

Communications

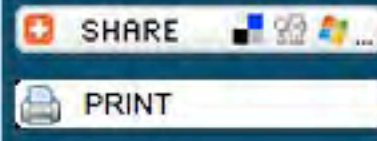
True Films

By Kevin Kelly

Whole Earth

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When it comes to guides to the best movies, you have plenty to choose from; dependable reviewers like Leonard Maltin will steer discriminating film buffs to the right stuff. Then there is the Internet Movie Database (www.imdb.com), a self-correcting opus containing everything anyone would want to know about any film. For fictional cinema, you're covered.



But when it comes to nonfictional films?what Americans call documentaries and the British call factual?guidance is scarce.

I haven't been able to find an accessible clearinghouse that reviews and evaluates factual films. In general the steady river of "true films"?documentaries, science programs, video courses, nature shows, and news specials?is usually ignored by catalogers and reviewers. This neglect is similar to the neglect of nonfiction books in the 1960s. Today if you want to find the best film about gypsies, where do you go? What about the best visual biography of Van Gogh and his work? The huge body of factual work is overlooked, in part because of the sheer daunting numbers of this kind of material produced. The BBC in London has vaults full of fabulous material that is not cataloged for the public in any meaningful way.

My hunch is that true films won't be ignored as soon as it is easy for anyone to download movies to their screen, ♦ [la Napster](#). When you are able to quickly find a copy of that esoteric film of Balinese dance you've always heard about, then the demand for comparative and complete reviews will trigger action.

To jump-start this process and encourage others to add their favorites, Richard Kadrey and I have put together a starter list of really good true films. One or both of us have seen the following factuals and thought they were definitely worth while. All are fairly easily available, either for sale from the usual online sources like Amazon or eBay, or for rent from Netflix, or on loan from a specialty local rental place (representative prices below are mostly from Amazon). All the works are in English or have English subtitles. We consider this list to be version 1.0, and would like to flesh it out further, probably online.

7 Up, 14 Up, 21 Up, 28 Up, 35 Up, 42 Up

VHS \$17.99 each volume

What started out as a British documentary exposing the role of class in a child's destiny has turned into one of the most satisfying works of cultural anthropology and a showcase longitudinal study. Every seven years, starting at the age of seven, we visit the same group of children as they grow up, have dreams, are lost and remade, and in many cases see their lives take the unexpected turn as they age. Because each new film is created to be understood by itself, each recapitulates all the others before it, so there is a lot of repetition from issue to issue, but a lot missing if you only see the last one.

Amazing Grace

VHS \$21.99

The simplest are sometimes the best. This documentary is about one song, "Amazing Grace." An amazing lot can be seen through this four-stanza song. Bill Moyers follows the origins and evolution of one of the world's most famous hymns. It is part music history, part African-American history, and part song itself.

Atomic Caf♦

VHS, \$26.99

No need to mock nuclear power and atomic weapons when the promoters do it so well themselves. This brilliant compilation of mostly government-funded atomic propaganda films is very campy. Imagine a nuclear version of *Reefer Madness*.

Baka: The People of the Forest

VHS \$17.99

This is one of the all-time great visual anthropology pieces. It took the filmmakers two years to settle into a village of

Pygmies and six months of warming up before they even began filming. All this care transforms exotic natives into next-door people. My favorite part is when the little boy tells his parent he wants them to send his newborn brother back from wherever it was that he came. Noble savages, this ain't.

Blood in the Face

VHS, \$17.99

A Day in the Life of White Supremacist America, shot in Michigan in 1991. This film captures both the collective power of racist groups and the frightening banality of the beliefs of the groups' individual members.

A Brief History of Time

This won't help you with physics, like the book did, but it will give you a powerful portrait of what a brain trapped in a withering body can still accomplish. Astrophysicist Stephen Hawking's ability to imagine the universe is matched only by his disheartening disability to do the most ordinary activity, including talking. His life is amazing; this film quite inspiring.

Buena Vista Social Club

VHS \$12.99, DVD \$15.98

Bands and concerts lend themselves to documentaries easily; they've got a built in soundtrack. This one follows the rediscovery of forgotten Cuban musicians as they make a new best-selling album. What works is the insight it provides to contemporary Cuba.

Burden of Dreams

VHS, \$59.99

One of the great films about filmmaking and artistic obsession (the other is Heart of Darkness; see below) This film captures director Werner Herzog going quietly insane in the Amazon jungle while making his equally insane movie Fitzcarraldo. Herzog gradually becomes the very fictional character his movie is about, an obsessed madman determined to drag a riverboat over a mountain.

Cane Toads: An Unnatural History

VHS \$17.99

An offbeat, kinky, tongue-in-cheek celebration of the monstrous cane toad invasion of Australia and of the people who love the poisonous creatures and those who hate them. A nature film with attitude.

Connections: The Day the Universe Changed

VHS, \$99.95 (5 pack)

James Burke makes connections everywhere, showing how ideas and inventions give rise to new creations, often in totally unexpected ways. For instance, what do bananas and radio transmitters have in common? Burke can tell you.

Crumb

VHS \$17.99, DVD \$23.76

This has to be the most honest portrait of an artist ever. Robert Crumb, the 60s underground comic genius, is revealed in all his pathetic neuroses and glorious brilliance. The tipping point is being introduced to his eccentric family which suddenly explains all.

The Decline of Western Civilization

Director Penelope Spheeris, who was part of the LA punk scene, turns her cameras on punk bands and the club kids, giving an insider's view of the peculiar vibrant moment of pop history, one so hot it burnt itself out fast, and now is gone except for this film.

Don't Look Back

VHS, \$17.99; DVD \$21.21

As rough and ragged as its subject?Bob Dylan?this portrait of the already legendary musician changed the way we see pop idols. This is no press agent puff piece, but a down and dirty portrait of a cranky artist and an industry on the edge of transformation: Dylan, from a fuzzy folk hero into a cynical recluse, and the music biz from Tin Pan Alley into the machine it is today.

F for Fake

VHS, \$26.99

Orson Welles was both a filmmaker and a stage magician and he uses all his visual and mental sleight-of-hand tricks in his free-form essay on the nature of lies and fakery. Primarily a portrait of an infamous art forger, it also features an interview with that other notorious faker (barely known at the time), Clifford Irving.

Feed

What do you get when you take unedited footage of political candidates making glad-handing stops, and mix it with raw satellite feeds of them waiting to be interviewed on television? Surreal moments such as George Bush who, when asked to speak during a sound check, says "This is not Dana Carvey."

Gates of Heaven

Errol Morris's 1978 documentary about pet cemeteries is so much more than that. Wrapped in layers of pathos, humor, and surprising candor, the film goes beyond mere novelty and becomes an examination of the power of love and the nature of life.

Heart of Darkness

VHS \$92.98

A film is like an invasion. Vietnam War's most memorable film, *Apocalypse Now*, like the war itself, nearly did in its creators. Francis Ford Coppola's wife filmed the director as his project sank deeper and deeper into sheer, irretrievable chaos. This is a strange case where the movie about the movie is just as good as the movie.

Hoop Dreams

VHS \$17.99

The thrill of a really great factual is you don't know how it is going to end. Here we follow young inner-city kids trying to escape their circumstances by making it big in basketball. We see how hard it is, and how big the dream can be. I came to root for them as if they were family.

The Last Waltz

Not another band movie! No, not just another band movie. Mixing performance footage from The Band's last concert together with interviews, director Martin Scorsese reinvents the concert film, bringing to it all the cinematic flair he used on movies such as *Raging Bull* and *Goodfellas*.

Looking for Richard

VHS \$26.99

While preparing a production of *Richard III*, actor Al Pacino and his cast ask "Why do we perform Shakespeare anymore?" Scenes are ripped apart and history is dissected. A great glimpse of raw creativity by a stellar acting ensemble.

Lumiere & Co.

VHS, \$17.99; DVD \$21.23

To commemorate the 100th anniversary of the Lumiere brothers' first movie, forty directors from around the world are invited to use one of the brothers' handcranked cameras to make an original 52-second film (the length of the Lumieres' original reels). The results from these modern artists range from pedestrian to stunning, with David Lynch, Peter Greenaway and Alain Corneau turning in especially memorable sequences.

Mondo Cane

VHS, \$17.99

The first and probably still greatest shockumentary ever made. More exploitive than the creepiest drive-in B movie, *Mondo Cane* snatches up forbidden images of human degradation and even death and throws them in the viewer's face, all to an Italian pop music score. Unforgettable? though you may want to.

Nanook of the North

VHS \$21.99, DVD \$25.46

One of the first film documentaries in history, and still unrivaled for clarity and amazement. Shows how Eskimo (Inuit) survived with traditional ways.

Notebook on Cities & Clothes

A meditation on the power of images, place and the loss of the self in a digital culture. This cinematic journal by Wim Wenders centers on Japanese clothing designer Yoji Yamamoto, and explores how what we wear can define us as individuals.

The Power of Myth

VHS \$89.98 (box set of six volumes), \$21.99 each

Proving that even an interview format can succeed if done with passion, this famous set of conversations between Joseph Campbell and Bill Moyers on the power of myths still delivers a very powerful punch.

Ring of Fire: An Indonesian Odyssey

VHS \$77.98 (box set of four volumes), \$21.99 each

The best travel documentary series ever made. For ten years two brothers lived in, adventured throughout, and mastered the islands of Indonesia. They delve into this truly esoteric culture with reckless enthusiasm and true love. And they film a lot of bizarre events. This is travel as art.

Roger & Me

VHS, \$13.99

Rabble-rouser Michael Moore tosses out the ideal of journalistic "impartiality" and makes a documentary that's more like guerilla theater than reportage. By turns, the film is funny, pathetic, ironic, and infuriating. Is it about General Motors? Flint, Michigan? Michael Moore? Who knows? It's mostly about power and access to power. (Also worth catching is the film's sequel, *Pets or Meat*.)

Stop Making Sense

VHS, \$17.99; DVD \$23.96

Lying somewhere between a high-concept theater piece and a down and dirty rock show, *Stop Making Sense* captures the band Talking Heads at the height of their energy and inventiveness.

Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story

The life and death of 70s pop star Karen Carpenter is told as a bizarre shockumentary—with Barbie dolls standing in for actors. Halfway between a twisted after-school special and a vaguely obscene puppet show, this film offended more than just the Carpenter family. You can't find it anywhere. Look for bootlegs where you can.

Survival Research Laboratories: A Bitter Message of Hopeless Grief

<http://srl.org/video/vidindex.html#videos>, \$25

Robot performance group Survival Research Laboratories stages scenarios of machine violence and conceptual madness. This recording is not a document of a public event, but a performance, shot on a set as SRL's machines move through a Bosch-like landscape of fire and meat, wrecking havoc.

Swimming to Cambodia

VHS, \$13.99

Spalding Gray's cleverly staged monologue is both a tall tale and a reflection on acting in *The Killing Fields*, the fall of Cambodia (and subsequent genocide) and his own search for spirituality.

Theremin

VHS, \$13.99

Some lives need a movie. Russian inventor Leon Theremin created the world's first electronic instrument, and it bore his name. He was an outstanding success in the 1920s and 30s, but in the 40s, he disappeared. This film looks at Theremin's overlooked life and work, and reveals the reasons for his disappearance and brief reappearance in his 90s. Interviews include theremin virtuoso Clara Rockmore and synthesizer pioneer Robert Moog.

Thin Blue Line

VHS, \$9.99

A modern-day Rashomon, set in Texas. This version of the tale involves a real man, named Randall Adams, claiming innocence while stuck on death row. The film hypnotically plays out his alleged murder of a cop over and over, each time according to different witnesses, until the "evidence" of the crime collapses under the tainted weight of so many versions. This was a new form of nonfiction film and it helped free an innocent man from prison. How many films can claim that?

Tokyo-Ga

German director Wim Wenders goes to Tokyo in search of...Tokyo. Not the real city, but the filmic Tokyo from the Japanese films that influenced his early work. Wender's journey lets us see a formidable talent in the act of experimenting and growing.

Unzipped

VHS, \$26.99

The concept is simple. Reveal what really happens as a world-class couture designer develops, in fits and starts, his fall line. Show the factual side of a fashion show. The result is both hilarious and mesmerizing. Unexpectedly I came to appreciate fashion designers as artists, even though I have zero fashion sense.