

# MAKING HISTORY COME ALIVE

**D**ocumentaries about an earlier period of time, past events or people who lived in the past are considered historical documentaries. Anything from the civil rights movement to surfing to rock groups can be the subject of a historical documentary. Similarly, biographical films portray not only the lives of famous people like Michelangelo and Eleanor Roosevelt, but also those of ordinary people.



Using re-enactments and actual newsreel footage of American soldiers, John Ford and Gregg Toland directed a film account of the attack on Pearl Harbor in DECEMBER 7TH (1943). Photo from the Margaret Herrick Library Collection, AMPAS.

Filmmakers use a number of different techniques to make their historical documentaries visually interesting. The makers of the 1987 documentary *Eyes on the Prize* used a combination of film and photographs from libraries and archives and on-camera interviews from the period, along with modern interviews and narration, to illustrate the story of the American civil rights movement.

Some documentarians use stock footage—that is, archival film that portrays a generally similar situation. For example, if someone on screen is reminiscing about going swing dancing in the 1940s, the filmmakers might show swing dance footage filmed during the 1940s, even though the images are not of the person being interviewed.

Re-enactments are another way filmmakers create visuals when none exist. In a documentary about the building of the Egyptian pyramids, the film might show actors dressed as ancient Egyptians.

Watch the film your teacher has selected. Pick an event, incident or person shown in the film and research it using newspaper accounts, magazines, books and the Internet. Keep a notebook or diary listing your sources.



Using Nazi military imagery and dynamic camerawork, German filmmaker Leni Riefenstahl created *TRIUMPH OF THE WILL* (1935), a film still known as one of the most controversial ever made. Photo from the Margaret Herrick Library Collection, AMPAS.

Title of film:

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What event or person did you research?

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What did you learn about the subject that the documentary did not portray?

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Did your research change the way you think about the film? Why or why not?

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Do you think the film presents an accurate or fair account of the story? Why or why not?

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Was it more interesting to read about the subject or to watch the film?

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What made it more interesting?

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