

DOCUSERIES

The serial documentary has come to the fore with Netflix, in particular, investing in original documentary series, or *docuseries*. The popularity of the form dates from the 2010s, but its roots lie variously in Reality TV, MTV's *The Real World* (1992), the golden age of TV revival initiated by HBO's *The Sopranos* (1999) and non-fiction podcast series like *Serial* (2014), an American pop culture phenomenon.

Docuseries' earliest example was PBS's *An American Family* (1973), which raised the specter of documentary's potential to manipulate and distort. The 12-episode program famously exposed the dysfunctional Loud family of Santa Barbara, arguably reducing them to cliché and offering up their pain to audiences who couldn't look away from a train wreck—maybe because it hit close to home.

Here are a few recent high quality, inventive docuseries by subgenre:

TRUE CRIME

Capitalizing on the allure of whodunit mysteries and confirming our skepticism about the virtue of powerful institutions, true crime docuseries command rapt audiences. Season 1 of *Making a Murderer* (USA, 2015), shot over the course of 10 years, investigates the conviction of Steven Avery for a murder he claims he did not commit—not particularly notable except that at the time Avery was charged, he had recently filed a \$36 million lawsuit against his county government after 18 years served on a wrongful sexual assault and attempted murder conviction. Released on the heels of the podcast *Serial*, but more explicitly making a case for the protagonist's innocence, *Making a Murderer* built a “buzz” that by some estimates leapt from just over 2 million viewers to 19 million viewers in 35 days (Netflix disputes these numbers and does not release its own ratings data for its original programming).

In true crime docuseries, the stakes are high. The audience is conscious of the potential influence of the series on the eventual outcome of the story by virtue of its investigation of the crime, the analysis and placement of the evidence within the context of witness testimony, and the public attention attracted. *The Keepers* (USA, 2017) juggles a multifaceted, horrifying narrative that connects the cold case murder of a young nun in Baltimore with the systemic sexual abuse of Catholic high school girls at the hands of a priest—all with the possible knowledge of the police and the Archdiocese of Baltimore. Since the release of the series, more victims have come forward. Even if the attention brought by the series does not result in a solved case where the responsible are held accountable, it may hasten the healing process of victims who now know they are not alone.

UNSCRIPTED

Unscripted docuseries situate us firmly in the present moment of a particular place and time; the site of much dramatic potential because participants' story arcs are as-yet undetermined. Like its scripted fictional counterpart, unscripted docuseries' dense nature offers a deep dive into the lives of a group of characters, affording more significant development than is practical for a one-off film. In the process of going deep, unscripted series also venture wide, suggesting universal truths underpinning a particular individual's or group's experience.

Flint Town (USA, 2018) embeds with the police officers of Flint, Michigan, a former company town decimated by the withdrawal of General Motors, whose struggling residents are reeling anew from the effects of lead-poisoned water. The understaffed police department attempts to manage the workload generated by the city, where incidents of violent crime register among the highest in the U.S. per capita. Tragedy, ruin, and poverty “porn” moments are many but so are moments where the landscape is rendered as a beautiful, elegiac tableau: snowfall and city lights soften the night sky, the sparks of a backyard bonfire rise above firelit faces, cloud cover passes in front of a full moon, fireworks blooms supply an enchanting backdrop. The language content of the piece comes mainly from officer interviews, shot interrogation-style with a single-source light mounted high in an otherwise dark space. Officers are aware that their job is particularly labyrinthine, especially given the current climate of citizen outrage around racist policing, and some handle questions about the issue with more nuance than others.

Like law enforcement (see *Cops*, USA, 1989-), sports is a popular source of nonfiction storytelling because of the built-in drama on tap. Each season of *Last Chance U* (USA, 2016-) follows players, coaches, and academic advisors through a season of junior college football, a stage that young athletes hope to use as a springboard to a coveted NCAA Division I program. Many of the predominantly black participants have been demoted from a 4-year college for poor academic performance or poor conduct. It's their last chance, not just to play football at a higher level, but to “make it out” of their communities where the problems of poverty threaten to overtake them. We stop frequently to worry about the entanglement of these vulnerable kids in a system that seeks to stamp out athletes like widgets, discarding the inferior product with as little heart as the analogy implies. The heroic efforts made on their behalf by some of their mentors stand out boldly.

HISTORY INVESTIGATED

Some docuseries are extended documentaries whose far-reaching investigation of particular events unfolds in a serialized version. Part movie, part mini-series, part history documentary, the episodes dramatize events from the past through voices of the present juxtaposed with archival imagery. By examining the political and social context in which the events took place, the findings help unpack present-day realities in the manner of a historian's or sociologist's research project.

Errol Morris' *Wormwood* (USA, 2017) is a highly stylized docudrama narrated by way of ten hours of interview footage taken from 10 different camera positions with Eric Olson, the son of Frank Olson, a CIA scientist who died from falling out of a hotel window in 1953. Eric Olson, whose decades-long preoccupation with discovering the true cause of his father's death (accident, suicide, or murder?), makes a perfect partner for Morris who painstakingly and elegantly exhumes, reconstructs, and analyzes the entire story, suggesting that Olson unknowingly contributed to a top secret biological weapons program before being dosed with LSD and pushed out a window to his death by U.S. government agents. We are left with our inner cynic intact—of course governments take cold and calculating actions against individuals and intentionally conceal them from public view.

Wild, Wild Country (USA, 2018, Figure 3-46) revisits 1980s rural Oregon, where a remote and tiny town of obstinate ranchers and retirees clash against the invading force of a Rolls-Royce-collecting



FIGURE 3-46

In *Wild, Wild Country*, Oregon locals try to deal with an Indian guru and his acolytes. Frame from film.

In five parts, it dissects one of the most culturally significant events in modern American history: the OJ Simpson trial. Director Ezra Edelman undertakes the daunting task of disentangling the biographical and cultural context in which the tragic spectacle took place. How can Americans be so divided along such hard and well-defined lines? It's a question that since then has come to border on cliché.

Indian guru and his industrious but unhinged followers. The extensive volume of news archive used in the series speaks to the story's appeal at that time and the huge popularity of the series presently speaks to the continued relevance of its themes and the allure of its often bizarre plot twists (including voter suppression, the drugging of homeless people, bioterrorism, assassination plots, etc.). The juxtaposition of interview testimony from the main players on both sides with archival footage featuring their more youthful selves is both compelling and eerie. They have not budged in their positions regarding the ugly episode and they come off as alternately misguided and justified.

From ESPN's excellent "30 for 30" documentary catalogue, *OJ: Made in America* (USA, 2016, mentioned in the previous chapter) is a fine example of the history investigated subgenre. In