Transnational Cinema: Research Project #2

In this session, we investigate filmmakers as transnational activists and consider documentary films in particular and their role in this process. In groups of three, groups you form yourselves, you will choose one full-length documentary about an ongoing or current issue or event in Africa. The following films are in NSCC’s collection, but you don’t have to choose from these:

- Black Gold
- Lost Boys of Sudan
- Long Night’s Journey into Day: South Africa’s Search for Truth and Reconciliation
- Sand and Sorrow: A New Documentary About Darfur

I’ve also seen a fine film called War Dance, (available at Fremont Video Isle, for sure), about three Ugandan children in a “displacement camp” preparing for a national school competition in traditional dance, song, and drama. And, Lisa Russell, who made We Will Not Die Like Dogs, has made other films about Africa. Please feel free to find a film to suit your interests. (I hope groups will “naturally” choose different films, so we don’t have to get too involved in deciding who does which film.)

Purpose(s):
- To learn about a range of issues and events in Africa
- To apply our shared reading and questions about the form and content of documentary films to specific films with their own styles and goals
- To consider how/when/why films can be activist texts and to consider how we want to define an activist text
- To compare a documentary’s content, impact, lens with three other “non-fiction” texts from mass media

Here’s how you start:
Watch the film. Analyze it content and its form. Consider and discuss with one another what it highlights, underscores, emphasizes about the issue/event it covers. Consider all the questions we used to discuss We Will Not Die Like Dogs—questions about who gets to speak with what kinds of authority, about the film’s rational and emotional appeal and how these are achieved, about the images and stories the film uses to create its “case,” about the sequencing and editing of the film, and other topics that arise as you watch.

Here’s what you research about the film:
- How/from whom did this film get its funding?
- Who planned, researched, filmed and “directed” it, and what is this person’s or these people’s background(s)?
What kind of assistance did the filmmaker(s) need and receive from local folk, from translators, from government officials or other kinds of representatives...?

Which audiences has this film reached and how?

What kinds of critical responses has the film received? (In this case, “critical” doesn’t mean negative; it means “from critics who think and write closely about films.”)

As with our last research project, I understand you might not be able to find answers to all these questions.

And here’s how you research the film’s content/event/issue:

Find an array of voices/stances/takes on the film’s subject matter that have appeared in print or in online mass media. In particular, look for sources on your topic from the following:

- official government-sponsored media from the country in which the film is based,
- other media sources from that country or surrounding countries
- American mainstream media—like The New York Times or other major newspapers, for instance
- National Public Radio or other kinds of public U.S. media
- smaller ethnic-oriented newspapers and magazines in the U.S. (try Ethnic Newswatch database)
- any other non-U.S. media

Also as you research the subject matter, look at the different genres of reporting and coverage, too—interviews, photo essays, editorials, news reports, “expert” guest speakers, human interest stories, and so on.

Your presentation to us of the film and your findings (in four parts):

I. Write a one page double-spaced summary of the film’s content, argument, message.

II. Write a one to two page double spaced analysis of the film’s form—how the film uses the medium of film and the genre of documentary to tell its story and argue its case.

III. Write a one to two page report on the film’s production history—how it came to be made, with whose money, by which people. Include your own thoughts about what’s significant in what you discover here.

IV. Write a two to three page analysis of the film’s coverage of the subject as compared with three other diverse sources’ coverage of the subject.
Parts I-III seem fairly straightforward to me—please ask questions if you’re not clear on what’s being asked of you.

Part IV seems more complex, so here’s how to go about it.

- Write a brief overview of each of the three articles or sources you’ve chosen. In your overview, tell us the title, venue, medium, country of origin, author, and date of the source. Then summarize its content in three to four sentences.

- After each overview, share with us what you note about the stance, slant, emphasis, message of the source and why you chose it as one of the three diverse sources on the subject.

- Then, compare the source to the film and note what strikes you as significant in this comparison and why. This might be in terms of content, form, or both.

Grading Criteria:

- Grasp of and clear attention to the various tasks being asked of you
- Success in finding interestingly diverse other coverage of the film’s subject
- Demonstrated insights gleaned from doing this work—the “aha” moments you discover and share
- Demonstrated commitment to working productively together