



PREVIEW

Subject

+ Q&A with directors Camilla Hall and Jennifer Tiexiera, and contributor Margaret Ratliff, hosted by Kim Longinotto

The advent of streaming has seemingly ushered in a golden era for documentaries. But what happens to the subjects of these documentaries after the camera stops rolling? What responsibilities do filmmakers have towards the people whose stories they tell? This insightful film unpacks and examines the experience of documentary participants through interviews with several famous figures of the genre, including *The Wolfpack*'s Mukunda Angulo, *Hoop Dreams*' Arthur Agee, and *The Staircase*'s Margaret Ratliff.

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Who would be a documentary subject? Plenty of us, as the record shows, from those with a burning truth to share to those with an eye on the main chance. But for many who do let filmmakers into their lives, the success of the resulting movie can come with a sting in its tail. The packaging and sale of their story, the shock of exposure and scrutiny, can be unnerving, sometimes shattering. A form that seeks connection carries the shadow of disconnect.

Documentary, as Russian nonfiction filmmaker Victor Kossakovsky has put it, 'is the only art where every aesthetic element almost always has ethical aspects and every ethical aspect can be used aesthetically'. Jennifer Tiexiera and Camilla Hall's fascinating and timely film *Subject* examines the first half of that maxim, exploring the risks and dilemmas of documentary filmmaking through five case studies – a protagonist each from *Hoop Dreams* (1994), *Capturing the Friedmans* (2003), *The Staircase* (2004-18), *The Square* (2013) and *The Wolfpack* (2015) – as well as a strong line-up of talking-head experts and a torrent of doc excerpts.

Aesthetically, it's less ambitious than the films it follows; put another way, it's more cautious, treading carefully with its participants and keen to feel out best practice. All five participants, or collaborators (not really protagonists, let alone 'subjects'), were made co-producers, invited to rewrite their release forms and given final approval over their sections. At times you feel the tension in bringing them back in front of the camera: there's a reserve, a distance in some of the reflectiveness. And yet – unavoidably? or because they press the argument? – the stories relating the most stress or trauma are the most compelling.

Maggie Ratliffe's is one such. She is one of the two adopted daughters of author Michael Peterson, whose conviction for killing his second wife, Kathleen, was documented in the 2004 true-crime miniseries *The Staircase* (and five follow-up episodes across 2013 and 2018), before being dramatised in a 2022 HBO miniseries of the same name. Ratliffe has no particular complaints about participating in the original filming in support of her father, though she does disconsolately recall a scene he pressed her to film when she had red-rimmed eyes fresh from a breakup with a boyfriend. But as the now-released Michael busies himself writing more books about the case, and promoting them on the talk show *Dr Phil*, Maggie wonders if he will ever let them move on: 'You could have just said "No",' she sighs.

Worse is the relentless corporate exploitation. Speaking last autumn, Ratliffe related how she'd had no warning before finding her image splashed across a giant Los Angeles billboard advertising the 2018 episodes of *The Staircase* on Netflix. In *Subject*, she discusses being asked to talk to the actor playing her in the HBO series – to relive a trauma for which she's spent decades in therapy, in order to benefit a professional actor. As Tiexiera has observed: 'the worst moment in her life is now not just entertainment – it is funding other people's kids' colleges.'

The traffic in documentary images – the commodification of real stories, the attentions of big money – is a major throughline of *Subject*. A (rather leaden) opening montage asserts that documentary 'is having a moment', replete with box office figures for the new-century hit parade, from Michael Moore to marching penguins. History will tell if we are living through a nonfiction-happy blip or if we're just gaga for media. Beyond a screen-grab of a Netflix page, we're not really shown how multinational streamers have supposedly changed the game again. But the film's boggling torrent of doc clips, while lightly illustrating the talking points, certainly impresses what a legacy of documentary we have already accrued, qualitatively and quantitatively. And while we can debate how wise audiences now are to documentary construction and subjectivity – programmer Thom Powers emphasises early on that docs are interventions in lives, not windows into them – at a legal level the conflation of documentary with 'objective' journalism helps producers avoid liability for subjects who are classed as interviewees rather than creative participants.

A segment on the whiplash induced by a successful springboard at Sundance underscores *Subject's* US focus – widened only by the slightly untethered strand on Ahmed Hassan, whose valour in the 2011 Egyptian revolution (and the subsequent documentary *The Square*) has left him in limbo in exile, forgotten except by the unforgiving regime back home. You can play your own what-about parlour game listing other docs *Subject* could have followed up. But though it's partial in its scope, its contrasts and nuance are welcome. Mukunda Angulo – star of *The Wolfpack*, about a group of homeschooled, housebound siblings whose connection to the outside world came through watching movies – brings a more upbeat note, seemingly seeing his experience making the film as part of his release from childhood confinement. Arthur Agee, from the celebrated basketball documentary *Hoop Dreams*, is the most fulfilled veteran, with his own takes on questions from performance to power relations and compensation.

Saddest is Jesse Friedman's story. Looking back on how *Capturing the Friedmans* gave him a voice after 13 years locked up on contested child abuse charges, he remembers the sense of release: 'I was a miracle of the documentary genre.' Now, after two further decades spent fighting to clear his name, he looks broken, and yearns for anonymity; the film has become another facet of the narrative that has defined and confined his life. *Subject* can only skim his fuller story, but it does imply that *Capturing the Friedmans* was edited and sold without consent or accountability. Patricia Aufderheide, a scholar of media and social change, floats a critique of the film's 'tantalising, voyeuristic', unresolved presentation of the Friedmans' trauma: 'I don't know what good it did anybody. I don't know why those people were put through that.'

Subject argues for a long-overdue code of ethics for documentary makers; it suggests they find budget lines for therapy support, and that festivals consult

subjects before launching films. It considers prospects for ‘decolonising’ authorship with more intimate and first-person forms of filmmaking, notably with Bing Liu and his friend-group portrait *Minding the Gap* (2018). And a flash of clips nods to a wave of films that have begun to make trauma therapy not only their subject but their process – from *The Interrupters* (2011) to *Of Men and War* (2014), *The Work* (2017) and *Process* (2021). Handing the frame to their subjects, they, too, are searching for the path of remedy.

Nick Bradshaw, *Sight and Sound*, April 2023

SUBJECT

Directors: Jennifer Tiexiera, Camilla Hall
Executive Producers: Kameela Mu’Min Rashad, Logan Snyder, Alex Lieberman, Gary Lieberman, Alexandra Johnes, Loren Hammonds
Producers: Camilla Hall, Jennifer Tiexiera, Joe Caterini
Co-Producers: Arthur Agee, Ahmed Hassan, Margie Ratliff, Mukunda Angulo, Jessie Friedman, Rita Baghdadi, Zachary Shields, Kelsey Oluk
Writers: Jennifer Tiexiera, Camilla Hall, Lauren Saffa
Cinematographer: Zachary Shields
Editor: Lauren Saffa
Composers: Jonathan Kirkscey and Rafaël Leloup

With

Arthur Agee
Ahmed Hassan
Margie Ratliff
Michael Peterson
Mukunda Angulo
Jesse Friedman
Elaine Friedman
Lisa Walsh
Susanne Reisenbichler

Featuring

Valerie Complex
Davis Guggenheim
Gordon Quinn
Bing Liu
Sonya Childress
Joe Brewster
Michèle Stephenson
Thom Powers
Caroline Libresco
Assia Boundaoui
Rebecca Day
Sam Pollard
Kirsten Johnson
Daresha Kyi
Patricia Aufderheide
Lonnie Soury
Evgeny Afi

USA 2022
93 mins

Courtesy of Dogwoof

IN PERSON & PREVIEWS

Preview: The Strays + Q&A

Mon 20 Feb 18:15

Preview: Suzume + Q&A with Makoto Shinkai

Wed 1 Mar 18:00

Doctor Who: The Sea Devils + Q&A with Katy Manning

Sat 4 Mar 12:00

Glasgow Film Festival Preview: How to Blow Up a Pipeline

Sun 5 Mar 19:50

TV Preview: Inside No. 9 + Q&A with Steve Pemberton, Reece Shearsmith and Adam Tandy

Mon 6 Mar 18:15

WOW Festival Presents Prima Facie + panel discussion

Wed 8 Mar 18:15

Preview: Winners + Q&A with director Hassan Nazer

Thu 9 Mar 18:15

Mark Kermode Live in 3D at the BFI

Mon 13 Mar 18:30

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