

# Documentary Films That Influenced Social Change



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# Introduction

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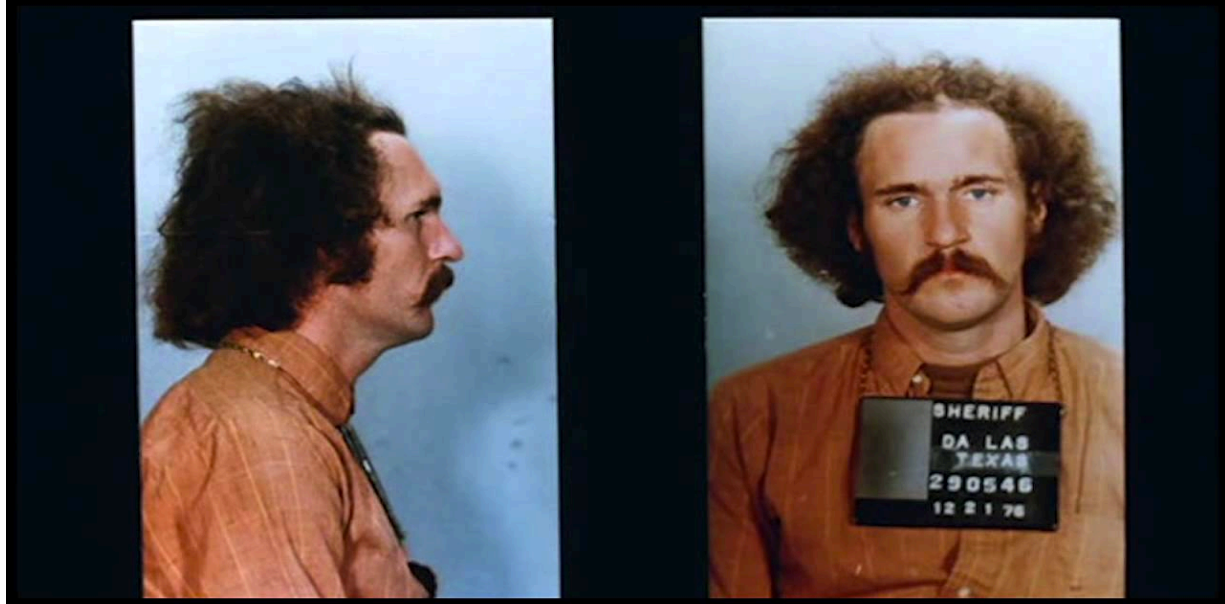
Documentary films are arguably one of the most accessible forms of media that also have the ability to give an influential voice to those without social power or prominence. A documentary about a drifter in North Texas can have as much of an impact on a viewer as one about the leader of a nation. At its most basic, a story can instill a sense of sympathy or compassion in the viewer that they otherwise may have never experienced.

Albert Maysles, the director of documentaries *Gimme Shelter* and *Grey Gardens* once stated, "I think it's inevitable that people will come to find the documentary a more compelling and more important kind of film than fiction. Just as in literature, as the taste has moved from fiction to nonfiction, I think it's going to happen in film as well. In a way you're on a serendipitous journey, a journey which is much more akin to the life experience. When you see somebody on the screen in a documentary, you're really engaged with a person going through real life experiences. So for that period of time, as you watch the film, you are, in effect, in the shoes of another individual. What a privilege to have that experience."

This is the reason that documentaries have the most profound ability to influence social change. It allows the viewer to be fully immersed in another's life experiences. However, it can also be used to manipulate the public. In the following pages, we will explore different examples of how documentary film has changed society, for better or for worse.

# *The Thin Blue Line*

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Director: Errol Morris  
Release Date: Aug. 25, 1988  
Country: USA

During Thanksgiving weekend in 1976 on a highway outside of Dallas, Texas, a police officer was shot dead during a traffic stop. The shooter escaped and an investigation began that led to the conviction of Randall Adams. About a decade later, when director Errol Morris was researching cases of death row inmates in Texas, he came across Adams' story.

Through a series of interviews with witnesses and investigators, along with reenactments of the killing, Morris' film argues that the evidence does not point to Adams. Towards the end of the documentary, David Harris, who was with Adams on the night of the shooting and was currently on death row for a separate murder, admits to Morris that he had lied to prosecutors about the case and that he was the one responsible. The following year after the film was released, Adams' capital murder verdict was overturned, and he was released from prison.

After being added to the National Film Registry by the Library of Congress, the documentary was released by the prestigious Criterion Collection who said, "Morris uses cinema to build a case forensically while effortlessly entertaining his viewers. *The Thin Blue Line* effected real-world change, proving film's power beyond the shadow of a doubt."

# *Harlan County, USA*

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Director: Barbara Kopple  
Release Date: Jan. 23, 1977  
Country: USA

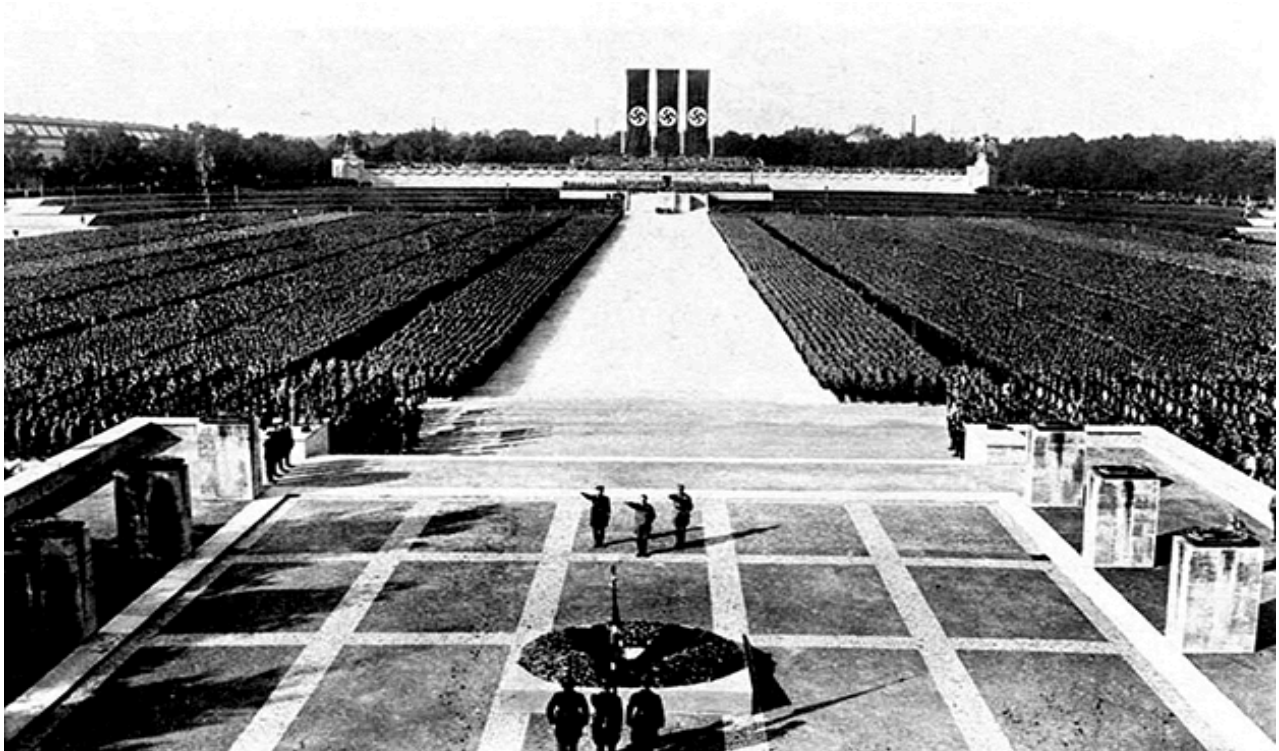
Documenting a coal miner strike in Harlan County, Kentucky, in 1972, Barbara Kopple spent years in the community interviewing the residents about safe working conditions and fair wages. Her work gave a voice to the powerless in their stand for basic labor rights.

At the heart of the matter was the refusal of many coal miners to sign a no-strike clause being required by their employer, Duke Power Company. At first, the disagreements between the miners and their powerful company were seemingly non-violent. As the strike continued, however, Kopple and her crew found themselves in an increasingly hostile environment. Both sides began to openly brandish their weapons, and the camera captured gunfire being directed at the strikers. Although no one was killed during these confrontations, ultimately, one miner was shot and killed during a scuffle later in the year.

However, there is no doubt that if Kopple and her crew were not there documenting and holding people accountable, more violence would have occurred. Resident Jerry Johnson later said, "The cameras probably saved a bunch of shooting. I don't think we'd have won it without the film crew. If the film crew hadn't been sympathetic to our cause, we would've lost. Thank God for them." In 1990, the Library of Congress added the documentary to the National Film Registry for preservation.

# *Triumph of the Will*

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Director: Leni Riefenstahl  
Release Date: March 28, 1935  
Country: Germany

Nazi Minister of Propaganda Joseph Goebbels was well aware of how influential motion pictures could be. In 1934, just a year after his party came into power, he enlisted filmmaker Leni Riefenstahl to document a massive rally at Nuremberg. With more than 700,000 Nazis in attendance, Riefenstahl tried new techniques, such as using moving cameras, adding music to provoke emotion, and shooting some sequences with a long focus lens for distorting perspective to show the grand visuals and formality of the event.

The themes of power and unity were intentionally displayed throughout the film. This served several purposes. To supporters of Nazi Germany, it was meant to strengthen their allegiance. In the very first scene, Riefenstahl edits the film to deify Hitler, showing him in his airplane descending from the clouds above to meet a large crowd screaming for joy. Conversely, to skeptics of the Nazi Party, these overwhelming images served as a warning of their power and control. After watching *Triumph of the Will*, American film director Frank Capra said that the film “fired no gun, dropped no bombs. But as a psychological weapon aimed at destroying the will to resist, it was just as lethal.”



# *The Invisible War*

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Director: Kirby Dick  
Release Date: July 22, 2012  
Country: USA

Using interviews with military veterans from multiple branches, *The Invisible War* paints a horrific picture of the prominence of sexual assault in the armed forces. Throughout the documentary, director Kirby Dick allows the women to give frank accounts about their experiences serving in the military while also investigating the government's determination to keep them quiet.

Dick also uses staggering statistics in the film showing the extreme contrast between the more than 100,000 women who screened positive for sexual assault in the military to the few hundred men who faced convictions. Instead these women watched their perpetrators rise in rank while they themselves were forced out of the military and given inadequate emotional and physical care.

Members of Congress and prominent military officials also helped to expose the circumstances that allowed for rape in the military and its cover-up to exist for so long. Two days after screening the film, Former Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta issued a directive requiring all sexual assault cases to be managed by senior officers at the rank of colonel or higher to ensure more accountability.

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