

# Cinema Verité: Filming John F. Kennedy

## OVERVIEW

In 1960, documentarian Robert Drew approached two presidential candidates, Hubert Humphrey and John F. Kennedy, seeking permission to film them on the campaign trail. He proposed making a movie with minimal narration, relying instead on candid footage of the candidates as they interacted with voters. He argued that the documentary would be a record of history. Both candidates agreed to have Drew and his team film them during the final days before the primary election in Wisconsin.

In this lesson, one of three offered on cinematic depictions of the American presidency, students screen two video interviews about John F. Kennedy. The first features Robert Drew explaining his approach to covering Kennedy during the Wisconsin primary election in 1960. The second is with historian Richard Reeves, who discusses how Kennedy changed the imagery associated with the office of the President.

**Teacher's Note:** Selected scenes for analysis are available with the other materials for this lesson on the Story of Movies website.

## EXPLAIN AND EXPLORE

**Display PPT 2: How Do Filmmakers Create Depictions?** Review, as needed, the various cinematic devices a filmmaker may use to create a depiction. Remind students that depictions are not limited to people. A depiction can also be of a place or an idea. Because depictions have connotations that can be positive, negative, or neutral, interpretation of these visual images is an important critical-thinking skill.

**Display PPT slide 3: Hubert and Jack in Wisconsin.** Share the information below.

Hubert Humphrey and John F. Kennedy were Democrats. Both were running for their party's nomination for president. Both were senators, but Humphrey was from the country's Midwest, representing Minnesota, and Kennedy was from the East, representing Massachusetts. They differed in age as well. Humphrey, at 49 years old, had served in the Senate since 1949. Kennedy was just 42. He had served as a congressman before being elected to the Senate in 1952. While both men had experience to enhance their bid for president, the Democratic party leaders felt Kennedy was a longshot for the office of president. He was too young and, as the son of a prominent New England family, considered too upper-crust to relate to ordinary people. He was also Catholic. His religion was controversial in that many people believed a Catholic in the White House would be more likely to obey the laws of the Vatican and the Pope than the laws of the United States Constitution.

Kennedy knew his bid for the presidency was a long shot. He entered the Wisconsin primary as an underdog, strategizing that if he won in this state, he would show the party that he could win the national election. But it was risky. If he lost this primary election, his campaign could come to an end.

**Share the additional information below.**

In the mid-1930s, *Life* debuted as a picture magazine. Its mission was to cover real life—people, locations, and events—using primarily photographs to tell a story. At the time, the format and style of photojournalism was innovative. *Life* looked and read differently than typical newspaper stories. In the 1950s and early 1960s, the magazine was particularly popular. Many Americans learned about their world—including celebrities and political candidates, as well as historical events such as the Korean and Vietnam wars—through the dynamic photographs published in the periodical.

Robert Drew worked as a photojournalist for *Life*. He envisioned a similar concept of visual storytelling using a movie camera rather than still photographs. He explained his concept this way: “Reporting in television and the reporting I’d done were word-logic based. That is, they were lectures with picture illustrations . . . real life never got onto the film, never came through the television. We had to drop word logic and find a dramatic logic in which things really happened. If we could do that, we’d have a whole new basis for a whole new journalism.”

That new journalism was cinema vérité.

**Define cinema vérité.** *Cinema vérité* is a type of nonfiction film where the camera records a subject, usually in everyday situations. Typically, cinema vérité is unscripted and therefore dialogue is natural rather than written. This type of film attempts to capture reality, or life as it happens. In 1960, it was an innovative style of filmmaking. No interviews. Just storytelling through action with minimal voice-over narration.

**Screen “Robert Drew Discusses *Primary*.”**

**GUIDED DISCUSSION**

1. Drew says the crowds who came to hear both candidates became characters in the movie. Explain what you think he means by this.  
*He is not referring to any individual voter. Rather, he states that the crowd itself was a character. Extend the discussion by asking students to comment on how each candidate interacts with the potential voters. Although students have not seen the entire movie, the selected clips in this segment suggest that Kennedy generated more excitement. Drew himself says that everybody loved Kennedy, especially the women.*
2. Refer to **PPT slide 4: Shots and Significance**. What do you think is being revealed about the candidate in each shot? Also, comment on whether you think these

depictions of the candidate are positive, negative, or neutral. Provide reasoning for your response.

*Interpretations will vary. Overall, most students might agree that the images are positive. Clearly the two shots of the crowd on the right show the reaction of others to Kennedy. The smiling faces and people crowding around the candidate suggest his popularity. The image on the left, however, shows a more somber candidate. Accept all reasonable responses.*

**Define tracking shot.** A *tracking shot* is one in which the camera moves to follow the subject. This movement may be by means of a dolly, on which the camera and its operator move alongside, behind, or in front of the subject. Or it may be created by an operator using a hand-held camera or Steadicam.

**Screen “Tracking Shot from *Primary*”** to further explain this filmmaking technique.

ASK: What is the effect of this shot on your perception of the campaign event? What do you learn about the candidate and the audience from this shot?

*Answers will vary, but should focus on the main idea that the camera takes the viewer through the hall with the subject. This allows the viewer to see and hear what the candidate sees and hears. This includes experiencing the excitement the audience is expressing.*

**Screen “Richard Reeves Interview.”** In this interview, historian Richard Reeves discusses the political ambitions of Senator John F. Kennedy and his influence through the use of media on the public’s perception of the presidency. This interview also includes archival photographs of Kennedy. Reeves is the author of *President Kennedy: Profile of Power*.

## GUIDED DISCUSSION

1. Richard Reeves states that in 1956, the primary election process was not an important factor in who became a party’s presidential nominee. Nor was the press. What is he suggesting about primaries at this time?

*Primaries had little impact on who the party nominees would be. The leaders of each political party ultimately made this decision. The selection of the VP candidate was likewise made by party leaders, so as to balance the ticket. Ideally, the VP nominee appealed to voters from regions or demographic populations that the presidential candidate might not attract. That said, candidates could and did campaign for the VP slot. Kennedy did this in 1956, but the party’s presidential nominee (Adlai Stevenson) disliked Kennedy, and the party rejected him in favor of Estes Kefauver.*

2. Reeves says that Kennedy found his own path to the presidential nomination. What does he mean by this?

*In 1960, prior to the national convention, Democratic Party leaders did not view Kennedy as a serious contender for president. He lacked the experience and political*

*influence of Lyndon B. Johnson. LBJ went to the national convention confident that he would be the party's nominee. Other credible candidates included Adlai Stevenson and Hubert Humphrey. As Reeves explains, Kennedy's path to the presidency was not to lobby party leaders. Rather, he appealed to the American people. He visited towns in various states, interacting with potential voters. He entered primaries. He welcomed press coverage. This grassroots approach generated name recognition. Kennedy won enough delegates through the primary system that once the convention began, he had outmaneuvered LBJ for the slot on the top of the ticket. It is reasonable to state that primary elections gained greater importance after this 1960 campaign. Their significance today remains integral to the nomination process.*

3. What does Reeves mean by “the people’s choice”?

*Reeves explains that in 1960, the press was enamored of Kennedy and believed the American people were as well, based on his personality and handsome physical appearance. By campaigning as actively as he did in small towns among ordinary people, he became well-known and well-liked.*

4. The Reeves interview includes two official World War II photographs of the two presidential candidates—Richard Nixon for the Republican Party and Kennedy for the Democrats. How does Reeves explain the difference in these two depictions?

*Nixon's photograph is a posed portrait of him in his officer's uniform. Kennedy's photograph seems to be a more candid shot of him, taken while serving in the South Pacific. Reeves says the Kennedy image projects youth, whereas Nixon's projects an older man's idea of youth.*

5. The Reeves interview also includes footage of Robert “Bobby” Kennedy. How does this footage help you to better understand the relationship between Kennedy and his younger brother?

*Answers will vary. The clip of Bobby at the podium depicts him as young, relaxed, and amusing. The clip of him in his office as attorney general shows him rolling up his shirt sleeves to get to work. Bobby's presence on the campaign trail and in the White House helped to define Kennedy, who was initially surprised by his brother's trustworthiness and sound advice.*

**Think more about it.** Reeves states that Kennedy's secret was that he was seriously ill with Addison's disease. He required pain medication daily. Although students may not have seen the documentary *Primary* in its entirety, the depiction of Kennedy in the film does not include any mention of his illness or his chronic pain.

**Refer to PPT slide 5: Robert Drew Films JFK.** Encourage students to comment on Kennedy's overall appearance in these shots from the film. Draw their attention to the lower right shot, which Reeves says is an indicator of Kennedy trying to control his pain.

ASK: Imagine that Kennedy's "secret" became known to American voters during the primary or soon after his acceptance of his party's nomination to be their candidate for the presidency. In your opinion, how might this information have influenced voters? *Answers will vary. Stress that the illness and its accompanying pain was something that Kennedy masked—not the filmmaker. This is evident from the top two images and lower left image taken from the documentary. Kennedy himself intentionally displayed a confident and healthy demeanor as part of his strategy to win the people's vote. Accept all reasonable responses.*

**Conclude the activity.** Assign for independent reading **"A Breakthrough Moment in Reality Filmmaking."** This article focuses on cinema vérité and Drew's innovative filmmaking style.