

être et avoir

F I L M  
EDUCATION



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## introduction

*'There are still, almost everywhere in France, single-classroom schools that bring together, under the same schoolteacher, all the children from the same village, from nursery age to their last year of primary education.*

*Whether their individual members are withdrawn or outgoing, these assorted little groups share everyday life, for the best and for the worst.*

*It was in one of these schools, somewhere in the heart of the Auvergne, that my film was shot.'*

Nicolas Philibert - director



Inspired by the French phenomenon of 'single-class' schools, the film ETRE ET AVOIR charts the life of a small one class village school over the course of one academic year, and takes a warm and serene look at primary education in the French heartland.

A dozen youngsters, aged 4-10, are brought together in one classroom and taught every subject by one single teacher of extraordinary dedication. A master in quiet authority, schoolteacher Georges Lopez patiently navigates the children towards adolescence, cooling down their arguments and listening to their problems.

Before we look in detail at Etre et Avoir, we need to spend some time thinking about what we understand by the term 'documentary' film.



# documentary

What did you expect to see when watching a documentary film?

Are there particular subjects that lend themselves to a documentary approach? Think about any documentaries that you have seen recently – either in the cinema or on television. What were they about?

As well as the issue of subject matter we should also think about the ways in which they were filmed. In what ways does a documentary film differ from a feature (fiction) film?

How is watching a documentary different from watching a feature film? What are our audience expectations of each type? How are we meant to react to what we see?

## task

Bring together the findings from above and summarise under the following headings:

Documentary Title	Subject/Information	Devices/Techniques	Experience of Viewing

## task

What other documentaries have you watched recently and what devices did they use? Add them to your list.

Documentaries are often seen as informing or entertaining us about real situations and real issues. They are in part called documentaries because they are not fiction films. They are regarded as a different type of film with different aims and objectives with different approaches and styles, that is conventions, when telling their story.



# types of documentary

Think about the different types of documentary films that exist, as follows:

Classic
Poetic
Fly on the Wall
Cinema Vérité
Reflexive
Performative
Docu-drama
Drama documentary

Can you describe these different documentary types?

Into which category would you place *Etre et Avoir*?

Consider, there are a number of things that all of these films have in common.

Firstly, they concentrate upon actual evidence relating to real events in history and the world around us rather than fictional stories.

Secondly, the way documentaries are made, that is the devices/techniques used to film real people, real events or explain historical events and scientific discoveries for example, tend to be different from fiction films.

Thirdly, documentaries speak about or allow others to speak for themselves. The documentary filmmaker often acts as a representative of the public.

Fourthly, documentaries provide a particular view, interpretation or understanding of the evidence put before us.

## task

Look carefully at the common elements of documentary as explained above. Show how each is reflected in *Etre et Avoir*.



## narrative

Documentaries rely upon a story or narrative. This may be, for example:

Solving a problem. Why did the Titanic sink?

An argument. Should drugs be legalised?

An assertion or claim. Life for the poor in nineteenth century England was like this.

In *Être et Avoir*, the story revolves around a teacher and his pupils in a small rural school. If we think of a classic story structure then we would say that a story contains some of the following:

Characters, events taking place over a period of time, settings, cause and effect.

What else would you expect to find in a story?

## character

When looking at *Être et Avoir* as a story, who are the main characters? Are all of the children in the class given the same amount of time on screen? If the director has concentrated on a few of them why do you think he chooses those particular characters to observe?

After you have seen the film, try to remember who were the main characters that you were shown. There is obviously M. Lopez, the teacher. Which of the pupils stand out in your mind and why?

Which incidents in the development of the story do these pupils appear?

## time

The action of the film takes place between December and June in one school year. How are we shown time passing in the film?

Why do you think that the director did not start filming in September when school started?

## settings

Most of the action takes place in the schoolroom. However, we are shown other places. What were they? Why were they included in the film?

Having played close attention to three elements of the story choose two other aspects that you have noted and apply them to *Être et Avoir*.



## expectations

Documentaries are not just about entertainment. Importantly, the documentary filmmaker hopes to reveal to us something we are probably unaware of about the past or present. This sets up for the viewer a series of expectations of what a documentary may include, for example:

- the nature of their content may be seen as 'serious'
- the content is taken in some form from real life
- the way it is filmed or the images used are representative of the subject and help us understand the issue under consideration.
- often a commentary may be used on the soundtrack to explain and makes sense of what we are watching



What is shown in the film is seen as real - real people, real situations and real events – often filmed like a 'window on the world'.

The documentary puts forward an argument or a case through which we expect to learn something. By explaining events or putting forward an argument documentaries have an instrumental power to alter the way we think about the world.

They can educate and inform and perhaps help change our own attitudes and minds. How are these expectations fulfilled in *Être et Avoir*?

The title of the film is also important in raising expectations in an audience. *Être et Avoir* translates in English as *To Be and To Have* – a rather enigmatic title.

What does this suggest to you? To be what or whom? To have what? Come up with some ideas as to what the title might mean.



# observational documentary

## fly on the wall

You may already have decided that *Être et Avoir* is a fly on the wall documentary. Let us look at this type of documentary in more detail.

## techniques/style

As the title suggests this technique stresses the non-intervention of the filmmaker acting as an uninvolved bystander merely recording the sights and sounds that occur in front of the camera. In doing so, the camera and soundtrack captures what happens in everyday situations. This includes people's behaviour, overheard speech and conversations as people interact with each other. In some ways this approach is like an unscripted fiction film. We observe and overhear people and individuals in situations and watch their responses. People 'perform' before our eyes and we follow their responses to events that affect them. In its pure form there is no commentary or music on the soundtrack, re-enactments and interviews are not used.

The main technique in the field is to use long takes of specific moments in time and place. This may well create a huge amount of material that must be edited into a form which gives the impression of real time while ensuring it is appropriate for the assumed length of the documentary. The dramatic element in this type of documentary comes from our involvement and identification with those being filmed.

## aim and objectives

- The filmmaker is secondary to the action. What we see is supposedly what would have happened if the camera and tape recorder were not present.
- The audience has the opportunity to see revealed peoples' attitudes and behaviour and the meanings behind social situations that may not be obvious or apparent to the participants.
- It encourages the idea that we are watching a slice of unaffected 'real life' allowing us to get 'under the skin' of the participants.
- The image we see actually reflects what has happened.

## debate

Below are a number of statements about fly on the wall documentary films. Apply each to *Être et Avoir* and say whether you think they are true or false. Give reasons for you answers.

- The technique is the closest in attempting to capture real life.
- The material organises the filmmaker, not the other way around.



- Does the presence of the camera and filmmaker still alter the reality of the situation filmed?
- Does the documentary respect the lives of those shown? To what extent are they represented objectively?
- To what extent should the opinions of those filmed be represented? If so how should they be represented?
- If dangerous situations emerge should the filmmaker intervene or carry on filming?

The life we are presented with as a viewer of the documentary is made up of decisions and choices made by the filmmaker(s). Their choices are influenced by what they see as important.

Nicolas Philibert, the director of *Être et Avoir*, took six months to film the action. Obviously he shot more footage than is actually used in the film. Thus, selection is an important part of the filmmaking process. The director needs to keep an audience entertained and involved and so will select scenes that will do this.



## task

Select any three scenes from *Être et Avoir* and try to say why you thought the director chose to include these in the film.

Normally in fly on the wall documentary film, direct interviews with people are not included. However, in *Être et Avoir* there is an interview with M. Lopez, the teacher. Why do you think this is included?





## box office

The film was one of the big hits at the French box office in 2002. One might say that it is not the sort of film that one would expect to see in the weekly top ten charts, but this was the case.

Why do you think that documentaries are often not widely screened in cinemas? In the UK we have recently seen the success of Michael Moore's *Bowling for Columbine*. What do you think attracted audiences to go and see this film?

Having seen *Être et Avoir* what do you think might have been its appeal to a French audience? What do you think its attractions are for a British audience?



## informing the audience

A trailer is an important marketing tool for any film. It gives us, the cinema-going audience, a sense of what the film will be about.

Look carefully at the trailer for *Être et Avoir*. Identify all of the scenes that are shown in the film. When you have done this say why you think that these sections were chosen. What idea of the film do they give?

