

Achieving an intimacy of knowledge and effect? The impact of documentary films in Europe

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Abstract:

A century ago, John Grierson wrote, “documentary can achieve an intimacy of knowledge and effect impossible to the shimsham mechanics of the studio”.¹ Yet empirical evidence about the impact of documentaries on audiences is still limited. This article addresses this gap in the literature by analysing the findings of a recent survey of documentary film viewers in Spain, Greece, Iceland and (to a lesser degree) other parts of Europe. The online survey of almost 1,500 respondents found that 97% had been affected by the experience of watching documentaries in some way, with 77% saying they had seen a documentary that had emotionally affected them. 70% had seen a documentary film that had improved their understanding of a particular issue, while 60% had seen one that had changed the way they think about certain issues. However, more proactive behavioural effects were less common: only 25% had seen a documentary that had encouraged them to take action, while just 19% had seen one that had encouraged them to change their lifestyle or behaviour. These findings corroborate previous studies on the effects of films. Yet they also temper arguments about the unpredictable and unique ways audiences respond to films by revealing certain trends in the type of documentaries most likely to affect audiences and the type of audiences most likely to be affected. For example, the documentaries most likely to encourage respondents to change their lifestyle or behaviour were emotionally engaging expository or performative documentaries that deal with the exploitation of animals or the natural world (e.g. *Earthlings*) or the human and environmental impact of modern consumer behaviour more generally (e.g. *Food, Inc*). Meanwhile, those most likely to be affected by documentaries in this way were

¹ John Grierson, “First Principles of Documentary (1932),” in *The European Cinema Reader*, ed. Catherine Fowler (Abingdon: Routledge, 2002), 43.

young people and those without a university degree. These findings contribute to wider academic debates about film audiences and media effects, particularly in relation to the conditions under which different types of effects are more or less significant.

Keywords: documentary film, media effects, film audiences, Europe

Introduction

It has long been assumed that documentaries affect audiences – that they move us, educate us, persuade us, and perhaps even inspire us into action. One of the first to make this claim was the Scottish film critic John Grierson, the man who coined the term ‘documentary’. In an essay entitled *First Principles of Documentary* published in 1932, Grierson wrote that “documentary can achieve an intimacy of knowledge and effect impossible to the shimsham mechanics of the studio”.² Such claims are still heard today. In 2014, British-American director Joshua Oppenheimer won the best documentary BAFTA for his film *The Act of Killing* (Oppenheimer, 2012), which explores the legacy of the Indonesian mass-killings of 1965-66. In accepting the award, Oppenheimer claimed his film was helping to “catalyse a change in how Indonesia talks about its past”.³ Meanwhile, Nash and Corner note the last decade has seen “the emergence of what is effectively a new kind of documentary production, one that aims to produce social change by integrating documentary production and strategic communication”.⁴

Using documentaries as a catalyst for social change makes sense given their current popularity in Europe. A 2014 survey for the European Commission, for example, found that 77% of EU citizens had seen at least one documentary film in the past few months, with 13% saying they had seen ‘many’ such films.⁵ Documentaries were particularly popular with men aged 35-50. Yet in another sense the survey found their appeal was fairly broad. For example, graduates were no more likely than non-graduates to frequently watch documentary films.

² John Grierson, “First Principles of Documentary (1932),” in *The European Cinema Reader*, ed. Catherine Fowler (Abingdon: Routledge, 2002), 43.

³ Joshua Oppenheimer, “Acceptance: Documentary,” BAFTA, February 16, 2014, [http://awards.bafta.org/sites/default/files/bafta-uploads/acceptance - best documentary.docx](http://awards.bafta.org/sites/default/files/bafta-uploads/acceptance_-_best_documentary.docx)

⁴ Kate Nash and John Corner, “Strategic Impact Documentary: Contexts of Production and Social Intervention,” *European Journal of Communication* 313, no.3 (2016): 228. As an example of what Nash and Corner call the ‘strategic impact documentary sector’, see: “The Impact Field Guide and Tool Kit,” DocSociety, accessed November 11, 2021. <https://impactguide.org/introduction/welcome/#>

⁵ Attentional, Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture (European Commission), Harris Interactive, and Headway International, *A Profile of Current and Future Audiovisual Audience: Final Report* (Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2014), 153.

Between 2005 and 2015, there were 15 documentary films – including *March of the Penguins* (Jacquet, 2004), *An Inconvenient Truth* (Guggenheim, 2006), and *Amy* (Kapadia, 2015) – that sold 1 million cinema tickets or more in Europe, according to the MeCETES Film Database.⁶ Many more will have seen these and other documentaries on TV, DVD or Video-on-Demand (VOD). In 2017, *The New York Times* reported that 73% of all Netflix subscribers – more than 68 million – had watched at least one documentary on the site in the previous year.⁷

However, despite repeated claims about their impact, there have been few empirical studies into how documentary films affect audiences. As Nisbet and Aufderheide note, “documentary film, despite its growing influence and many impacts, has mostly been overlooked by social scientists studying the media and communication”.⁸ This article addresses this gap in the literature by analysing the findings of a recent online survey of documentary film audiences in Spain, Greece, Iceland and (to a lesser degree) other parts of Europe. The survey was commissioned by Moving Docs – a partnership managed by the European Documentary Network (EDN) and supported by the EU’s Creative Europe MEDIA programme to support documentary film screenings – but its findings were analysed independently by the author of this article. The survey focused on the impact of feature-length documentary films *produced for* the cinema (rather than shorter documentaries made for television). Yet it wasn’t solely interested in documentaries *seen within* the cinema: it also considered whether feature documentaries had been seen on other platforms (e.g. TV, DVD and VOD) to examine how context might affect their impact.

Section one outlines the theoretical framework behind the Moving Docs survey, with particular reference to the literature on media effects. Section two outlines its methodology. Section three examines how respondents said they had been affected by the experience of watching documentary films, while section four examines which documentaries have had a particular effect on them. In summary, the Moving Docs survey corroborates other studies on how films influence their audiences by demonstrating the significant effects of documentary films on people’s emotions as well as their knowledge and opinions about certain issues. At the same time, it tempers arguments about the unpredictable and unique ways audiences

⁶ The MeCETES Film Database is a private database created by the author for the ‘Mediating Cultural Encounters through European Screens’ (MeCETES) project as part of the HERA ‘Cultural Encounters’ programme (2013-16). The database combines film and cinema admissions data from various sources including the European Audiovisual Observatory’s LUMIERE Pro World database and the Internet Movie Database (IMDb).

⁷ Glenn Kenny, “Netflix Casts a Wider Net for Original Documentaries,” *The New York Times*, March 9, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/09/movies/netflix-casts-a-wider-net-for-original-documentaries.html>

⁸ Matthew Nisbet and Patricia Aufderheide, “Documentary Film: Towards a Research Agenda on Forms, Functions, and Impacts,” *Mass Communication and Society* 12, no.4 (2011): 451 (450-56).

respond to film by highlighting certain tendencies in both the types of documentaries most likely to affect audiences and the types of audience most likely to be affected.

1. Theoretical framework

A key idea behind the Moving Docs survey was the concept of ‘media effects’. This refers to “the many ways individuals and society may be influenced by both news and entertainment mass media, including film, television, radio, newspapers, books, magazines, websites, video games, and music”.⁹ These effects can take many forms. Potter, for example, identifies over 130 types of effect, which he groups into six key categories:

- *Cognitive* – where media exposure affects our knowledge about a topic.
- *Beliefs* – where media exposure convinces us something is real or true, even if we haven’t seen it ourselves.
- *Attitudes* – where media exposure influences our judgements about something.
- *Affect* – where media exposure triggers feelings or emotions.
- *Physiological* – where media exposure triggers an automatic bodily response.
- *Behaviours* – where media exposure leads to action.¹⁰

Potter notes these effects can influence each other. For example, cognitions can influence attitudes, which in turn can influence behaviours. They can also function in different ways. For example, watching a documentary film might lead us to acquire a new attitude about something, or it might change, trigger or reinforce an attitude we already held. And they can also aggregate over time so that they influence not only individuals on a ‘micro-level’ but also the public, institutions and the media themselves on a ‘macro-level’.

Whether focusing on cognition, attitudes or behaviours, a key academic debate has been the degree to which the media is responsible for these effects. During the 1940s and ‘50s, researchers challenged the common assumption that audiences passively accept media messages by demonstrating the ‘limited effects’ of the media. Drawing on large-scale interviews, Lazarsfeld et al., for example, found that interpersonal interactions and word of mouth were more important than newspapers or radio in forming voter opinions.¹¹ However, by the 1970s and ‘80s, there was growing evidence about the long-term effects of the media. Gerbner et al., for example, found that high exposure to violent television shows may not

⁹ “Media Effects,” Communication for Governance & Accountability Program (CommGAP), accessed November 11, 2021.

<https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/57a08b6de5274a27b2000b2b/MediaEffectsweb.pdf>

¹⁰ Adapted from W. James Potter, *Media Effects* (London: Sage, 2012), 41-42.

¹¹ Paul F. Lazarsfeld, Felix, Bernard Berelson, and Hazel Gaudet, *The People’s Choice: How the Voter Makes Up His Mind in a Presidential Campaign, 2nd Edition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021).

directly cause violent behaviour, but it might encourage viewers to see the world as a violent place.¹² Nevertheless, these views were tempered by new theories like Hall's 'encoding/decoding' model, which argued that while some audiences accept media messages, others might only partially accept or even actively reject these messages, depending on their own knowledge, background and experiences.¹³ This has prompted more recent research on "the conditions under which different types of effects are more or less significant", including a focus on the persuasiveness of particular narrative forms or framing devices.¹⁴

Most research on media effects has been conducted by communications scholars focusing especially on television or political messaging.¹⁵ Film scholars, by contrast, seem reluctant to apply media effects theories to film, perhaps because of their association with discredited research on media violence.¹⁶ A notable recent exception is the British Film Institute's (BFI) *Opening Our Eyes* report.¹⁷ Involving an online survey of 2,036 respondents, representative of the UK population aged 15 to 74 years, the study explored (amongst other things) the effects films have on British audiences. In particular, respondents were asked to assess whether they had seen any films in recent years that had affected them in some way by selecting from a list of 11 options that encapsulated different types of effect.¹⁸ The results showed films have a significant effect on audiences: 85% of respondents had "seen a film recently that had provoked them to do something – even if only to talk about it to friends and family".¹⁹ "Two-thirds of people had seen a film they found educational or which gave them insights into other cultures," while substantial minorities had "followed up a film by taking action such as joining a club, writing a letter or otherwise becoming involved".²⁰ In demographic terms, young people were more likely than over 55s to "have seen films recently that led them to take action directly related to the situation shown in the film", while people

¹² George Gerbner, Larry Gross, Michael Morgan, and Nancy Signorelli, "The Mainstreaming of America: Violence Profile No. 11," *Journal of Communication* 30, no.3 (1980): 10–29.

¹³ Stuart Hall, "Encoding, Decoding," in *The Cultural Studies Reader, 3rd Edition*, ed. Simon During (London: Routledge, 1993), 477-487.

¹⁴ Yariv Tsfati, "Media Effects," *Oxford Bibliographies*, last modified February 23, 2011, <https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780199756841/obo-9780199756841-0081.xml>

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ See for example: Roy Stafford, *Understanding Audiences and the Film Industry* (London: BFI, 2007), 123-129. For a critique of media effects research into violent films, see Martin Barker and Julia Petley, eds., *Ill Effects: The Media/Violence Debate, 2nd Edition* (London: Routledge, 1998).

¹⁷ BFI, *Opening Our Eyes: How Film Contributes to the Culture of the UK* (London: BFI, 2011).

¹⁸ "Appendix 1: Survey Questions," BFI, accessed November 11, 2021, <https://core-cms.bfi.org.uk/media/1743/download>

¹⁹ BFI, *Opening Our Eyes* 34.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

from minority ethnic groups were “more likely than people from a white background to experience” any of the 11 types of effects included in the survey.²¹

The BFI survey also asked respondents to name “a film that you have seen that has had an effect on you” and “explain briefly what sort of effect this film made on you, and why”.²² Respondents generally named films they saw as “thought-provoking or informative” (49%) or which had “an emotional impact” (41%) on them.²³ However, in his own analysis of the survey findings, film scholar Ian Christie argues that, “*Opening Our Eyes...* provides evidence that people do not respond identically or in predictable ways to the same film, even if a film is one that might seem to be intended for the mass market, and therefore aiming at a uniform response”.²⁴ To illustrate what he calls the ‘individuation of response’, Christie notes that, “Even ‘blockbusters’ such as *Avatar* produced very different reactions, ranging from the aesthetic and near-religious, to viewers being stimulated to think about ecology, about native peoples facing imperialism, and about the challenge of architecture in different environments”.²⁵

These findings should be treated with caution. Like most media effects studies, the BFI survey was based on self-reporting, where respondents make their own assessment about how they have been affected by the media. Potter notes that, “with some types of effects, self-reported measures are the most appropriate. After all, how can we measure people’s current knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs unless we ask them to tell us?”²⁶ However, he argues, “The use of self-reported data on *behaviours* should be regarded as highly suspect, because it has been well-documented that self-reported behaviour is often different from actual behaviour”.²⁷ This is because respondents tend to overreport socially acceptable behaviour and underreport unacceptable behaviour, or they may be unaware of what their actual behaviour is.²⁸ Yet even with other types of effects, self-reporting is “open to all sorts of bias: that is, people might not want to tell you private things about themselves or things that would make them look bad, so they are likely to ‘enhance’ the data”.²⁹ Nevertheless, apart from being far cheaper and more efficient than alternative methods like observation, the problems

²¹ *Ibid.*, 36.

²² BFI, ‘Appendix 1’

²³ BFI, *Opening Our Eyes*, 62.

²⁴ Ian Christie, “What Do We Really Know About Film Audiences?”, in *Audiences: Defining and Researching Screen Entertainment Reception*, ed. Ian Christie (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2012), 226.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 231. (emphasis in original)

²⁶ Potter, *Media Effects*, 301.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 301-2. (emphasis added)

²⁸ For similar reasons, Potter also argues that “Self-reporting measures of physiological responses are also highly suspect,” though this is less of an issue for the BFI survey, since it didn’t ask about physiological effects.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 302.

with self-reporting were somewhat mitigated by the fact the BFI survey was answered anonymously online, which perhaps placed respondents under less pressure to offer socially acceptable responses. It also gave respondents the chance to say in their own words how films have affected them, rather than let others speak for them.

Despite its shortcomings, the BFI survey's account of "what effects films have on us" has been described as "ground-breaking".³⁰ However, with its focus mainly on fictional feature films, it had little to say about documentary films. To be sure, there have been some studies on the macro-level effects of specific campaigning documentaries, especially in relation to their effectiveness at raising awareness of particular issues or achieving social or political change.³¹ Borum Chattoo and Jenkins, for example, have shown how "human-centered social-issue documentary film can unveil an unseen story to U.S. policy-making audiences, and further, it can foster policy change by spotlighting the experiences of real people in emotionally engaging ways".³² But there is still little empirical research on the different effects that documentary films – of all types and genres – have on individuals. It was to this gap in the literature that the Moving Docs survey was created.

1. Methodology

The Moving Docs survey used the BFI's questionnaire as a template, but tailored questions towards documentary feature films.³³ In particular, respondents were asked whether they had been affected by the experience of watching documentary films in any way. They were also asked to name a documentary film which had had a particular effect on them and explain in their own words how they had been affected.³⁴

It was not within our budget to target a representative sample of the entire European population, from which generalisations about the effects of documentary films could be made. However, we were able to target a 'convenience sample' through distributing the survey through the network of Moving Docs – an organisation which helps independent

³⁰ Christie, "What Do We Really Know About Film Audiences?," 230

³¹ For example see: David Whiteman, "Documentary Film as Policy Analysis: The Impact of *Yes, In My Backyard* on Activists, Agendas, and Policy," *Mass Communication and Society* 12, no.4 (2009): 457-477; Heather L. LaMarre and Kristen D. Landreville, "When is Fiction as Good as Fact? Comparing the Influence of Documentary and Historical Reenactment Films on Engagement, Affect, Issue Interest, and Learning," *Mass Communication and Society* 12, no.4 (2009): 537-555.

³² Caty Borum Chattoo and Will Jenkins, "From Reel Life to Real Social Change: The Role of Contemporary Social-Issue Documentary in U.S. Public Policy," *Media, Culture & Society* 41, no.8 (2019): 1122 (1107–24).

³³ Drawing on the Doc Society's funding guidelines for a documentary feature-length film in the UK, a 'documentary film' was defined as a film that: (a) provides a factual report on a particular subject; (b) usually last longer than 69 minutes; and (c) is made for cinema release (rather than television).

³⁴ The Moving Docs Survey can be viewed here: <https://forms.gle/LHq6GxRZTodpiPi78>

cinemas and film festivals to screen documentaries – and the local partners it supports.³⁵ These partners included DocsBarcelona (Catalonia/Spain), Doc Lounge (Sweden), IceDocs (Iceland), Rise and Shine Cinema (Germany), and CineDoc (Greece). Each Moving Docs partner sent a web link to the survey (translated into the local languages) to its mailing list, where it might be seen by several hundreds of people who had previously attended one of their events and had agreed to receive further emails about forthcoming screenings.³⁶ Each partner also posted links to the survey on their Twitter and Facebook page, where the survey might be seen by many thousands of people who more casually follow the partner's activities online. Additionally, links to the survey were posted on the Twitter and Facebook accounts of Europa Cinemas, a network of over 1,200 cinemas which specialise in European film, as well as the *Cineuropa* website, which carries industry related news about European cinema in four languages.³⁷ Consequently, the Moving Docs Survey was circulated amongst many thousands of people across Europe who were all – to a greater or lesser degree – actively interested in European documentary cinema.

Although social scientists discourage the use of convenience samples, Bryman notes “this doesn't mean that convenience samples should never be used, particularly as they can be a useful way of accessing hard-to-reach populations”.³⁸ One such hard-to-reach population are those who frequently watch documentary films. As noted above, these represent only 13% of EU citizens.³⁹ Yet they accounted for 72% of Moving Docs survey respondents. Bryman notes that the “second context where convenience sampling may be useful is when there is a rare chance to gather data from a sample to which you have easy access and this represents too good an opportunity to miss”.⁴⁰ This was certainly the case in terms of accessing frequent documentary viewers through the Moving Docs network.

However, the convenience sample inevitably meant responses were skewed towards particular demographic groups (table 1). Of the 1,496 valid responses, a high proportion came from Spain, Greece and (relative to its size) Iceland. These were simply the countries where Moving Docs' partners had the largest mailing lists and highest number of followers on social media. Yet it also meant three types of European country were fairly well represented:

³⁵ The survey was restricted to people aged 16 and over and resident within Europe (defined as the EU28 including the UK, candidate EU member states, and EFTA member states).

³⁶ DocsBarcelona, for example, has around 500 email addresses on its mailing list, 22,940 followers on Facebook and 4,033 followers on Twitter.

³⁷ For example see: Vladan Petkovic, “Moving Docs launches a survey on documentary audiences in Europe,” *Cineuropa*, December 5, 2019, <https://cineuropa.org/en/newsdetail/382191/>

³⁸ Tom Clark, Liam Foster, Luke Sloan, and Alan Bryman, *Bryman's Social Research Methods, 6th Edition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 177.

³⁹ Attentional et al., *Current and Future Audiovisual Audience*, 153.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

- Spain – a large southern European country (population: 46.9m) with moderate levels of income (GDP per capita: €30k), a moderately active cinemagoing population (2.2 average admissions per capita), and a relatively high market share for its own national films (15% of cinema admissions), making it less dependent on foreign film imports;
- Greece – a medium-sized southern European country (population: 10.7m) with low levels of income (GDP per capita: €20k), a relatively inactive cinemagoing population (0.9 average admissions per capita), and a low market share for its own national films (5% of cinema admissions), making it highly dependent on foreign film imports; and
- Iceland – a small northern European country (population: 0.4m) with very high levels of income (GDP per capita: €67k), a highly active cinemagoing population (3.5 average admissions per capita) but a low market share for its own national films (4% of cinema admissions), making it highly dependent on foreign film imports.⁴¹

Ideally, there could have been more responses from Germany or Sweden to provide further comparison with a large or medium-sized northern European country with a high level of income, a moderately active cinemagoing population and a medium-to-high market share for its own national films. However, responses from these and other countries in Europe were patchy. In any case, none of the responses were demographically representative of the countries or regions from which they came. Indeed, compared to the EU population as a whole, they were generally skewed towards women, graduates, urban-dwellers, full-time workers, and high earners, and skewed against all age groups except 16-24-year-olds. Perhaps understandably given that the survey was distributed through the Moving Docs network, there was also a very high proportion of responses from people working in the media and creative industries, as well as a relatively high proportion of responses from workers in education, healthcare and social services. These biases mean that the findings of the Moving Docs survey cannot be generalised to Europe as a whole or even particular regions or countries. Yet they still allow us to hear the voices of frequent documentary viewers from certain parts of Europe who might otherwise be hard to access.

2. Results I: The effects of documentaries on individuals

Almost all (97%) Moving Docs survey respondents said they had been affected by documentaries in some way. This was true across all demographics. Even amongst those who only occasionally or rarely watched documentaries, 93% said they had seen a documentary that had affected them, underlining the incredible impact of these types of film.

The most common type of effect was an *affective* one (Figure 1). Over three-quarters (77%) had seen a documentary film that had had a big emotional impact on them. *Cognitive* and *attitudinal* effects were the next most important effects. Seven out of ten (70%) had seen a

⁴¹ European Audiovisual Observatory, *Focus 2020: World Film Market Trends / Tendances du Marché mondial du film* (Strasbourg: European Audiovisual Observatory, 2020), p.28; p. 36; and p.38.

documentary film that had improved their understanding of a particular issue, while six out of ten (60%) had seen one that had changed the way they think about certain issues. Many respondents highlighted more specific cognitive effects. Half of all respondents (50%) had seen a documentary film that had improved their understanding of a particular section of society, while similar proportions had seen one that had improved their understanding of a country or place (49%) or a person or event (46%). Many also highlighted some *behavioural* effects. Over half (54%) had seen a documentary that had encouraged them to find out more about an issue, while a slightly smaller proportion (48%) had seen one which had encouraged them to talk to others about a particular issue. However, more proactive behavioural effects were less common. Only a quarter (25%) of respondents had seen a documentary that had encouraged them to take action (e.g. join a campaign), while less than a fifth (19%) had seen one that had encouraged them to change their lifestyle or behaviour.

Demographic	Group	N.	%
<i>Country</i>	Greece	502	34%
	Spain	587	39%
	Iceland	145	10%
	Other European	262	18%
<i>Gender</i>	Female	928	63%
	Male	528	36%
	Other (e.g. non-binary)	8	1%
<i>Age</i>	16-24	153	10%
	25-34	358	24%
	35-44	384	26%
	45-54	327	22%
	55 or over	261	18%
<i>Education</i>	Non-graduate	337	23%
	Graduate (e.g. BA)	571	39%
	Post-graduate (e.g. MA, PhD)	550	38%
<i>Residence</i>	Urban (i.e. city)	1128	76%
	Non-urban (i.e. suburb, town, village)	355	24%
<i>Employment</i>	Full-time (>29hrs / week)	858	60%
	Part-time (0-29hrs / week)	198	14%
	Unemployed / retired	229	16%
	Student	149	10%
<i>Income</i>	<€10k	227	19%
	€10-20k	333	28%
	€20-30k	245	21%
	€30-50k	222	19%
	>€50k	144	12%
<i>Occupation</i>	Media, Arts, Entertainment ('Media')	614	45%
	Education, Healthcare, Social Services ('Education/Care')	316	23%
	Other professions ('Other')	439	32%

Table 1. Number/percentage of survey responses by social demographics.

Age was a key factor in how respondents were likely to be affected by the experience of watching documentary films. Younger respondents were significantly more likely than older respondents to have seen a documentary film that had affected them across all the types of effect included in the survey – with the exception of improving their understanding of a section of society or of a country or place (figure 2). Indeed, 16-24-year-olds were twice as likely as respondents aged 55 and over to have seen a documentary film that had encouraged them to change their lifestyle or behaviour and three times more likely to have seen one that had encouraged them to take action (e.g. join a campaign). Even controlling for the number of documentaries respondents had seen in the past year, age was still a significant factor in six of the eleven types of effect included in the survey including lifestyle and behaviour. This may be because 16-24-year-olds are in a period of their lives – between late adolescence and

young adulthood – when people often define their own personal identity and value system, as well as being more open to external influences.

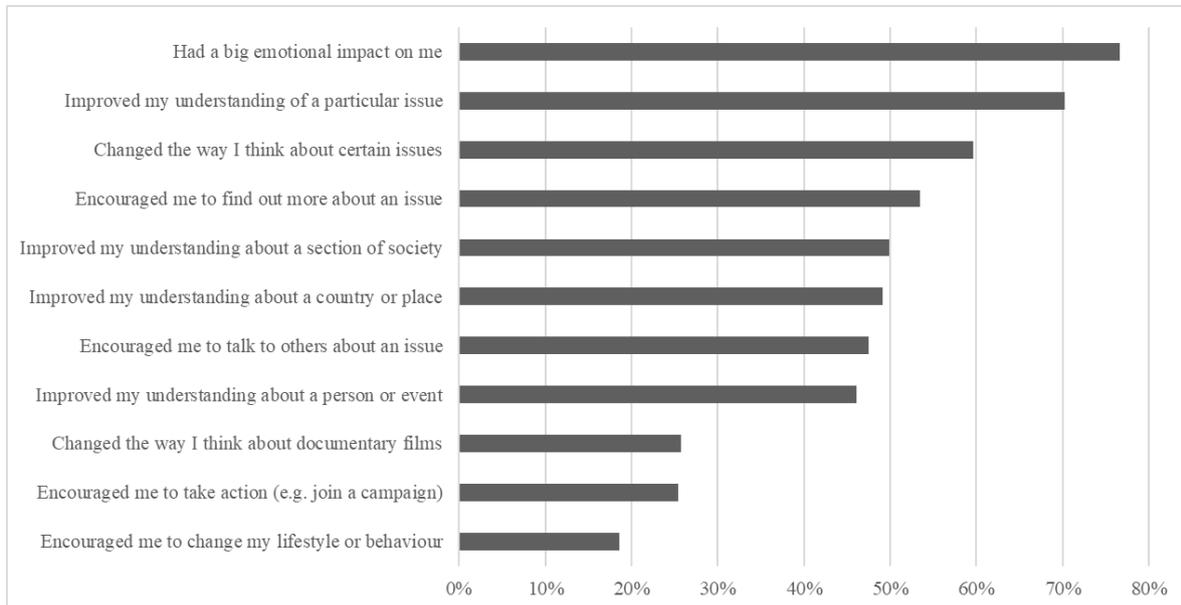


Figure 1. Percentage of respondents who have seen a documentary film that has affected them by type of effect.

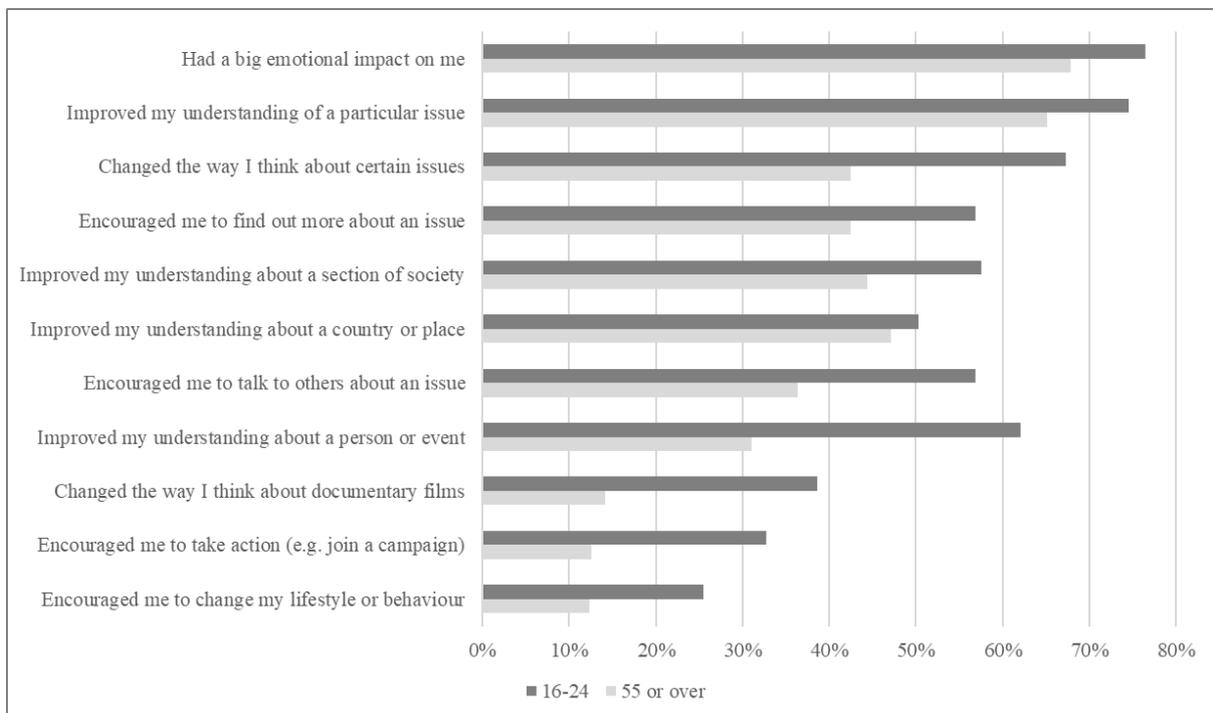


Figure 2. Percentage of respondents who have seen a documentary film that has affected them by selective age groups and type of effect.

Other demographic factors had little or no influence on how respondents were affected by the experience of watching documentary films. To be sure, high earners were more likely than

low earners to have seen a documentary that had improved their understanding of certain issues, while postgraduates were more likely than non-graduates to have seen one that had changed their opinion about certain issues or about documentary itself as an artform. But age was the only demographic factor that significantly influenced all types of effect (e.g. cognition, attitudes, emotions, behaviours).⁴²

The only other significant factor was *where* respondents tended to watch documentaries. Those who tended to watch documentaries in cinemas, at festivals or other special event screenings were significantly more likely than those who mainly watched documentaries on TV, DVD or VOD to say that they had learnt about a section of society or been encouraged to change their lifestyle or behaviour by the experience of watching documentary films. Indeed, when controlling for the number of documentaries a respondent had seen in the last year, 'big screen' documentary viewers were also significantly more likely than 'small screen' viewers to have seen a documentary that improved their understanding of a country or place or one that had changed their thinking about documentary as an artform. This suggests that the collective and immersive experience of watching documentaries on the big screen can leave a deeper impression on respondents than watching documentaries at home on the small screen, where there are perhaps more distractions.

3. Results II: The effects of particular documentaries

Three-quarters (75%) of Moving Docs survey respondents could name a documentary that had affected them in some way. Compared with the general effects of documentaries (see above), far more respondents than might be expected named a documentary that had changed the way they think about documentary as an artform (20% compared with 26%), while fewer named one that had improved their understanding of a country or place (22% compared with 49%). But generally, the order of effects was the same, with emotional and cognitive effects the most common and behavioural effects the least common.

Most of the named documentaries received just one mention, while only eleven documentaries received 10 or more mentions. In total, 525 documentary films were named. This seems to confirm Christie's argument about the 'individuation of response', whereby responses to films are rarely uniform or predictable but rather individual and unique, since they are influenced by the individual's own particular background, interests and affiliations.⁴³ Nevertheless, some trends could be identified. Seven in ten respondents (70%) named a documentary made in the last decade. Almost a third of respondents (32%) named one made in the last three years, suggesting the effects of documentaries (or at least people's memory of these effects) are relatively short-term. Over half (52%) named a documentary that had

⁴² Significance was determined by collating the survey responses into a custom table in SPSS and running a column proportions test to identify any statistically significant differences between the responses (e.g. male versus female respondents). The significance level was set to $p < .05$

⁴³ Christie, "What Do We Really Know About Film Audiences?," 226.

been shot in the English language (even if this was later dubbed or subtitled into other languages). But in another sense, the linguistic range of documentaries was quite diverse – representing 47 other languages, from Albanian to Ukrainian. Almost half (46%) of respondents named a documentary from another European country: French and British documentaries were particularly popular, though a significant number also came from Germany and Sweden. This suggests Moving Docs survey respondents are particularly affected by cultural encounters with other Europeans, even if they do not deem these encounters to necessarily improve their understanding of other European countries or places. The top 20 most frequently mentioned documentaries (‘impactful documentaries’) provide further clues about which documentary films were most likely to affect respondents (Table 2). Amongst the key themes were films with a focus on:

- The lives of extraordinary individuals (1, 2, 4, 7, 8, 11, 13, 14, 15, 17, 19);
- The problems of modern societies and political-economic systems (3, 5, 6, 9, 10, 12, 16);
- The exploitation of animals or the natural world (7, 10, 12, 14, 16, 20);
- The legacy of war, genocide or colonialism (2, 4, 11, 12, 18, 20);
- Strong women (7, 8, 9, 15, 17); and/or
- Artists or musicians (1, 4, 15, 19).

Additionally, many of the top 20 were films that had won major awards (1, 2, 4, 5, 7, 11, 12, 14, 15, 16, 18, 20), were box office hits (1, 4, 5, 12) or were made by well-known ‘auteur’ directors (4, 5, 14, 20). Others had none of these characteristics but were films that had been screened at special Moving Docs events (3, 7, 8, 9, 13, 15).

	Title	Year	Director(s)	Country(s)-of-origin	Awards	European admissions	Mentions
1	<i>Searching for Sugar Man</i>	2012	Malik Bendjelloul	SE/GB/FR	40 awards (1 Oscar)	798,772	27
2	<i>The Act of Killing</i>	2012	Joshua Oppenheimer	GB/DK/NO	53 awards (1 Oscar nomination)	69,843	27
3	<i>The Swedish Theory of Love</i>	2015	Erik Gandini	SE		34,800	17
4	<i>The Salt of the Earth</i>	2014	Juliano Ribeiro Salgado, Wim Wenders	FR/BR/IT	12 awards (1 Oscar nomination)	1,323,471	16
5	<i>Bowling for Columbine</i>	2002	Michael Moore	US/CA/DE	40 awards (1 Oscar)	3,641,627	14
6	<i>Mourning Rock</i>	2000	Filippos Koutsafitis	GR	3 awards	122	14
7	<i>Honeyland</i>	2019	Tamara Kotevska, Ljubomir Stefanov	MK	32 awards (2 Oscars nominations)	10,194	13
8	<i>In Search...</i>	2018	Beryl Magoko	DE/BE/KE			13
9	<i>Push</i>	2019	Fredrik Gertten	SE/CA/GB	1 award	10,743	13
10	<i>Earthlings</i>	2005	Shaun Monson	US			11
11	<i>The Look of Silence</i>	2014	Joshua Oppenheimer	DE/ID/PL/NO/GB/IL/FR/US/DE/NE	48 awards (1 Oscar nomination)	45,933	11
12	<i>Darwin's Nightmare</i>	2004	Hubert Sauper	AT/BE/FR/DE	16 awards (1 Oscar nominations)	633,489	9
13	<i>Dolphin Man</i>	2017	Lefteris Charitos	GR		26,040	9
14	<i>Grizzly Man</i>	2005	Werner Herzog	US	21 awards	146,658	9
15	<i>Sonita</i>	2015	Rokhsareh Ghaemmaghami	DE/CH	19 awards	27,690	9
16	<i>The Cove</i>	2009	Louie Psihoyos	US	38 awards (1 Oscar)	49,087	9
17	<i>Amazona</i>	2015	Clare Weiskopf, Nicolas van Hemelryck	CO		3,646	8
18	<i>Of Fathers and Sons</i>	2017	Talal Derki	DE/US/SY/LB/NL/QA	19 awards (1 Oscar)	13,048	8
19	<i>Petit et</i>	2018	Carles Bosch	ES		820	8
20	<i>The Pearl Button</i>	2015	Patricio Guzmán	FR/ES/CL/CH	11 awards	132,053	8

Table 2. Top 20 most frequently mentioned impactful documentaries. Additional sources of additional data: IMDb, Lumiere.

Most of the impactful documentaries were ones which had affected respondents emotionally (table 3).⁴⁴ This was particularly the case with *Honeyland* (Kotevska and Stefanov, 2019), a critically acclaimed documentary about the last female wild beekeeper in Europe. Of the 13 respondents who named *Honeyland* as a documentary which had affected them in some way, 12 said the film had had a big emotional impact on them. This was perhaps due to the film’s formal qualities as much as its subject matter. A Danish male graduate aged 55 or over, for example, described the film as “a piece of art, touching, [and] cinematographically excellent”, while a Greek man of the same age group and educational level praised the “excellent use of expressive means”.

Type of effect	<i>Searching for Sugarman</i>	<i>The Act of Killing</i>	<i>The Swedish Theory of Love</i>	<i>The Salt of the Earth</i>	<i>Bowling for Columbine</i>	<i>Mourning Rock</i>	<i>Honeyland</i>	<i>In Search... (Womanhood)</i>	<i>Push</i>	<i>Earthlings</i>	Average
It had a big emotional impact on me	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
I learned a lot about the issues shown in the film	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
It changed the way I think about certain issues	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
It encouraged me to talk to others about the issues shown in the film	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
I learned a lot about country or place shown in the film	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
It encouraged me to find out more about the issues shown in the film	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
I learned a lot about the person or events shown in the film	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
I learned a lot about the section of society shown in the film	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
It changed the way I think about documentary films	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
It encouraged me to change my lifestyle or behaviour	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
It encouraged me to take action (e.g. join a campaign)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Other	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
None of the above	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Don't know	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

Table 3. Top 10 impactful documentaries by type of effect and proportion of respondents who named this effect.

Several impactful documentaries had significant cognitive effects. For example, eight of the 14 respondents who named *Bowling for Columbine* (Moore, 2002) – American filmmaker Michael Moore’s hugely popular investigation into the causes of the Columbine High School massacre in 1999 – said it was a documentary that had taught them a lot about a country or

⁴⁴ For summaries of the top ten most impactful documents see: Huw D. Jones, “Documentary film audiences in Europe: Findings for the Moving Docs Survey,” Thessaloniki International Film Festival, July 15, 2020, <https://www.filmfestival.gr/attachments/article/27317/Moving%20Docs%20Survey%20Report.pdf>

place. Moore's ability to link the high incidences of gun violence in the US to the country's large defence establishment, its history of overseas military interventions and its sensationalist cable news media seems to have played a key role in triggering this response. An Icelandic male graduate aged 45-54, for example, said the film "showed me that it's important to dive deeply to understand [these issues] and to examine the larger context". *In Search... A Journey to Womanhood* (Magoko, 2018) – which tells the story of Beryl Magoko, a Kenyan filmmaker based in Germany who underwent Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) as a child and now faces the emotional dilemma of whether to undergo reconstructive surgery on her genitals – was another impactful documentary that had significant cognitive effects. Eight respondents said they had learnt a lot about the issues shown in the film, while eight also said the film had improved their understanding of a person or event. However, whereas *Bowling for Columbine* educated audiences through placing a particular event (the Columbine High School massacre) within a wider socio-political context (e.g. America's large defence establishment), *In Search...* informed people about the FGM issue through Magoko telling a more personal story on camera. As one Spanish female graduate aged 45-55 explained, "I really liked that there was the director and she spoke".

There were also a few impactful documentaries that had significant attitudinal effects. Twelve respondents said *The Salt of the Earth* (Salgado and Wenders, 2014) – a critically acclaimed and commercially successful documentary about Sebastião Salgado, a Brazilian photojournalist who covered the Ethiopian famine, Yugoslavian civil war and Rwandan genocide – had changed the way they think about certain issues. One Greek female graduate aged 25-34, for example, said the film "made me see the ugly aspect of human behaviour without losing my love or my faith in the human race," while another Greek respondent of a different demographic (male non-graduate aged 35-45) likewise said the film "gave me hope that a man – not common – is enough to do something for our planet". *Morning Rock* (Koutsaftis, 2000) – a documentary about Eleusis, a Greek town linked with ancient Greek mythology and classical antiquity that has become spoilt in recent times by urban development – was another impactful documentary that had a significant attitudinal effect, with seven respondents saying the film had changed the way they think about certain issues. But while *The Salt of the Earth* affected attitudes about global issues, *Mourning Rock* changed thinking about more local matters. One Greek male graduate aged 35-44, for example, said the film "reminded me of my duty as a Greek to defend my ancient cultural heritage against all kinds of small-time companies and contractors".

Not all changes of attitude were related to social issues. Thirteen respondents said *The Act of Killing* – in which director Joshua Oppenheimer invited former leaders of Indonesia's anti-communist death squads to recreate their killings in the style of their favourite films – had changed their opinion of documentary as an artform, confirming filmmaker Ruri Hamid's view

that the film “turns around what we think of as documentaries”.⁴⁵ However, despite Oppenheimer’s hope that his film would force the American and British governments to “acknowledge the crimes of the past, and our collective role in supporting and participating in those crimes”,⁴⁶ only nine respondents had been encouraged to find out more about the issues shown in the film, while just one took action (e.g. joining a campaign).

Indeed, there were very few instances of behavioural effects. To be sure, a couple of impactful documentaries encouraged audiences to talk to others about the issues shown in the film. For example, ten respondents cited this effect in relation to *Push* (Gertten, 2019) – an investigative documentary exploring why city-living has become so expensive – with one Greek female graduate aged 35-44 saying she “urged people to go and see it”. Eight respondents said the same of *The Swedish Theory of Love* (2015), a critique of Sweden’s supposed obsession with personal independence and self-sufficiency. Notably, both films had been screened at special Moving Docs events, a further indication that *where* respondents watch documentaries can influence *how* these films affect them. However, more proactive behavioural effects such as taking action or changing lifestyle were extremely rare.

One exception was *Earthlings* (Monson, 2005), a campaign documentary about the human exploitation of other animals. Like *The Swedish Theory of Love* and *Push*, *Earthlings* had a very limited theatrical release. But rather than rely on Moving Docs screenings, it seems to have found an audience through word-of-mouth and free VOD platforms, with over 320,000 views on YouTube alone.⁴⁷ Of the 11 respondents who named *Earthlings* as a documentary that had affected them in some way, nine said the film had changed the way they think about certain issues. But more strikingly, nine respondents said the film had encouraged them to change their lifestyle or behaviour, while six were persuaded to take action. One Spanish male graduate aged 25-34, for example, described how he “stopped eating meat and started to empathise more with the situation farm animals live [in]” after seeing the film, while another Greek woman of the same age group and educational level said the film influenced her “decision to change [her] lifestyle to [become] vegan”. Other respondents noted that the film “strengthened [their] compassion for all the creatures of the earth” (Greek female graduate aged 25-34) or encouraged them to reflect on their “relationship with other animals overall” (Spanish male non-graduate aged 25-34). One Spanish female non-graduate aged 25-34, for example, explained how the film helped her overcome “any doubts [she] had about the intelligence, empathy, love, and pain that animals feel”.

The reason why *Earthlings* encouraged so many to change their lifestyle or behaviour was not simply down to its emotive and topical subject matter. *Honeyland*, for example, also focuses

⁴⁵ Ruri Hamid, “Ruhi Hamid recommends...,” BBC Fresh, filmed August 29, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UVqfdMYxTfo>

⁴⁶ Oppenheimer, “Acceptance: Documentary”.

⁴⁷ “Earthlings Documentary,” YouTube, accessed November 11, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8gqwpfEcBjI>

on the exploitation of animals and the natural world. But whereas *Honeyland* employs an ‘observatory’ documentary mode, which aims for neutrality by simply observing what is happening in front of the camera, *Earthlings* was one of the few impactful documentaries to employ an ‘expositional’ mode, where things are explained through the use of voiceover narration and illustrative images.⁴⁸ Indeed, *Earthlings* features a particularly didactic commentary from Hollywood actor Joaquin Phoenix, combined with highly explicit hidden camera footage of animals being mistreated and killed, and was even described as ‘propaganda’ by one IMDb user.⁴⁹ In media effects terminology, this illustrates the persuasiveness of particular narrative forms or framing devices.

Earthlings was one of 97 documentaries that respondents said had encouraged them to change their lifestyle or behaviour. Many of these likewise focused on the exploitation of animals and the natural world or the human and environmental impact of modern consumer behaviour more generally. A significant number were also expositional rather than observational documentaries, though quite a few were ‘performative’ documentaries involving personal stories about the filmmaker’s own journey of discovery.⁵⁰ For example, six respondents mentioned *Food, Inc.* (Kenner, 2008), an expositional documentary that looks inside America’s corporate controlled food industry; four mentioned *The Cove* (Psihoyos, 2009), a performative documentary that analyses and questions dolphin hunting practices in Japan; and two mentioned *Cowspiracy* (Andersen and Kuhn, 2014), a performative documentary that explores the impact of animal agriculture on the environment. Meanwhile, a Greek male graduate aged 35-44 said he “doesn’t drink soft drinks anymore” after watching *Super Size Me* (Spurlock, 2004), a performative documentary that charts the impact of the filmmaker eating McDonald’s fast food every day for a month, while a Greek female graduate aged 35-44 said she has “stopped shopping at certain clothing chains and now insist[s] on reusing clothes” since watching *The True Cost* (Morgan, 2005), an expositional documentary exploring the impact of fast fashion on people and the planet. Again, 16-24-year-olds were significantly more likely than the 55s or over to name a documentary that had encouraged them to change their lifestyle or behaviour. But interestingly, it was non-graduates who were more likely to be affected in this way than post-graduates. This could be because higher education had empowered postgraduates to think more critically about documentaries, making them more likely to reject their messages. Or it could be because the experience of higher education had already helped change the lifestyle and behaviour of postgraduates, leaving them with less to gain from the experience of watching documentary than non-graduates who had never been to university. Yet, whether young or old, graduate or non-

⁴⁸ Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary, 3rd Edition* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017), 22

⁴⁹ “Earthlings: User Reviews,” IMDb, accessed November 11, 2021, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0358456/reviews?ref=ttexrv_sa_3

⁵⁰ Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*, 22

graduate, the respondents had one thing in common: almost every respondent who named a documentary that had encouraged them to change their lifestyle or behaviour also said the documentary had affected them emotionally, even if it hadn't necessarily improved their understanding of an issue, place, event or section of society. This chimes with Borum Chattoo and Jenkins's suggestion that the documentaries most effective at fostering social change are ones which emotionally engage audiences.⁵¹

Conclusion

Like all media effects research, the findings of the Moving Docs survey should be treated with caution. The use of self-reporting is likely to mean respondents over-reported socially acceptable effects and under-reported less acceptable effects or ones which respondents themselves were unaware of. The use of a convenience sample drawn from the Moving Docs network rather than a representative sample of the European population skewed the findings towards age groups (e.g. 16-24-year-olds) that previous studies suggest are more likely to be affected by films or to occupations (e.g. media professionals and teachers) who have a vested interest in demonstrating the positive effects of documentaries. Yet it did provide access to the voices of a group that would otherwise be hard to reach – namely, frequent documentary film viewers in Europe. Amongst this small but active audience there is at least evidence to support Grierson's longstanding claim that "documentary can achieve an intimacy of knowledge and effect": 84% of respondents had seen a documentary film that had improved their understanding of something; 77% had seen one that had affected them emotionally; 71% had seen one which had encouraged them to do something (if only talk to others about the issues in the film); and 67% said they had seen one that had changed their opinion about something. However, even amongst the most frequent documentary film viewers in Europe, more proactive behavioural effects were less common: only 25% had seen a documentary that had encouraged them to take action (e.g. join a campaign), while just 19% had seen one that had encouraged them to change their lifestyle or behaviour.

These findings corroborate the BFI survey by demonstrating the significant effects films can have on individuals. Yet they also temper Christie's argument about the 'individuation of response'.⁵² To be sure, a large variety of documentaries and effects were mentioned by respondents. But certain trends can still be identified, particularly in terms of the types of documentaries most likely to affect respondents and the types of audience most likely to be affected. For example, the documentaries most likely to encourage respondents to change their lifestyle or behaviour were emotionally engaging expositional or performative documentaries that deal with the exploitation of animals or the natural world (e.g. *Earthlings*) or the human and environmental impact of modern consumer behaviour more generally (e.g. *Food, Inc*). Meanwhile, those most likely to be affected by documentaries in this way were

⁵¹ Borum Chattoo and Jenkins, "From Reel Life to Real Social Change".

⁵² Christie, "What Do We Really Know About Film Audiences?," 226.

young people and those without a university degree. There was also evidence that those who tended to watch documentaries in cinemas, at festivals or special event screenings were more likely to be affected by the experience than those who mainly watched documentaries on home platforms. This certainly does not mean that audiences will respond to films in uniform or predictable ways: for every young person who became a vegan after watching *Earthlings* there were undoubtedly many more who rejected the film's message as propaganda. But – as further necessary research in this area may reveal – there are perhaps certain tendencies in the ways documentary can achieve an intimacy of knowledge and effect.

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