

# Some documentaries have measureable impact

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Educators and experts who study education are not entirely convinced that Guggenheim's film will be any more successful at effecting change than all the other documentaries that have come before it; in fact, filmmakers have been warring hands over public schools for decades, especially on public television.

"The challenge for *Superman* will be if all that happens is people walk out angry at the teachers unions," says Rick Hess, director of education policy studies at the American Enterprise Institute, a Washington think tank. "I can imagine more people feeling the need to do better by kids, but I'm not sure how that gets channeled."

Guggenheim does supply specific prescriptions — what viewers can do. The marketing campaign for the film includes a website, a book, local panel discussions and town-hall meetings, and a campaign to get people to pledge to see the film in return for corporate donations to education causes.

## 'Inspire and inform'

*Superman* is one of four recent what's-wrong-with-schools films released with the aim of spurring people to action. These films attest to the power of what Lesley Chilcott, one of the producers of *Superman*, calls "heartbreaking entertainment."

"A documentary, no matter how comprehensive, is not a dissertation on the screen. It has to be an entertaining story," she says. "The backbone (of *Superman*) is the animation, charts and graphs, but the heart is these five families trying to get into the one good school available to them."

Attention for *Superman* is high because Guggenheim won an Oscar in 2007 for *An Inconvenient Truth*, about former vice president Al Gore's effort to raise alarms about global warming. Later that year, it helped pave the way to the Nobel Peace Prize for Gore, and it has grossed \$24 million at the box office.

"What gives some of these films their power is not just the content, but also the craft," says Sheila Curran Bernard,



**Waiting for Superman in New York:** Francisco and his mother, Maria, live in the Bronx and are one of the five families featured in Davis Guggenheim's highly anticipated documentary, which opens in limited release on Friday.

associate director of documentary studies at the University at Albany/SUNY, who is writing a book about using documentaries to change the world. "Imagine how dull *An Inconvenient Truth* might have been if it were not shaped well."

Guggenheim argues that his films do have impact, even if it's not measurable in, say, a reduction in global warming. "There is this immeasurable thing, which is that people's behavior changed," he says. "Movies do not write policy, but they have a very potent ability to inspire and inform, and I know *Inconvenient Truth* inspired and informed millions."

He hopes *Superman* will have a similar impact. "I'm not in documentaries for the money," he says. "The work is intensive, and they don't pay well. I'm in it because I think these stories have the capacity to do good in the world, and I've seen it."

## A broader audience

But it's not always easy to spot. Morgan Spurlock's 2004 film, *Super Size Me*, about unhealthy fast food, and Robert Kenner's 2008 takedown of the American food industry, *Food, Inc.*, were successes, grossing \$11.5 million and \$4.4 million, respectively. But even though many individuals have changed

their eating habits, millions more still flock to fast-food places.

Michael Moore is America's most successful and famous documentary feature filmmaker, with an amusing/dyspeptic body of work. One film, *Fahrenheit 9/11*, about the post-9/11 paranoid approach to national security, has grossed an astounding \$119 million since its release six years ago. But even if it opened some eyes, did it fundamentally change anything?

"It is impossible to show scientifically that any single media event has a disposi- tive effect on events — that is just the sad reality of social science," says Patricia Aufderheide, a media professor at American University in Washington and author of *Documentary Film: A Very Short Introduction*. "That said, I think you can point to documentary films that have had a real-life, real-time effect in the world."

For instance: Errol Morris' *The Thin Blue Line* in 1988 helped to overturn the conviction and death sentence of a man wrongfully convicted in the 1970s of killing a police officer. *Taxi to the Dark Side*, the 2008 Oscar winner about U.S. use of torture in Afghanistan, Iraq and Guantanamo Bay, made less than \$275,000, but filmmaker Alex Gibney

says the film is being used as a teaching tool at the Army JAG school. *Loose*, a lesser-known 2008 film about the first American female soldiers to be sent into combat, resulted eventually in legislation to help them gain access to veterans' health benefits, Aufderheide says.

Meanwhile, documentarians forge on. A sampling of recent or upcoming films:

► Several films about New Orleans five years after Hurricane Katrina, including *The Big Uneasy* by comedian Harry Shearer, which will have a limited run in theaters in New Orleans, New York and Los Angeles, and *If God Is Willing and Da Creek Don't Rise* by Spike Lee, which was shown on HBO. TV will continue to be a natural outlet for filmmakers, either on PBS (home to such series as *Frontline* and *POV*) or on HBO, which has nurtured its documentary unit for more than 30 years, says chief Sheila Nevins.

"The problem with all advocacy documentaries is, are the people who need to see it seeing it?" says Nevins. "That is the great gift of TV, which can have a greater effect, a greater chance of (inspiring) change and promoting awakening of consciousness."

► Walker's *Countdown to Zero*, an unsettling look at the threat of terrorists ac-

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—Lesley Chilcott, a producer of *Waiting for Superman*

quiring nuclear weapons, opened in July. A similar film, *Nuclear Tipping Point* by the Nuclear Security Project, which seeks a nuke-free world, was screened at the White House. "I made *Countdown* to be the scariest movie I've ever seen, but it doesn't have to have an unhappy ending." If people wake up to the threat, Walker says.

## Primed for reality

► *Badrus*, by Julia Bacha, Ronit Avni and Rula Salameh, opens next month in New York and Los Angeles. The Israeli, Palestinian, American and Brazilian filmmakers tell the story of how residents of the Palestinian village of Badrus in the West Bank in 2003 organized a peaceful protest of Israeli plans to blockade their community and changed their fate.

"We wanted to look at what happens when people adopt a non-violent, unarmed approach, and where it actually worked," says Avni. "Film (is) an opportunity for people to let their guard down so you can get to audiences and constituencies that think tanks and advocacy organizations have spent years trying to reach."

► *How to Make Money Selling Drugs* by Bert Marcus, due in theaters in 2011, is intended, with its ironic title, to be a critical look at the failures of the war on drugs. "People today look to documentaries as something they can learn from," says Marcus. "People want to see real things they can relate to and identify with, and documentaries provide (an) outlet to be entertained about something authentic."

Indeed, it may be that the proliferation of reality TV in the past decade has primed the audience for documentaries, even though most reality TV is actually scripted, says Michael Lumpkin, executive director of the International Documentary Association, which supports filmmakers. "What it has done is make the notion of non-fiction much more respectable to audiences," he says.

## Corrections & Clarifications

OUR STORY ABOUT THE RELEASE OF THE DOCUMENTARY *THE THIN BLUE LINE* WAS CORRECTED TO SAY THAT THE FILM WAS RELEASED IN 1988, NOT 1987. WE ALSO CORRECTED THE FILM'S DIRECTOR TO ERROL MORRIS, NOT ERROL MORGAN.

The fall music preview Friday gave the wrong age for LL Cool J. The rapper will be 26 on Sept. 27, the release date of his new album, *I'm Not a Human Being*.