

Documentary Analysis of “Amy” (2015)

Directed by Asif Kapadia

Amy (2015) is a biographical documentary directed by Asif Kapadia, produced by James Gay-Rees and edited by Chris King. The film is about deceased, British musician Amy Winehouse. It chronicles the story of Amy Winehouse’s life, her meteoric rise to fame, and the factors influencing her sudden death July 23, 2011.

The documentary is structured linearly. It has a clear beginning, middle, and end. There is a three act structure. In the first act, Winehouse is a child, a teen and then a rising, undiscovered, star. In the second act, Winehouse is signed as a new artist and she acquires a record deal. She’s not yet famous. Winehouse leaves the home of her mother, Janis Winehouse. Amy Winehouse shows signs her bulimia and drug and alcohol addiction are getting out of control. In the third act, Winehouse becomes an international celebrity. She is frequently seen in public under the influence of drugs and alcohol. Her musical performances routinely suffer due to her addictions. Winehouse’s musical talent has made her so rich and famous, people rarely say no to Winehouse

or her addictive behaviors. Winehouse is ridiculed locally and internationally by paparazzi and mainstream media. Winehouse dies in the last act.

The documentary is a character and event driven piece that contains the basic elements of cinematic storytelling: themes, plot, setting, characters, character arcs, point of view, conflict and resolution. The central conflicts discussed in the film are: man versus man, man versus himself, man versus society and man versus nature.

Within the film, Amy Winehouse goes on an internal and external journey. Winehouse has always wanted to be a professional singer since she was a child. But, at the start of the film, Winehouse believed she wanted to sing and be rich and famous. This belief resulted in Winehouse signing a new artist contract and a record deal with a huge recording label, Island Records. Winehouse was a singer and performer before these deals: she had written songs for years and performed in small venues before being signed. But, when a friend offered Winehouse studio time to create a demo, Winehouse made a choice to seek fame and fortune in addition to a singing career. By the end of the film, Winehouse learns she did not want fame or fortune. Amy learns all she wanted was to sing and make music in the way she had been doing it before signing a record deal. Amy also learns she has boundaries: she only wants her close friends in her life, she needs privacy, and she needs to get her addictions and bulimia under control. At one point in the film while in a rehab facility, Winehouse states, "I quite like it here." Within a week of her death, Winehouse states, "If I could give it all back to just walk out that door unnoticed, I would." But, by the end of the film, Winehouse has become so famous, she can't turn back the clock on her fame, fortune, global recognition and transformed personal and professional

relationships. A confidant believes Winehouse used drugs and alcohol to try to disappear from the fame and exposure.

The inciting incident is the record deal with Island Records. If Winehouse hadn't made this deal (or if this record deal wasn't offered to her), her life and the film may have turned out differently. While with Island Records, Winehouse writes *Back to Black*. The international success of this album placed Winehouse within a deadly, perfect storm.

The climax of the film occurs in 2006, when Winehouse is launched into international fame with award winning album *Back to Black*. From this point, over the next five years, Winehouse's life goes downhill, then ends in her death from alcohol poisoning.

Several characters in the film note Winehouse metaphorically lost her life after she wrote *Back to Black*. The moment is foreshadowed throughout the film by confidants and Winehouse. At the start of the film, Winehouse states, "I couldn't handle being famous. I'd go mad." In the film, a number of characters state if the album hadn't been made, Winehouse may still be alive today. The success of the album placed Winehouse in an eclectic stratosphere whereby people were doing everything for her, she was extraordinarily rich, an antagonistic paparazzi and media were permanent fixtures in her life and, aside from a bodyguard, there was no one in Winehouse's personal life who set boundaries for Winehouse – not even Winehouse. During this act, Winehouse's drug and alcohol addiction and bulimia is enabled. Winehouse's friends, Lauren Gilbert, Juliette Ashby and Nick Shymansky, try to convince Winehouse's handlers to take Winehouse to rehab. (Gilbert, Ashby and Shymansky are protagonists throughout the film. They are vehicles who, by their relationship with Winehouse, project an innocent, non-celebrity,

child-like image onto Amy Winehouse.) Her handlers point out high level executives can function on drugs and alcohol, so Winehouse can function on it too.

The film explores several, central themes. A list of some of these themes is below:

- family relationships (mother-daughter, father-daughter, the influence of strong, mother figures on families, and the effect the absence of fathers has on families),
- dysfunctional child-parent relationships, and its lasting effect upon children,
- the loss of innocence,
- coming of age,
- women, self-esteem, self-identity and self-determination and how these elements intertwine,
- the stigmatization of addiction and bulimia in society,
- the adverse effects of normalizing public ridicule of celebrities suffering from addiction and disease,
- celebrity and fame, its role in modern society, and the effects of celebrity on the individual, and
- the effect of the cultural normalization of alcohol and drug abuse and addiction within celebrity and non-celebrity populations.

The filmmakers brilliantly structure the story using only archival material, new audio interviews, Winehouse's music as well as Winehouse's lyrics superimposed on screen. It's an

effective way to tell this story. With the exception of two acquired clips, there are no talking head interviews within the entire 127 minutes of the film. The film appears to be shot in cinéma vérité, but, remarkably, Kapadia did not shoot footage for this film. The way Kapadia, King and Gay-Rees constructed the film is a dramatic departure from traditional documentary formats.

Using content and tone, the film's central message is Amy Winehouse is a child struggling with addiction. The documentary has an editorial slant. Home video is deftly used to build the perception Winehouse's struggles with addiction, bulimia and self-abuse are the result of a confluence of negative events, beginning with the dysfunctional childhood Winehouse never outgrew. The filmmakers' build a tone of hope and positivity with largely uplifting music mixed into the film, including tracks recorded by Winehouse. The filmmakers encourage the viewer to maintain a posture of non-judgment and compassion toward Winehouse with these techniques. The viewer is repeatedly and sympathetically introduced to the interior world of Amy Winehouse – the vulnerable adolescent and young woman. Within home videos, close friends and an ailing grandmother provide visual testimony about Winehouse's quality characteristics, drawing empathy from the viewer. Mitch and Janis Winehouse, Blake Fielder-Civil and individuals in the music industry are depicted as antagonists responsible, in part, for Winehouse's death. The villainizing of these individuals generates additional sympathy for Winehouse. The film positively uplifts Winehouse's character and skillfully restores her humanity.

There are several events and major plot points driving the film forward. These events and plot points revolve around Winehouse's life and include her:

- dysfunctional childhood,

- rising, musical career,
- poor self-esteem,
- immaturity and naivety as a young adult,
- inability to care for herself,
- struggles with addiction, bulimia and self-harm, and
- her complex relationships with Mitch Winehouse, Janis Winehouse, Blake Fielder-Civil, the recording industry, the media, the public and the fan base.

Since the documentary is structured like a film, it similarly contains beats like those seen in cinematic films. The beats within *Amy* are listed below:

- Mitch Winehouse leaves home and never returns. As a direct result, Amy Winehouse suffers from depression, emotional problems, and bulimia. She copes by teaching herself to play guitar.
- Winehouse gets a record deal with Island Records.
- Winehouse moves to her own flat in Camden and meets Blake Fielder-Civil.
- Fielder-Civil introduces Winehouse to heroine and crack. Together, they enable self-destructive behaviors and addictions within each other.
- Winehouse nearly dies from an overdose. Winehouse consults with her father, Mitch Winehouse, on whether she needs treatment. Mitch Winehouse tells Amy Winehouse she doesn't need rehab. Amy Winehouse leaves rehab.

- Amy Winehouse almost loses her record deal with Island Records.
- Amy Winehouse writes and records *Back to Black*. She quickly accelerates to international fame and celebrity.
- Fielder-Civil is arrested and jailed.
- Winehouse stops abusing drugs. She continues to struggle with alcoholism and bulimia.
- Fielder-Civil files for divorce.
- Amy Winehouse dies from alcohol poisoning and bulimia.

Since *Amy* was produced after Winehouse's death, viewers are aware of how the film will end. But, the film maintains its suspense through the use of unseen footage and through a narrative style that visually introduces the viewer to an Amy Winehouse the viewer has never seen.

The visual and scripted narrative is structured to utilize fiction film conventions. These conventions include: suspense, contrasting points of view, rising action, climax, falling action, dramatic tension, turning points, foreshadowing, tone, denouement as well as an epilogue through montage. Additional fiction film conventions the filmmakers use include: raising stakes, subtext, comedy, scene twists and turns, dialogue, building exposition and structuring the film so the ending is in the beginning. For example, in the beginning of the film, Winehouse states she, "Could never be a celebrity because she would go mad." In the first act, as early as adolescence, Winehouse struggles with emotional disorders, bulimia and drug and alcohol addiction. In the

first act, Winehouse complains about her need for boundaries. She similarly complained her mom needed to be tougher on her. A lack of boundaries, breaking boundaries and not setting boundaries is a theme in Winehouse's life. Winehouse's struggle with boundaries in the first act foreshadows her demise from the lack of boundaries in the third act.

As a child, Winehouse demonstrates a propensity to break rules: in her mother's home, Winehouse is drinking, doing drugs and she is sexually active. Janis Winehouse states she, "...couldn't control Amy," and allowed Winehouse's bad behavior to continue unchecked. It's no surprise Winehouse's abusive and destructive behavior escalates when she moves into her own home in Camden. Winehouse consistently demonstrates emotional immaturity. Winehouse's friends state Winehouse needed her grandmother in her life because the grandmother would set boundaries, confront Winehouse and tell Winehouse to, "pack it in." Although they are children themselves, Winehouse relied on Shymansky, Ashby and Gilbert to set boundaries for her by restricting her drug use, cleaning her up after binges, and repeatedly taking her into rehab. During the first and second acts, Winehouse begins to lose the perception of acceptable boundaries. By the third act, Winehouse's parents, her friends and the record industry (for the most part) don't provide boundaries, Winehouse doesn't implement any, and she subsequently loses her life to excess.

The technique of weaving together contrasting points of view is used throughout the film. This technique elucidates Winehouse's life and her complex relationships with her parents and with her partner Blake Fielder-Civil. Her relationship with music, the music industry, fame and celebrity is also depicted using contrasting viewpoints. Specific examples of the use of contrast and contrasting viewpoints are listed below:

- Winehouse's career is rising, but her personal life and health is miserably failing.
- Winehouse is a wealthy, successful celebrity, but she is belittled and verbally abused by paparazzi, fans and international media.
- Winehouse has substantial financial power and influence as a celebrity, yet she exhibits an inability to use her power to positively control and guide her own life.
- Negative changes in Fielder-Civil and Winehouse's relationship result in Winehouse abusing herself. Each time Fielder-Civil ended the relationship, Winehouse spiraled into drug abuse and self-harm.
- After Amy Winehouse is signed as a new artist, Mitch Winehouse states Amy Winehouse, "...doesn't need rehab." A few years later, after Winehouse receives a sizable, record deal, Mitch Winehouse states, "There is nothing I can do to help Amy because it's her responsibility to seek treatment."
- Following one of Winehouse's near overdoses, some of Winehouse's handlers do not encourage Winehouse to go into rehab. Instead, they say high level executives and celebrities function well while on drugs. But, due to her consistent inebriation, management at Winehouse's record label refuses to allow her to attend the Grammys. The label threatens to drop Winehouse if she doesn't sober up.
- Winehouse's personal friends unsuccessfully attempt to get Winehouse to commit to a rehabilitation program. Winehouse's colleagues in the music industry acknowledge she is an addict and needs treatment, but they do not place her in a program -- nor do they restrict her use of drugs or alcohol.

Within the epilogue, the filmmakers conclude the film with a visual coda to Amy Winehouse. The filmmakers use powerful, playful, and child-like images of Amy Winehouse. After the shot of Winehouse in the body bag, the film cuts to a shot of a young Winehouse waking from sleep. She appears innocent, joyful and naïve. She looks as if she's waking from sleep and the film has been a bad dream. The strategic placement of this shot emotionally fulfills the viewer's internal desire for Winehouse to be alive and well. It is cathartic. By this point in the film, Winehouse is the viewer's friend. She has won the viewers' sympathy and compassion. The filmmakers end the film by humanizing Winehouse. The filmmakers dissociate the audience from "Amy Winehouse the mega-celebrity persona." The imagery reminds the viewer Winehouse was a child, a friend, and a daughter in tremendous pain and in need of guardianship.

Amy (2015) is a testament to the powerful illusions behind celebrity and fame, and the lethal effects the celebrity industry can have upon vulnerable populations. Amy Winehouse was a young woman who lost her life and the public perception of the true nature of her character within that space. The filmmakers artfully and gracefully restore it. The first and last images in the film are of youthful images of Amy Winehouse as a teenager, before her rise to fame occurs. Winehouse's parents, Mitch and Janice appear at the beginning and the end of the film, which is also the beginning and end of Winehouse's life. This cinematic placement of Winehouse's parents is an intentional tool symbolic of birth and death. The filmmakers have also bookended the film with content that matches the central theme of the film: innocence and innocence lost. This style of structuring was done deliberately. The filmmakers want the viewer to visually and emotionally begin and end the film as a friend to the real Amy Winehouse.

References

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Amy. Dir. Asif Kapadia. Perfs. Amy Winehouse, Lauren Gilbert, Juliette Ashby, Nick Shymansky, Tyler James, Guy Moot, Chris Taylor, Nick Gatfield, Ian Barter, Garry Mulholland, Jonathan Ross, Janis Winehouse, Mitch Winehouse, Sam Beste, Bobby Womack, Blake Fielder-Civil, Cynthia Winehouse et al. A24, 2015. DVD.

Gay-Rees, James, Producer, Kapadia, Asif, Director, and Chris King, Editor. *Amy*. Film4 in association with On The Corner Films. Distributed in the USA by A24, July 3, 2015.