

# Amy (Kapadia, 2015)

## Component 2 Section B: Documentary film

### Core study areas:

- **Film form**
- **Meaning and response: aesthetics and representations**
- **Contexts**

### Specialist study areas:

- **Digital debates**
- **Filmmakers' theories**

**Rationale for study:** This critically and commercially successful documentary is a fascinating and disturbing exploration of Amy Winehouse as an artist. It reclaims her persona as a talented and vulnerable young woman affected by fame, the media, and addiction from the unkind caricature presented in the media. It also shows the underside of fame and celebrity culture. With *Amy*, Kapadia consolidates his signature style, established with *Senna*, of creating documentaries from existing material depicting the lives of celebrities considered to be outsiders. The truthful nature of the documentary was called into question by Amy's father, Mitch Winehouse, who objected to the way that he was represented. This controversy draws attention to the constructed nature of documentaries, despite the use of authentic rather than reconstructed footage.

## STARTING POINTS - Useful sequences and timings

“Opening” 00.00.00 – 00.02.57

“Camden and Blake Fielder” 00.27.51 – 00.31.43

“Nick takes Amy to rehab” 00.39 – 00.47.17

“St Lucia/divorce” 1.36.07 – 1.40.55

“Belgrade Concert and ending” 1.53.58 – end

## CORE STUDY AREAS 1 - STARTING POINTS: Key elements of film form (micro features)

### Cinematography

- Drone shots are used to establish locations, particularly of London. Much of the footage is shot on mobile phones, with some low-quality, washed-out, and wobbly filming which gives a feeling of intimacy and creates authenticity.
- Montages of still photographs are used and zooming in on photos gives a sense of scrutiny and truth-seeking.

### Mise-en-scène

- The London setting is established, alongside various homes including Amy's, which creates an uneasy voyeurism, especially when we see drug paraphernalia.
- Streets are also key locations and inevitably the presence of the paparazzi on them as they hound Amy.
- The iconic look of Amy: the beehive, the tattoos, and the increasing weight loss, examines the thin line between being in and out of control.



Image by Atlaspix / Alamy Stock Photo

## Editing

- Slow motion is often used to create an eerie sense of descent into chaos and to create tension in a story which would be very well known by most audience members.
- The rapidity of change in Amy's life is reflected by the pace of the editing.

## Sound

- The music is at the forefront of the film. Amy's extraordinary voice dominates and the lyrics, which appear on screen, are a storytelling device. The choice of font (handwriting style) makes it seem that Amy is writing the narrative, but of course these are choices made by Kapadia that mimic the feeling that many have from listening to music; that the artist is speaking directly to them.
- As is common in documentaries, interviews form a voice-over, which also helps to construct the narrative.

## Performance

- Close-ups in the performance footage of Amy create intimacy and show her passion for her music and confidence as a performer. This makes it even more tragic when she can no longer perform at the final concert in Belgrade.
- Kapadia chose to interview Amy's friends and family through audio only, as he felt people behave differently in front of a camera. The interviews were recorded just a year after Amy's death – you can hear the raw emotion in Amy's friends' voices.

## CORE STUDY AREAS 2 - STARTING POINTS: Meaning and response

### Representations

- Key representations are the press, men ready to exploit women, young women who are both sassy and vulnerable, drug users, and mental health issues, including eating disorders. The documentary asks us to question the toxic nature of celebrity culture and fame itself.

### Aesthetics

- There is a sense of Amy as a very British performer but also her talent as a white jazz

singer is demonstrated. This creates a rather eclectic and unique aesthetic attributable to Amy Winehouse, that the film is both mourning and celebrating.

- The aesthetic can be described as intimate, personal and tragic.

## CORE STUDY AREAS 3 - STARTING POINTS – Contexts

### Social

- *Amy* is an interesting study of patriarchy and the vulnerability of young women in a supposedly post-feminist era, particularly in the still, male-dominated music industry.
- The film also highlights mental health issues, including eating disorders such as bulimia and the relationship between poor mental health and drug use. It gently challenges the dominant ideology by bringing both marriage and the family into question.

### Cultural

- This documentary draws our attention to our own digital footprint and how easily our narratives can be constructed by ourselves, but more disturbingly, by others. Unseen footage and unheard tracks are used in the film, entering the culture, and gratifying the needs of her fans.

### Political

- While not overtly political, this film highlights the issues surrounding a 'free press' and the intrusive nature of the paparazzi desperate to sell papers at any cost. Ultimately, this can be seen as a critique of capitalism. It also engenders a need for *schadenfreude* (pleasure from others' misfortunes) within the audience, a need which can then be fed by representing celebrities such as Amy Winehouse in a mocking and uncaring way.

### Institutional

- *Amy* is an independent British film funded by Film4 and two small independent companies, one from the US and one Canadian, with some funding from Universal Music UK who released the soundtrack. It was distributed by British independent distributor Altitude Film Distribution.

- Kapadia has said that *Amy* forms part of a loose trilogy of his films about talented, tragic celebrity figures, alongside *Senna* (2010) and *Diego Maradona* (2019).

## SPECIALIST STUDY AREA: Starting points

### Digital debates

- The film is reliant on the existence of digital technology both for the footage and the editing. The use of text on the screen in colourful and informal fonts creates a connection between the young, vibrant Amy and the viewer. This intimacy is enticing, but the film also explores the negative aspects of technology: the intrusive cameras of the paparazzi, and the voyeuristic nature of them in the wrong hands (particularly the shots of a fragile, ill Amy which are uncomfortable to watch).

### Filmmakers' theories

- Nick Broomfield also has an interest in celebrities and reflecting on his approach in *Kurt and Courtney* might be a good starting point. In contrast to *Amy*, the participatory mode of Broomfield's documentaries draw attention to the film as a constructed narrative featuring heroes and villains. With *Amy*, the process seems much more invisible and observational, however, Kapadia is pursuing an agenda just as much as Broomfield.

## KEY SEQUENCE ANALYSIS

### "Opening" 0.00 - 4.06

- The poor-quality mobile phone footage that opens the film creates a sense of nostalgia for 14-year-old Amy. The colours are so blanced it almost looks like sepia, which contrasts with the colourful text on the screen with the date and location. We feel privileged to see Amy as her young friends see her and this sets up the rise and fall narrative. Amy is young, vibrant, talented, and full of promise.
- The frame is crowded as Amy and her two friends loom into the shot, the lollipops accentuate their youth, and the wobbly camerawork reminds us that this is a private event. We may feel uncomfortable as voyeurs of something not made for public consumption; a fact re-enforced by the childish voice of the friend.

- We hear the girls singing Happy Birthday and are immediately struck by the incredible voice of Amy Winehouse, which is easily discernible.
- We cut to a MCU of her singing; it is a low angle, she is powerful and full of promise, she is beautiful, young, confident, and talented. We are reminded of how she was, maybe as an attempt to cleanse our minds of the awful tabloid photos of her downfall. The lip-synching is slightly out which draws attention to the amateurish nature of the filming, but also creates an eerie and surreal tone as a foreshadow of that downfall. Talent is a dangerous thing in this society.
- We then cut to stills of Amy performing as we hear her singing Moon River. This confirms the talent that we heard at the birthday party and gratifies her fans by providing them with something new.
- We then have a voice-over of Amy talking and photographs illustrate her words, showing her influences and establishing her as a serious performer. She has the promise and talent of her heroes, but the black and white photos which are mid or long shots create a nostalgia for a different era when stars were treated more respectfully.
- We return to the still of Amy singing with the National Youth Jazz Orchestra. The purple lens flare effect brings us back to the present and celebrates the vibrancy of the youthful talent of which Amy is a part, and the title in a block font in pink appears.
- The fade to black takes the viewer back to the birthday party, but the V/O of Amy talking continues, the camera moves around the group, and we see Amy and she smiles into the camera. She puts the lollipop into her mouth, the footage is slowed down, and the image begins to look sleazy, already the tone has become darker.
- As she repeats "I'm lucky" in the voice-over, the song Moon River comes back on and ends, creating a sense of foreboding and suggesting a rise and fall narrative arc.