlete. Even today he is probably the most famous athlete world-wide. The story of his rise from small time boxer Cassius Clay to draft resister, to poetry reader to world champ after a famous fight in Zaire, Africa would be entertaining in itself. But what puts this documentary about that famous fight in Africa (the rumble in the jungle where Ali regained his championship) over the top is the cast of characters – from Ali himself, to his antagonist (George Foreman), announcer (Howard Cosell), reporters (Norman Mailer), entourage (James Brown), promoters – all who loom way larger than life. If you were to write a Hollywood version of Ali's life and then try to cast actors to juice up the roles, you simply could not cast more outrageous people than the actual folks themselves – here forever documented with drama, intrigue, and plot twists.



By Leon Gast
1996, 89 min.

Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix

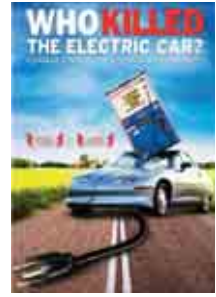


Muhammad Ali jokes before the fight (left).



Who Killed the Electric Car?

Since GM has just introduced a new electric car, the odd circumstances of their coordinated destruction of all their older electric cars seems less sinister. However, take the murder mystery metaphor of this fun film as simply a good narrative device to communicate the peculiar and disheartening politics surrounding alternative energy. There's a lot broken. This film does a good job in outlining all the forces conspiring against electric cars (many, powerful, and desperate), and the unceasing technological forces converging to make it happen. Now that the reactionary forces have been exposed in full video daylight, the inevitable electric car may happen sooner. This film makes the virtues of an electric car seem so utterly sane and desirable, you'll want one immediately. I've ridden in two different independent luxury electric cars being developed by eager Silicon Valley entrepreneurs, and boy, electric cars are powerful, fast, and amazing. This movie finally explained to me why I can't buy one yet.



*By Chris Paine
2006, 91 min.*

*Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix*



A view of massive battery banks and of the inventor. Crushed GM electric cars (below left) removed from the market. An EV races against a hummer (right).



Why We Fight

This is a complex anti-war film. I recommend all lefties and righties see it. It's sort of a civics class.

Its main thesis was articulated by President Dwight Eisenhower, who was no peacenik. As a former US general, Eisenhower was deeply familiar with how the agendas of military contractors meshed with the agenda of a vast standing army to form one large mutually self-reinforcing force called the "military-industrial complex" – a term he coined. This complex was hard to vote against, and therefore hard to constrain. By the end of his term Eisenhower was sincerely alarmed by its influence. He felt that if unchecked it threaten to overtake the interests of a democracy.

To illustrate Eisenhower's fear of a military-industrial complex gone berserk this film traces its unequivocal expansion since Eisenhower. It retells recent US wars, chiefly Iraq, in the language of the ones who benefit most from the wars. When we fight, they win. Do we fight so that they can win? The filmmakers don't deal with alternative or supplemental reasons for "why we fight," so their case is not a balanced trial. But it is a very informative and eye-opening argument. I found it convincing enough that it moved me to agree with President Eisenhower. We should be alarmed by the complex's power since it gains so much when we fight. The film is a little preachy, suggesting that in order to purify "why we fight" we need to relentlessly push back against this entrenched system which often hides its self-interest in a flag. The desires of the military-industrial complex are not the only reason why we fight, but as this film makes so visible and plain, it can easily become the only reason if we aren't vigilant.



*By Eugene Jarecki
2005, 98 min.*

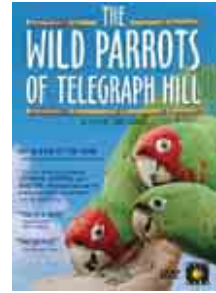
*Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix*



President Eisenhower delivers his famous "military-industrial complex" warning (left)

The Wild Parrots of Telegraph Hill

An articulate and overeducated man, but a drifter and nearly homeless, finally finds his calling in life: to feed and befriend a flock of escaped parrots on a high-priced hill in San Francisco. Like Francis of Assisi, he gently delves so deeply into the lives of these exotic birds that he can identify them individually, and over time follows their saga through generations as they multiply and take over the neighborhood. Through him you get to watch a parrot soap opera – who died, who's with whom, she said, he said. It's a wonderful natural history mystery, and as therapy, the parrots seem to liberate our saint from his stagnation. Enlivened by this wild bunch, he steps out and becomes an expert – on parrots. In short, a man is tamed by wild parrots; and the parrots become as interesting as people.



*By Judy Irving
2005, 83 min.*

*Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix*



Every parrot is an individual. He feeds them by hand every day (below).



Wild Wheels

You mean you've never had the urge to decorate your car? Add a few marbles to the hood, or plastic toys on the roof? Or maybe cover it in grass? Harrod Blank, son of artist parents, got that urge one day in the 1970s, and converted his VW Bug into an "Omigod" car. It was promptly singled out for tickets by the police simply because it was strange. Soon he found other art cars around the country equally ostracized and began to interview their creators on film about their mutual obsession. This film took 10 years to complete and is a film made for love about cars made for love. Both are cheerful testaments to creative impulses. The art car artists are wonderfully sane, fabulously interesting, decidedly unique, and full of life. I am left wondering why we all don't personalize our cars? The film has an upbeat spirit and solid countercultural perspective - even though art cars are less rare these days. Really makes me want to turn my old white van into a blaze of dreams.



*By Harrod Blank
1992, 64 min.*

*Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix*



What could be more outrageous than a car and clothes covered in living grass (left)? How about a car, clothes and coffin covered in buttons (lower left)? Or a car covered in synchronized blinking lights?

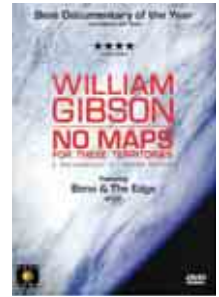




A passing billboard beams Bono from U2 into the conversation.

William Gibson: No Maps for these Territories

Science-fiction author William Gibson is locked inside a limo and driven around several cities while he muses improvisationally on the twilight between present and future. Pure talking-head, with a seat-belt. But the bizarre imprisonment gives a good dose of Gibson, who is often at his best in conversation.



*By Mark Neale
2000, 88 min.*

*Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix*





Winged Migration

Fly! Watching this remarkable film you are a bird in flight, wing to wing with your feathered brethren as you fly south. Shot over five years by training birds to fly alongside ultra light planes in locales around the world, this documentary magically immerses you into the bird dimension. Be the bird! Graceful and beautiful, and extremely satisfying. I found it an out-of-the body experience.



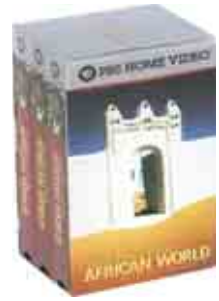
*By Jacque Perrin
2003, 98 min.*

*Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix*



Wonders of the African World

Most reports about Africa emphasize one of two well-worn themes: a) Africa's awesome natural environment, or b) its titillating variety of tribal life. This 6-hour video series illuminates a third, refreshing, little-seen dimension: African civilizations. Harvard professor Skip Gates narrates his very personal investigations into the overlooked black civilizations that blossomed on the African continent. Sometimes Gates is a little too full of himself, but other times his intensely idiosyncratic road show works perfectly in conveying the magic of ancient civilizations few Westerners are aware of. This video series is oddly better than any book about this overlooked subject – perhaps because the film succeeds in reflecting the tremendous oral and visual nature of these cultures. I had my mind changed.



*By Henry Louis Gates Jr.
1999, 360 min.*

*Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix*

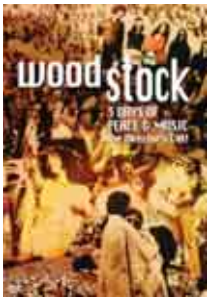


Skip Gates on location as he seeks his roots in Africa. He visits northern camel cities, Arabian sea ports, and the classical central and east coast cultures of Africa.



Woodstock: 3 Days of Peace and Music

Some threshold was crossed at Woodstock in 1969 when half a million kids appeared out of nowhere to govern themselves and listen to their favorite bands in the rain. The music (pretty great), the vibes, and the expectations and hope of this outburst of optimism are all captured on this remarkable film – which everyone agrees was much better than being there. The dreams of two decades are encapsulated into 4 hours.



*By Michael Wadleigh
1970, 228 min.*

*Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix*

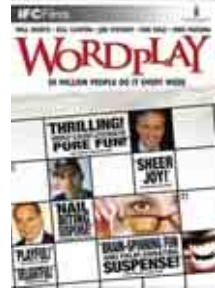


Hundreds of thousands of kids pour in to the village the evening before (above). Few were prepared for the scale or the scarcity of facilities like food, shelter from rain, or sanitation. Clown and court jester Wavy Gravy (right) gives good advice from the stage. Yoga-heads greet the dawn with exercises for the crowd (below).



Wordplay

Yet another word puzzle gets its spotlight. This one is the *New York Times* crossword puzzle. *Wordplay* follows two great films on spelling bees (*Spellbound*, p.162) and *Scrabble* (*Word Wars* p.195). Like the previous two, *Wordplay* follows fanatical contestants as they battle each other in various matches to win the championship game. The drama in *Spellbound* is the question of which little kid will go the furthest in the superhuman attempt to memorize the dictionary. The juice in the *Scrabble* documentary is the weirdness of adult professional *Scrabble* players; their lives are odd as they try to earn their living playing fast *Scrabble* games. The joy of *Wordplay* erupts from the delight of words, the mystery of puzzles, and the cheery intelligence of the game players. For me (a non-user) the behind-the-scenes look at how cross-world puzzles are constructed, and how they are solved by the best players is worth the trip. This film is surprisingly fast-paced, and entertaining. It takes a small corner of life and expands it with unexpected details, funny lines, and sure editing until it seems like the most fulfilling thing in the universe. You see crossword puzzles differently, but also life. Maybe because crossword players are so smart and fun, this film is. See it.

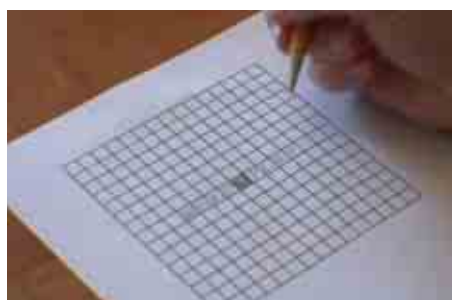


By Patrick Creadon
2006, 85 min.

Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix



Comedian Jon Stewart (above) rants and raves about the legendary puzzle. The champ (left) is not sure he's got the right answer. How the pros make the puzzle (below).



Word Wars

Just as *Spellbound* (p.162) made the spelling bee cool, *Word Wars* lifts the invisible world of championship Scrabble into the spotlight. But rather than cute kids, the champs of Scrabble are lone guys without jobs or relationships. They are misfits who neurotically memorize words, and word orders. Their competition is less the joy of winning and more a compulsion. The joy of this film, then, is less the drama of who will win, and more the pleasures of following an odd obsession to see where it takes us. We go deep into a subculture, one of many hidden from the mainstream, and discover strange guys who find the meaning of life in the order of words.



By Eric Chaikin and
Julian Petrillo
2004, 81 min.

Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix



The former champion practices Tai-Chi on his lawn to ready his mind for the upcoming contest. Thousands of players will converge in a hotel ballroom to play Scrabble for a \$20,000 prize. They study endless word lists (top right). And when they are not in a game, they play each other on a wager. Here (right) one contestant is in the middle of losing a \$1,000 game, and begs mercy for a \$500 early concession. When they aren't playing Scrabble, they are practicing and when they aren't practicing Scrabble they are talking about it, and when they aren't talking about it, they are thinking about it.



World War II: The Lost Color Archives

It's eerie how the simple addition of color can utterly transform our notions of the past. The restoration of color to World War II takes it from a remote, starkly defined monument into an immediate, vibrant, contemporary experience. It's at once more shocking and more beautiful. Enough experimental color footage (digitally restored) was filmed by US, German, and Japanese photographers to provide this amazing three-hour account of the war from all sides. This is how the participants of Europe and the Pacific saw it. Their words and letters form the narration for this British product. Disturbing though it is, this is the version that one wants to remember of the last world war.



*Produced by the History Channel
1999, 165 min.*

*Available from Amazon
Rent from Netflix*



Color film footage was shot by the Germans (top left), the Russians (top right), the British (bottom left), and the Japanese and Americans (bottom right).

Good Docs

The difference between Great and Good is often subjective. For various reasons, I didn't find the following true films to be great, although most of them were good. Some of them appear on the great lists of friends or other critics, so I mention them here without my full treatment. Just about all of them can be found on Netflix or Amazon. There's a whole bunch of documentary films that are just okay; I see no benefit in mentioning them. Films are listed in chronological order.

Man of Aran (1934) – Poetic romantic record of Irish peasants filmed in the 1930s.

Kon-Tiki (1950) – Early documentary about a legendary journey across the Pacific on a straw raft.

Mondo Cane (1962) – The original shockudrama, showing people dying, and other censored material.

The Battle of Algiers (1966) – Re-enactment of the first modern Islamic uprising and terrorism.

Sorrow and Pity (1969) – Interviews with French villagers who may have co-operated with German Nazis.

F for Fake (1974) – Very weird film about fakes (primarily art fakes) which itself is a fake.

Grey Gardens (1975) – Crazy ladies who live in an old estate house.

Gates to Heaven (1976) – Wry look at pet cemeteries and the man who invented them.

The Long Way Home (1997) – How the Jews were shuttled unwanted until the state of Israel was founded.

The Saltmen of Tibet (1997) – A semi-documentary about a caravan to distant salt mines.

Charcoal People (1999) – The lowest of the low, the people who burn the wood cut in the Amazon of Brazil.

The Endurance (2000) – William Shackleton's epic journey to the South Pole.

Eyes of Tammy Faye (2000) – Extensive portrait of the infamous televangelist, who is not what you expect.

Children Underground (2001) – Documents the sad lives of Bulgarian street urchins.

Beyond the Gates of Splendor (2002) – Missionaries who befriend cannibals who ate their husband/fathers.

Journeys with George (2002) – George Bush on the campaign trail filmed by Nancy Pelosi's daughter.

Capturing the Friedmans (2003) – A son investigates his father and brother who were arrested for pedophilia.

Lost Boys of Sudan (2003) – Follows young men refugees as they settle in Texas.

Speedo (2003) – Good portrait of a famous but struggling auto demolition speed freak.

Bright Leaves (2003) – The central role tobacco plays in the Carolinas, and the dilemma it still holds.

Born into Brothels (2004) – Children of Bombay prostitutes are given cameras to record their plight.

Control Room (2004) – Inside view of al Jazeera TV station as it tries to cover Iraq and Mid-East.

Fahrenheit 9/11 (2004) – Court jester Michael Moore makes fun of Bush's ineptitude and agenda.

Slasher (2004) – Profile of a super salesman called in by used car lots to (hopefully) sell lots of cars.

Jockeys (2004) – Gets into the sacrifices (constant dieting and bulimia) required to be a great jockey.

I Like Killing Flies (2004) – Memorable character who runs a beloved diner in New York City.

Manufactured Landscapes (2007) – Stunning, and surprising images of pollution and industry in China.

Dedicated to my family,
Who watch with me.

Thanks to
Michele McGinnis, research
Camille Cloutier, production
Paul Donald, design advice

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