Documentary Film

EXAMPLE SOURCE: *Auschwitz: The Nazis and the Final Solution* (BBC, 2005). Series available on Netflix or DVD. Focus here on Episode I

A much shorter alternative (circa 6 minutes each) is the series of mini-films available on the BBC Teach website *The Eichmann Show Documentary*. These do not include perpetrator testimony as such, but might be used to introduce some of the key questions about guilt and justice. Do note that these contain some upsetting imagery and advanced teacher view is recommended:
https://www.bbc.co.uk/teach/holocaust-memorial-day-2019/zb3r6v4

Key Considerations

- Much like video testimony, documentary film can appear "transparent" as a medium; that is, it can be difficult for the viewer to remember the presence of the director, camera, script, editing, marketing and distribution etc. Students need to be made conscious of these features and should consider what this means for how we respond to the testimonies within the film.
- Documentary film frequently contains multiple testimonies set alongside one another. More reflective forms might include contradictory stories (as is the case in *Auschwitz*); however, the effect is usually to reinforce a single argument about the world.[1] Artefacts, photographs and footage are often used alongside the testimonies to support that argument. The testimony in the example sources is given in different forms and includes both face-to-camera witnesses and voice-reading of autobiographical sources.
- *Auschwitz* includes perpetrator testimony alongside survivor and bystander testimony. Students should be encouraged to think about the different ethical and methodological questions raised by these different kinds of accounts. Why should we hear perpetrator testimony at all? What do we need to think about when we listen to perpetrators? How does this differ to our engagement with bystander or survivor accounts? What is the impact of having their voices side-by-side with survivors? The *Eichmann Show* does not include perpetrator testimony; however, the focus is on perpetrators from the perspective of victims and bystanders. This raises similar questions: Why should we think about motivations? What about punishment of perpetrators? How do we decide who is guilty?

Starting Point

The fact that documentary film draws information from lots of different places means that it is a good opportunity to engage students with the idea that different sources can answer different kinds of questions – and that different forms of testimony need to be approached in different ways. Students might be asked to imagine they were

[1] See Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary* (Indiana: Indiana UP, 1991).

going to write the history of one particular aspect of the Holocaust, perhaps something that has already been studied to some extent in class and which features in the documentary. For *Auschwitz*, this could be the Nazi euthanasia programme and for the *Eichmann Show* the punishment of perpetrators or the experience in the camps. Ask students to then write a list of questions that they would ask about this history. What sources would they use to find the answers to these questions? Encourage them in particular to think about where testimony (from survivors, perpetrators and bystanders) would be appropriate. What problems can they anticipate with using each kind of source?

Source Engagement

Whilst watching the film, ask students to write a list of the different kinds of sources used (footage, photography, testimony, autobiography etc.). At the end, ask them to write two sentences summarising what the key idea of the film is – that is, what the film is trying to tell us about the origins of Auschwitz or the Eichmann trial. How does it try to convince us? What role does each source play in trying to convince us? Is everything in the film "real"? What about the re-enactments? The teacher will need to gauge the extent to which students can engage in depth with different ideas of authenticity, but the key point is that students recognise that documentaries often combine evidence with reconstruction in order to persuade us.

Turning to the perpetrator testimony and/or focus on the perpetrator from different perspectives, students might be asked to think what they learn from that in particular. Was there anything that surprised them? What do we learn from the perpetrator perspective that we can't learn from other sources?

Thinking specifically about the use of perpetrator testimony in *Auschwitz*: Do they see any problems with using perpetrator testimony? One simple way of getting students to engage with these issues is to ask if they believe the perpetrator account: why /why not?

By way of an extension, students could be asked to look at a selection of victim testimony in which the perpetrators are described. How do the accounts differ and what can we learn from each? A further issue is the use of photographs and footage taken by perpetrators in order to tell the story of the victims. Do we see the perpetrator perspective elsewhere in the films? Who was taking the pictures and the footage that we see?