

# Amy

## (Kapadia, 2015)

Component 2: Global filmmaking perspectives

### Themes

Archive Documentary  
Objectivity Observational  
True Fiction

#### The Contexts of the Film

The film was directed by Asif Kapadia, who also directed the documentary *Senna*. *Amy* had the same production team as *Senna*, including archive producer, Paul Bell and editor, Chris King. It was Kapadia's success with *Senna* that led Amy's record label, Universal, to approach him about the Amy documentary. *Amy* was made on a budget of £3.4 million and grossed \$22 million worldwide.

*Amy* premiered at Cannes in 2015, in 2016 it won a BAFTA and an Oscar for best documentary film. The film's musical soundtrack was released as an album, it is a combination of Winehouse's music and Antonio Pinto's film score.

#### Documentary and Digital Technology

The argument regarding digital technology and documentary is how objective can it be. Direct Cinema has the belief that the camera tells the truth and can therefore guarantee objectivity. However, with digital photography images can be easily manipulated, bringing into question the legitimacy of what we are seeing. In regard to *Amy* the real footage created for the documentary are the aerial shots of London. Everything else is archive footage which has been carefully selected and positioned.

**Aesthetics:** Kapadia uses a style called 'True Fiction' he went against the conventional 'Voice of God' narration and staged interviews. Instead he interviewed 100s of people who were in Amy's life both personally and professionally in order to develop an insight into her troubled life. The purpose was to make the subject feel more real and having a 'voice of god' style narrator puts the filmmaker as the central figure, Kapadia wanted Amy to be the focus.

The difficulty of using archive footage was how to build the narrative. Amy's songs were used as the backbone of the film, the lyrics to each song mirrored a point in her life; each song has the narrative built around the meaning of it. In this way Amy herself was able to have her voice in the film, she effectively wrote it.

Due to the lack of video footage, Kapadia decided to include a number of still images of Amy, from both personal collections, promotional material and the paparazzi. These photographs provided a personal interaction with Amy as she is directly looking into the camera and therefore gazing directly at the audience. This intimate gaze is also present in the home video footage that was provided by some of her closest friends. These videos allow the audience to view Amy through the lens of some of the closest people in her life and have her gaze back at us with the same level of intimacy.

Kapadia is not the central focus in his documentary, he removes himself from the film, he does not put his own subjective stance on the film, instead the spectator is allowed to build their own response without being told what to think or how to feel.

**Representation:** The film gives a more realistic representation of Amy Winehouse than the media ever portrayed her to be. Through using footage from her loved ones as well as live performances and media coverage, the documentary gives a more rounded representation of her. She is represented as someone battling her own demons and who fears fame, in her own words, a young Amy states "I don't think I am going to be at all famous. I don't think I could handle it. I would go mad." The film starts with her as an innocent 14-year-old singing happy birthday to her friend. We glimpse her as a besotted girlfriend and wife to Blake who funded his crack cocaine and heroin addiction, herself then becoming addicted. The film doesn't hide from her drug and alcohol addiction, it features images of her and Blake bandaged and bloodied after falling off the wagon. It also showcases her talent through live performances and studio recordings. One of the most honest moments is when Amy is duetting with her idol Tony Bennet, her clear nerves and frustration present her as a vulnerable, star struck young woman. Although the film is not related the videos and images are all selected to create a particular representation of Amy. The final scenes of her being carried away in a body bag and her funeral provides a clear message that her life was tragic, and many factors impacted this final outcome.

The representation of Mitchell Winehouse caused him to unsuccessfully demand the film be re-edited. Mitchell is represented as someone more concerned with his daughter's success than her welfare. He is also significantly absent in her early life, one of the reasons Amy blames for her childhood depression and addiction. Mitch turns up near the end of the film when Amy is in St Lucia, he is criticised for turning up with a film crew and invading his daughter's private holiday.

Blake Fielder-Civil (Amy's ex-husband) is represented as the catalyst for her drug addiction. He is also represented as someone who uses Amy's fame and money to fund his own habits. In one scene of him in a bar surrounded by drinks he says, "Who's paying for this, I'm broke?" when a person off camera replies "Amy" Blake responds with "Can we get a bottle of Dom Perignon?". Blake's arrest is also selected in the documentary as well as images of them taking drugs together. This positions the audience to view him as a negative influence.

#### Filmmakers Theories

**Nick Broomfield** has developed a participatory, performative mode of documentary filmmaking. Broomfield is an investigative documentarist with a distinctive interview technique which he uses to expose people's real views. Broomfield doesn't understand the mode of observational filmmaking, he states that it is voyeuristic, on his participatory style he explains "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." In the early 90s Broomfield began to focus his films on celebrities and how they are constructed by the media. His 1998 documentary *Kurt and Courtney* caused an issue with Courtney Love and her lawyers who attempted to stop the film being released.

**Kim Longinotto** is a British documentary maker. Her films often focus on women who have either been oppressed or discriminated against. Longinotto is an observational filmmaker. In her own words she films "survivors and rebels and women who are standing up against tradition." She believes that film should enrich the spectator rather than instruct them. Longinotto's style is also known as direct cinema, she doesn't plan or script her films. Instead Longinotto wants her subjects to feel it is their film, she describes how she observes them living their lives, so they have complete control over their own stories. Her style is to be unobtrusive, favouring long takes observing her subjects.

**Michael Moore** is an American filmmaker, author, and political activist, who was best known for a series of controversial documentaries that addressed major political and social issues in the United States. Moore uses the performative style of documentary making. He reports on situations often personal to him to construct social truths. Moore creates many of the events and situations to be filmed, combining the participatory style of filmmaking as well.

**Peter Watkins** is an experimental and controversial filmmaker who pioneered the 'docu-drama' style. His films include voice of God narration, hand held camera sequences, newsreel footage, use of amateur actors and reconstructions. Watkins' films blur the lines of reality and fiction. Watkins' politically charged cinema has tackled nuclear destruction, political oppression, police brutality, teenage suicide and workers' rights. The films he produced in the 1960s were highly regarded, *The War Game* (1965) won an Oscar for best documentary film, although was banned by the BBC for 25 years due to its shocking content.

### Back to Black- America

The on-screen text tells us it is April 2007, Amy and Blake are filmed getting into a car. Amy introduces Blake as her fiancé, allowing the spectator to understand their relationship is back on. Aerial shots of New York iconography such as the yellow taxis signal she is now in America. As the camera zooms out to show the skyscrapers the non-diegetic radio announcer introduces Back to Black this informs the spectator that she has made it big in America.

On screen graphics appear showing her position in the Bill Board top 100. A wipe transition is used as a series of magazine covers appear with her as the cover star. On Rolling Stone magazine, the cover line 'The Diva and her Demons' enlarges and fills the screen. On screen text appears depicting the headline 'Winehouse Wows America'.

Vox pops of Amy's American fans are used to show her popularity stateside. Footage from Amy performing on American talk shows *The Late Show with David Letterman* smoothly transitions into Amy performing on *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno*. The purpose of this is to portray her success but also holds the connotation that they all blur into each other which perhaps reflects her state of mind.

The voice over of Hip Hop artiste Yasiin Bey tells us "She was embarrassed that she was doing so well. She expressed concern about the way everything was going to go and how she was going to handle it.". The v/o of Monte Lipman, chairman and CEO of Republic Records anchors the footage of Amy on the red carpet being posed in front of the cameras by Blake. He explains "Everyone just wanted to spend time with Amy. In our business there is nothing that can prepare you for that level of success." Even though the images showing success and fame are positive the voice overs create a haunting foreshadowing of what will happen to her.

The red-carpet scene cuts to a distorted Amy reflected in broken mirror. The connotation of this being how fragile she is and how fame is a mere reflection of the person. The mirror turns out to be from a photoshoot with her and Blake. As she stands in front of the camera she points a shard of mirror at her bare stomach. Afterwards she tells Blake, who is filming her at this point "I wrote I love Blake on my tummy." The innocence of this statement is juxtaposed by the fact she carved it in broken glass. This sentiment reflects the two sides of Amy, her vulnerability in loving Blake alongside her volatile need to hurt herself.

### Overdose and Rehab

On screen text informs establishes the location as 'Amy's Flat Camden'. Still images are shown of a drug fueled party with homemade pipes, A still image shows a close-up of Blake smiling, his face is covered in sweat, he looks either drunk or on drugs. This is followed by a picture of Amy with her hand on her head and her tongue out, again the image depicts her either being drunk or on drugs. V/O of Nick Shymansky explains "Blake called freaking out that she had overdosed." As the v/o tells us Amy as overdosed the image of a partying Amy slowly fades to black and is replaced with a close-up of Amy with no make-up, she appears natural and vulnerable staring into the camera with a worried expression. This image remains on screen for 40 seconds, this is almost uncomfortable viewing, the spectator is made to maintain eye contact whilst being told of her near brush with death. It is almost an accusation, we are all implicit in Amy's demise, everyone is at fault. Her friend Juliette tells us "She was petrified, he was petrified, she looked like a child." This reinforces her vulnerability and at the same time implies Blake's recklessness.

In the hotel still shots are included that have been taken by the paparazzi, this makes the spectator an unwelcomed observer to these private moments, whereas throughout the rest of the film we have been invited to watch her. Non diegetic sounds of cameras zooming and clicking enhances the idea that the press are invading her privacy. A close up of Amy looking haunted and pale appears on screen. Juliette's voice tells us "The Doctor that they go on looked me dead in the eye and said to me if she has another seizure she will die and then I was told she was going to America to perform." The impact of these words against this image of Amy looking so ill allows the spectator to feel anger at whoever is putting money before her well-being. The image then cuts to Amy's Dad Mitchell, linking these two images together tells the audience he is responsible for this decision. The image of Mitchell remains on screen as Lauren, Amy's other best friend tells how they begged him to cancel the tour and how he refused.

A non-diegetic news broadcast informs us that Amy has pulled out of her American tour due to health issues. Hand held footage of Amy and Blake in rehab, Blake is behind the camera, he zooms into a close up of Amy's face until it distorts. Blake's voice is heard behind the camera saying to Amy "Can we have the new version of Rehab?" She replies, "I don't really mind it here". The next image that flashes up using a camera sound is a picture Amy with her make up smudged and clearly back on drugs.

### Serbian Concert and Death

An aerial shot of thousands of fans cheering is used to emphasise the size of the stadium. The on-screen text informs us it is 'Kalemegdan Fortress Open Air Arena, Belgrade, Serbia'. Amateur footage from the crowd shows Amy running onto the stage, she hugs the guitarist, sits down and then falls to the floor. Throughout the film we have been viewing Amy in close ups, these scenes are wide shots, this distances us from her behaviour and isolates Amy. The crowd starts to boo, and we hear the voice over of Dale Davis, musical director and bass guitarist, "I wasn't sure what was going on. She just wouldn't sing." On-screen text appears translating some comments from the crowd 'She doesn't know where she is' 'Look at her, look at her', Amy is public property who everyone feels they can judge and criticise. Amy is framed in a mid-shot, she looks bored, the footage slows down, and emotive non diegetic music begins to play. Her pianist, Sam Beste anchors this image of her with the words "It felt like the end. It was someone who just really didn't care anymore." The shot of her sitting and swaying is left on screen for longer than is comfortable, the spectator is being made to watch someone purposely sabotage their career and self-destruct; we are not allowed to look away. Cut to a news broadcast with the headline 'Winehouse Tour Cancelled', the reporter states "This was supposed to be a major comeback and she totally blew it". Positioning the news broadcast after we have just witnessed her breakdown on stage reinforces how she is constantly under media scrutiny and will never be left alone.

The v/o of Amy's best friend Juliette tearfully recalls a phone call from Amy "It was my Amy, completely normal and all she kept saying was I'm sorry." Still images of them as children and teenagers appear on screen connoting their innocence, this makes what comes next more emotive. Non diegetic melancholic piano music provides the soundtrack for the next scene. An aerial shot of London appears with the text telling us it is 'Saturday 23<sup>rd</sup> August 2011'. News footage is used to show police outside of her flat. The voice over of her bodyguard, Andrew Moms tells us "She just looked like she was sleeping...she was on top of the bed just sleeping. But she was gone." He recalls the last conversation he had with her about her singing talent "If I could give it back just to walk down the street with no hassle I would." As Amy's body being carried out of the flat the dominant sound is the clicking of cameras which punctuates the last thing she said; even in death she isn't left alone by the press.

### Assessment Question:

**What techniques are used to create the observational style of documentary and how does this help to create an objective reading?**

### Assessment Question:

**How is the spectator positioned to view Mitchell Winehouse and Blake Fielder? How have these representations been constructed using editing choices?**