

## Documentary Lens Lesson Plan for *23 Skidoo*

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### Curriculum Connections

*23 Skidoo* is an 8-minute film made in 1964 by director Julian Biggs. It is a cautionary tale of a modern city whose inhabitants have been wiped out by a neutron bomb.

### Lesson Objectives

This lesson is for high school students studying 20th century history and social studies, especially units on the Cold War between the USSR and the USA. There are cross-curricular opportunities in Language Arts (particularly media literacy), Political Science, Sociology and Filmmaking.

Students first explore the threat of a neutron bomb and how filmmakers create a film to address such concerns. Students then analyze the director's message, his attitude towards his subject and the techniques he uses. Finally, students use that analysis to plan a documentary film about an issue of concern to their local, national or global community.

### Canadian Social Studies Themes in *23 Skidoo*

Theme/Strand/ Key Concept	Connections to <i>23 Skidoo</i> –Discussion Points/Guided Questions
Citizenship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What responsibility do you have, as a citizen, to explore issues that involve threats to the safety of your local, national and global communities?</li> <li>• How can you use various media to sensitize people to threats to their security?</li> <li>• How do documentary films help citizens make responsible decisions?</li> </ul>
Multiple Perspectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• As a Canadian living in the 21st century, how do you react to the message of this film from the Cold War era?</li> <li>• How do you think Canadians would have reacted in 1964?</li> <li>• How can a documentary film give audiences a fresh perspective on an issue?</li> </ul>
Power, Authority, Governance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What response can citizens make when their country is in danger from threats such as those of the Cold War?</li> <li>• How can people influence their country's involvement in arms races like the one that took place during the Cold War?</li> </ul>
The Land: Places and People	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How does this film portray the positive and negative effects of human actions on the physical environment?</li> <li>• What is the film's message about the uses to which people put technologies?</li> </ul>
Global Connections	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How might this film have increased awareness of the threat of nuclear war?</li> <li>• What global threats face people today? What global issues need to be kept</li> </ul>

Theme/Strand/ Key Concept	Connections to <i>23 Skidoo</i> –Discussion Points/Guided Questions
Time, Continuity and Change	<p>in the forefront of people’s consciousness?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What military and environmental threats did Canadians face in the 1960s? What conflicts beyond our borders caused those threats?</li> <li>• What global threats do Canadians face today? What conflicts beyond Canada’s borders threaten Canadians’ well-being today?</li> <li>• How are the threats today different from those portrayed in <i>23 Skidoo</i>? How are they the same?</li> </ul>

### Assessment Strategies

There are a number of assessment opportunities in this lesson: a) anecdotal, b) observation checklists for full-class and small-group cooperative work (Activities 1 and 2), c) assessing student worksheets (Activities 2 and 3) and d) establishing rubrics or peer assessment checklists with students for oral presentations (Activity 3).

### Materials and Resources

- At the Documentary Lens Web site, go to the “Behind the Camera” link, and view the “What is a documentary?” section of this interactive feature. Of particular interest for this lesson are the sections “Poetic documentaries” and “Preparing to Film” (especially “Getting the Plan on Paper”) <http://www.nfb.ca/>
- Background and context on the Cold War: “Cold War Culture: The Nuclear Fear of the 1950s and 1960s” at CBC Archives Web site (Cuban missile crisis of 1962) [http://archives.cbc.ca/IDD-1-71-274/conflict\\_war/cold\\_war/](http://archives.cbc.ca/IDD-1-71-274/conflict_war/cold_war/)
- Other films directed by Julian Biggs are available from NFB. These may be useful in Social Studies, History and Language Arts courses: *Are People Sheep?* (1956), *Journey from Etsa* (1958), *Let's Talk about Films* (1953) and *Three Apprentices* (1963).

### Activities for *23 Skidoo*

#### Background

Today’s students think of the word “skidoo” as a snowmobile produced by Bombardier. Explain that in the film title, *23 Skidoo* is American slang from the 1920s that means “go away quickly.”

This Canadian film was made in 1964 during the Cold War when the nuclear arms race between the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and the United States was at its height. Canada was in a precarious position: the shortest distance between the two superpowers was over our country. Either the USSR or the USA could have launched missiles carrying nuclear warheads over Canada.

Neutron bombs, a development of nuclear weaponry, were supposed to kill humans and animals but leave buildings intact. People who didn’t die immediately would eventually die of radiation poisoning. In 1964 such bombs were only in the talking and planning stages, but they were actually developed in the 1970s.

### Introductory Activity 1: Documentaries as Warnings

#### Step 1

First, read aloud the Background note to the class. Then, before students watch *23 Skidoo*, brainstorm the following:

- What would have been the effect if a neutron bomb had exploded in a Canadian city?
- How do you think the threat of such a bomb would have affected people across Canada?
- What issues and concerns would people have faced during the years when neutron bombs were being developed?

Write the class's responses on the board or on chart paper so that everyone can refer to them as the lesson progresses.

## Step 2

Ask students to write a brief response to the following:

- If you had been a filmmaker in the 1960s, how would you have warned Canadians about the threat of neutron bombs?
- As a filmmaker, your goal would have been to create a persuasive film that left a lasting impact on your audience. How would you have achieved this goal?

Ask student to keep their response to these questions on hand as they watch and analyze *23 Skidoo*.

## Developing Concepts Activity 2: Analyzing Filmmakers' Purpose and Techniques

Before students watch *23 Skidoo*, read them the following excerpt, which is from an article by filmmakers Michael Grigsby and Nicolas McClintock:

It is extremely important for us to be clear about what we're trying to say, why we're trying to say it, and then work out a way to say it. . . Half of what a documentary is can be more about your attitude to the subject than the subject itself.  
("The State We're In," *Dox*, Summer, 1995, pp. 6-10; quoted in "Behind the Camera: What Is a Documentary?")

## Step 1

Students will need to view this 8-minute film at least twice (and probably more often). During their first viewing, ask them to take quick notes on their initial impressions about the subject and message of this film:

- What is the film about?
- What is the director's main message? How does he convey it?
- What is the filmmaker's attitude towards his subject?
- What impact or effect does the film have on you?

## Step 2

During their second (and subsequent) viewing, ask students to use **Worksheet A: Shooting Plan** or **Worksheet B: Storyboard**. If students are not familiar with these tools, you may want to explain how filmmakers use storyboards and shooting plans. The following descriptions are taken from NFB's "Behind the Camera" section called "Preparing to Film: Getting the Plan on Paper" (see Resources section above)

On a **storyboard**, the director (and others) draw out a movie shot by shot, as a kind of comic strip. Notes describe dialogue and sound as well as camera movement. Storyboards work best for fully scripted films, where the director has a very particular vision. Documentary filmmakers rarely use storyboards. The exception is a documentary that includes re-creations, like a docu-drama, where the filmmaker may use a storyboard just like a fiction filmmaker to ensure that the sequence comes out exactly as planned.

More commonly, the documentary filmmaker will create a **shooting plan** that describes the sequences as a preliminary guide for shooting. Some filmmakers also

explain the purposes of each sequence, or what they will contribute to the development of the film's story. . . .

In creating the shooting plan, the filmmaker considers the arc of the film. We expect works of art to have the shape of a drama, which means that there should be a rising sense of tension or excitement as the film progresses, then a resolution of some kind to reach a decision or new understanding, or solve the conflict. Even though documentaries portray real life, we still expect the “artistic treatment” to satisfy our age-old expectations of how a story works.

### Step 3

Working either alone or in small groups, have students note, on their worksheet, how the filmmaker’s choice—and sequencing—of visual and sound images convey his message. The following questions may help:

- What images does the filmmaker use? (For example, city streets early in the film, empty playground swings near the end.)
- What sequence does the filmmaker use? What “rising sense of tension” is evident? (For example, the moving shots of the suburbs come first in the film before the still shots of downtown streets; the early shots seem impersonal, the later shots of a pillow and a child’s toy are more personal.)
- From what perspective or vantage point do we see those images and in what sequence? (For example, the opening scenes seem to be taken from a fast-moving vehicle. The office scenes seem to be from the vantage point of someone walking through the rooms.)
- What are the different sounds used? How do the sounds change as the film progresses? (For example, early in the film there are sounds of engines; later there is a choir and a theatre audience laughing; towards the end there is the voice of a small child.)
- What is the purpose of these visual and sound images and their sequence in the film? (For example, the more personal, human images and sounds appear after the film’s audience has seen the teletype message. Students may suggest that this sequence increases the sense of foreboding or loss.)

### Step 4

When students have filled in their worksheet, ask them to write a summary paragraph explaining which technique, sequence, or scene they found to be most effective. How did their selected element help the filmmaker get across his message about the threat of a neutron bomb?

### Application Activity 3: Planning a Documentary

In *23 Skidoo*, viewers are invited to see their familiar world—of homes, airports, cars and streets, parks and theatres—with new eyes. The filmmaker rearranged the normal elements of life to deliver a powerful and stark warning.

In this activity, students create a plan for a documentary based on a current issue that they see as a threat to their health, welfare, quality of life, and/or security on a local, national or international level.

Your students may find different sections of “Behind the Camera: Preparing to Film” helpful. For example, “Decisions, Decisions,” “Deciding the Approach,” and “Getting the Plan on Paper.”

### Step 1

You may want to hold an open class discussion about current issues that concern students. Depending on your course of studies, you could have students focus on particular curricular themes or topics.

Students may choose to use one of the two worksheets to plan their documentary. Or they may choose to use a different kind of chart or graphic organizer: for example, a map detailing movement through different locales within the film.

## **Step 2**

As students plan their documentary, the following questions may help:

- What message do you want your documentary film to convey?
- What images will you use to convey the message? In what sequence?
- Will you use a narrator? Will you use human actors and dialogue?
- From what perspective will the audience view the images?
- How will you create rising tension? What kind of resolution will the film have: a decision, a new understanding, a conflict settled?
- What sounds will you use? What mood will the sounds evoke? How will the sound contribute to the overall impact?
- How will the combined elements serve the purpose you want to achieve? How will you get across your specific message to the intended audience?

## **Step 3**

Have students prepare a brief oral presentation for their classmates explaining:

- a) why their film's message is important to their community, and
- b) how their film would convey their desired message to their intended audience.

### Worksheet A: Shooting Plan

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_  
Film Title \_\_\_\_\_

Location	Sequence Description	Purpose of Sequence in Film



## Worksheet B: Storyboard

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Film Title \_\_\_\_\_



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