**Knowledge Organiser Film Studies Component 2 – Global Filmmaking Perspectives Section B – Documentary Film – *Amy***

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| 1. **Synopsis**
 | Archival footage and personal testimonials present an intimate portrait of the life and career of British singer/songwriter Amy Winehouse. |
| 1. **Cast and Characters**
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| Amy Winehouse |  | Mark Ronson |  |
| Mitch Winehouse |  | Lauren Gilbert |  |
| Blake Fielder-Civil |  | Juliette Ashby |  |

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| **Context** |
| **C. Institutional Context** | **1.** | Of the production context of ***Amy***, the film’s producer has explained that James Gay-Rees (producer):“Because we went in with a complete blank canvas, with absolutely no agenda, our investigative process was to talk to as many people as possible, and to be as completely informed as three years would allow for us to be. Then we cross-referenced all the information to work out what the through lines were because Amy was such a contradictory, complicated person. Everyone had different impressions of her that you couldn’t necessarily reconcile.” |
| **2.** | In order to engage with ***Amy*** in terms of style and content it’s fundamental that we identify what is meant by the term, and ideas of, documentary film. Documentary film scholar Bill Nichols is one of a number of film historians and scholars who engage with the form of the documentary and critically he considers all films to be documentaries.  |
| **3.** | Realism is an implicit aesthetic value of documentary but don’t be fooled: a documentary is as shaped and considered and selected as a narrative fiction film. It’s an act of manipulation. The only difference is that the subject of the film has a life and existence beyond the film frame. |
| **D. Social, Historical and Political Context** | **4.** | Films are viewed across time and place in different contexts but also in relation to a number of broader social and political contexts within which a film is produced. In saying that there is such a thing as international cinema we are indicating that in part, by viewing films produced by specific nations we are able to develop some sense of (i) the ‘character’ of a nation and by extension (ii) the ideological position they might have and (iii) the way in which they ‘see’ the experience of the world around them. |
| **5.** | In relation to ***Amy***, the film’s social and political context resides in it being a film about celebrity and also about the way in which popular culture related to Amy Winehouse. The film also relates to social and political (ideological) considerations around drug use, marriage and an ‘idea’ of London as a place. It’s worth noting, too, that ***Amy*** was a hugely popular release at cinemas. Also of note is that it was premiered at the Cannes Film Festival that gave the film a very high-profile promotional launch and also endowed the film with a certain kind of ‘legitimacy’ |

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| **Key Scenes** |
| **E. Back to Black Recording** | **7.** | In the film there is a notable sequence that is archival footage that shows Amy Winehouse in the studio recording the title song of her breakthrough album. Critically, Kapadia takes this footage that would have been shot for commercial, promotional purposes and ‘revises’ its meaning by adding to it an interview on camera from the archive of Amy Winehouse. |
| **8.** | The interview provides fundamental information about Winehouse’s lyrics and also her relationship with Blake Fielder-Civil. This sequence demonstrates the value of sound in generating meaning in relation to image: we hear a segment of the song ***Back to Black*** and we also hear Winehouse’s producer, Mark Ronson discussing her relationship with Fielder-Civil. |
| **9.** | Captions are then used in the sequence to lay out the lyrics and in their use at this point they provide a context to Winehouse relationship to Fielder-Civil so that the material does provide a powerful connection between ‘real life’ and creative life and in doing so relates to how we understand the work and processes of creative people. |
| **10.** | The sequence combines diegetic and non-diegetic sound and we recognize a disjunction between Amy singing in the studio and what we hear on the soundtrack. It’s an intentionally constructed effect; the work of the director and his team to construct meaning through use of sound and image. |
| **11.** | Critically, this scene retains a moment from the archival footage of Amy Winehouse reacting to a take / recording of her performance and the lyrical content and we hear her say *"it’s a bit upsetting at the end, isn’t it?”*. Kapadia’s inclusion of this comment assumes a particular power in the context of how Winehouse’s life would develop. |
| **12.** | If we were to discuss the film in terms of genre, we would identify the film as working to some degree within the genre of tragedy. |

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| **Documentary Filmmakers** |
| **F. Michael Moore** | **13.** | Michael Moore, American filmmaker, author, and political activist, who was best known for a series of documentaries—often controversial—that addressed major political and social issues in the United States |
| **14.** | After producing three television series and other limited-release films—including the comedy Canadian Bacon(1995), in which a U.S. president starts a cold war with Canada in order to boost his approval ratings—Moore achieved major success with Bowling for Columbine(2002). The film, which profiles gun violence in the United States, won the Academy Award for best documentary. |
| **15.** | In his next documentary, Fahrenheit 9/11(2004), Moore criticized U.S. Pres. George W. Bush’s handling of the September 11 attacks and the administration’s decision to start the Iraq War. Although highly controversial, it won the Golden Palm at the Cannes film festival and earned more than $222 million worldwide to become the highest-grossing documentary |
| **16.** | In 2007 Moore released Sicko, an examination of the health care industry in the United States. For his next documentary, Capitalism: A Love Story (2009), Moore took a critical look at the U.S. economy, including the subprime mortgage crisis of 2007–08 and the subsequent bailout of banks. Where to Invade Next (2015) unfavourably compared various aspects of daily life in other countries—such as educational practices and the balance between work and leisure—with those in the United States |
| **17.** | He wears casual clothes, a baseball cap and is overweight. However, this seemingly, laidback persona does hide a sharp and incisive line of questioning which he uses to good effect. |
|  | **18.** | A key part of Moore’s approach is to concentrate on a particular agenda whether it be for example gun control (Bowling for Columbine (2002), the invasion of Iraq (Fahrenheit 911, 2004) or the American health care system (Sicko, 2007) and expand on a set of arguments around his perspective on these issues. |
| **G. Nick Broomfield** | **19.** | Nick Broomfield was born in London in 1948. He made his first film, Who Cares? (1971), with financial aid from the British Film Institute while studying politics and law at Essex University. Its subject is a close-knit but threatened working class community in Liverpool, and the influence of Willmott and Young's classic study Family and Kinship in East London is clear, but even in this early work Broomfield's characteristic sense of personal involvement is already apparent; as he himself put it: "everything at university was at a very conceptual, analytical level, and I felt a need to look at things in a more immediate way."  |
| **20.** | In 1976, Broomfield made the first of several films with the American filmmaker Joan Churchill, whom he'd met at the National Film School and who had already made a name for herself in the US with documentaries such as The American Family (1973). Their films are less overtly confrontational than Broomfield's solo works, belonging more to the tradition of direct or observational cinema in the Frederick Wiseman mode |
| **21.** | The reason why he uses a more participatory approach, he has explained, is because "what's important is the interaction between the filmmakers and those being filmed, and that the audience is aware of that interaction so they can make decisions of their own." |
| **22.** | In particular he began to focus on 'celebrities' and on the media circus that surrounds and indeed constructs them. |
| **23.** | This is particularly the case in Aileen Wuornos: The Selling of a Serial Killer (1992), but it's also there in Heidi Fleiss - Hollywood Madam (1995), Biggie and Tupac (2002), and Kurt and Courtney (1998). This last also raises the question of censorship once again, via Courtney Love and her lawyers' increasingly determined efforts to stop the film in its tracks. These give rise to one of the film's most characteristic moments, in which Broomfield interrupts an award-giving ceremony for Love hosted by the American Civil Liberties Union, which champions free speech, in order to protest at her efforts to silence him and others. He is rapidly evicted. |
| **24.** | Broomfield's later films are fascinating examples of what Stella Bruzzi calls the 'performative documentary'. This, by openly acknowledging that the intrusion of the filmmaker into the situation being filmed inevitably affects and alters that situation, underlines the fact that the documentary is itself a mode of representation as opposed to unmediated reality and thus foregrounds the construction and artificiality of even the non-fiction film. This is not to imply that such documentaries are not concerned with getting at 'the truth', but, rather, that the truth emerges from the encounter between the film-makers, subjects and spectators. |
| **H. Point to Note – Amy Winehouse the Icon** | **25.** | The songs of Amy Winehouse might be considered classics of pop music in the way that they revisit an older ‘sound’ and in terms of the resonance of their lyrical content. |
| **26.** | Significantly, Amy Winehouse has become a ‘text’ in herself (rather as Beyonce, Lady Gaga and Madonna have done) that continues to be meaning- generating and Asif Kapadia’s film ***Amy*** explores this resonance. Of popstars as cultural touchstones, the scholar Richard Dyer has made the point that a pop star (whether a pop music star or a pop-film star) crystallise a range of cultural values and ideological positions. Critically, pop stars in their music come to represent concentrated examples of the very real emotions that we experience in our daily lives. Dyer also notes that stars have to be both different to us and yet the same as us so that they are both somehow aspirational but also sufficiently resonant and ‘familiar’ to us. The comment certainly informs how we can think about i) the film ***Amy***, ii) the performer Amy Winehouse and iii) the ‘real’ person, Amy Winehouse. |

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| **Specialist Study Areas** |
| **I. Critical Debates** | **27.** | A key way in which to engage with the contemporary and/or historical critical debate around a film and its formal properties (its film language and sound work) to consider several reviews of a given film particularly if they offer vividly contrasting responses. In this way, we can begin to understand more fully how the discourse around a film’s interest and value (aesthetically and sociologically) develops and then becomes embedded in the wider culture.  |
| **28.** | In its review of ***Amy***, ***Vulture.com*** says that:“***Amy*** is a celebrity-mongering documentary about the lethal effects of celebrity. Her management’s decision (abetted by her dad) to push her into a tour that began and ended in humiliation was the coup de grâce. But the main culprit might have been fame itself. She had such a fragile talent, every note profoundly felt and hard-won, and Kapadia shows her repeatedly surrounded by paparazzi, whose clicks he amplifies to the point where they sound like the guns that took down Butch and Sundance. We identify with her pain but see her through the eyes of those cameras, complicit in spite of ourselves.”  |
| **29.** | ***Vulture’s*** comment touches on ideological and ethical aspects of the film’s subject but also the act of being a viewer of this particular film. Compare and contrast the tone of the Vulture piece with this excerpt from the magazine ***Sight & Sound*** magazine in which we read the comment that:“Amy seems not only the subject but the author of her own story. There are some shocking images in this desperately sad, judicious but overlong film, which itself could be read as part of the problem – a symptom of the public’s endless appetite for misery and seeing stars self-destruct. But while walking this fine line, ultimately the film neither wallows in Amy’s fate nor glamorises her tragedy.”  |
| **J. Narrative** | **30.** | The narrative of ***Amy*** is essentially linear, within its expository form as it follows Amy’s life in a linear progression but with several instances where home video footage of Amy as a child is incorporated. The film’s dramatic effect and structure is not so different to how a ‘fiction’ film is constructed and in ***Amy***, Asif Kapadia makes powerful dramatic use of three events: attempts by Amy’s family to encourage her to stop her drug use; the imprisonment of Fielder-Civil and finally Amy’s death. |
| **31.** | In an interview with the BFI at the time of the film’s release, Asif Kapadia noted that:*“The interesting thing about doing it as a doc instead of as a drama is that it would have taken years to get a script together. So, it was interesting not to have a script, not to have to worry about financing, to just go off and interview people. You get that raw reaction which you hear in the finished film. One of the things I find frustrating about drama is that the process can somehow kill spontaneity.”*  |
| **32.** | Key to the narrative distinction of ***Amy*** is an absence of a voiceover to provide a kind of authorial voice. As such, the narrative instead explicitly makes its meaning by associations and juxtapositions between images and sounds. Critically, the narrative is shaped by interviews with people in Amy’s life who do not speak directly to camera. The narrative is also constructed around the inclusion of captions that take the form of excerpts from Winehouse’s song lyrics. Fundamentally, the narrative construction allows the film to manipulate us to sympathise or empathise with a point of view about Amy. |