

# Good example of stranger with a camera: reflection essay argumentative essay

[Sociology](#), [Poverty](#)



## **Introduction**

Stranger with a camera is a documentary film directed by Elizabeth Barret in 2000 that tries to shed some light to the murder of Canadian television journalist, Hugh O'Connor, in 1967, at Lecher County, Kentucky. O'Connor was shot by a coal miner named Hobart Ison, when he was trying to document poverty and living conditions in Appalachia, and interviewed Ison's house, without Ison been there at the time. When Ison arrived, he asked O'Connor and his crew to move away from his house and when they did, he shot O'Connor to death.

In this documentary Barret investigates the circumstances around O'Connor's death from a different angle. She does not take sides or puts judgment on Ison, as one might expect. She was more interested to see both sides of the same story and analyze the difference between how people see their place and how others represent it. And, from what it seems, she has managed to present convincing arguments by interviewing a number of people coming from a variety of social classes in Kentucky, and people that knew O'Connor.

## **Summary**

Back in 1967, Hugh O'Connor, a Canadian filmmaker was hired to direct a film that showcased the " American Dream", as it was depicted in a number of ways and communities, including both healthy and prosperous, and troubled ones. O'Connor wanted to show not only the numerous achievements of specific counties, but also another, sad, side of the same coin: an America where people were nothing close to living the American

Dream, as it has been defined at that time.

For the purposes of his survey, O'Connor had to travel to Lecher County, Kentucky, and see through what was called a "War on Property", a legislation introduced by President Lyndon, in 1964, according to which 19 percent of Americans have been living in poverty and were in need of massive economic and social reform to fight poverty (Weisbrod). In the American history, Appalachia, a region located east of Kentucky, was a representative example of a community that has been living far away the American Dream, struggling to survive poverty. The fact that Appalachia was a region economically exploited, due to its coal mines came to the light of publicity by a Kentucky lawyer, namely Harry Caudill, which is probably what urged O'Connor to film this place.

Obviously, all the sudden attention to their area, made many residents of Appalachia thankful, as they wanted the world to know about an America that was moving in two different speeds. However, there were many residents, both poor and rich, that were not at all happy with the fact that their area was becoming known to the world as a poverty-stricken region, where living conditions were miserable. There were businessmen and professionals in the area, as well as poor people that didn't like that sudden attention of so many "saviors" trying to save them from getting hungry and hungrier. IT was like a deep offence to them to be shown as poor people. Like Barret said in the documentary, "Many factors, including social status, influence how people see the place they live and what they want others to see". Among those that were opposed to the media's attention, including O'Connor's presence in his property, was Hobart Ison, who finally shot

O'Connor and killed him, when O'Connor was filming his family, among the many mining families living in shacks.

## **Analysis**

Elizabeth Barret, the filmmaker of *Stranger with a Camera*, was born and raised in east Kentucky, the area that was poverty stricken during the 1960s. She tries to explore the intense emotions that actually armed Ison's hand to fire at O'Connor and how things have changed, if at all, now. She is the narrator of her film and rolls out personal memories from her own childhood and adolescence, while she was growing up, in a middle class family. Her life, as she describes it in the film, has been fun and enjoyable; yet, the media has shadowed them, when her region was only shown for its poverty and hunger. To her, the media played a significant role in how people see other people. This is something that became more apparent when she began her studies in a local media arts center that taught how one can document and film their own culture.

Barret narrates that " Media images can bring powerful and conflicting emotions" and the outcome of those conflicting emotions, she believes, led Ison kill O'Connor. Truth is, a poor mountain man felt unable to defend his property, his land, when O'Connor decided to interview his family for their - poor- living conditions. Ison could not find his place in the American Dream as the media has passed it on to him through the years. Media images and the role they play in society are demonstrated via a number of well-spoken and eloquent interviews that go back and forth expressing a wide array of perspectives and opinions on the matter. O' Connor was presented by the

people that knew him, as a man with high sensitivity that would not insult another person in any way, and a filmmaker that wanted to show real life, exposing both the good and bad sides within a society. Appalachia was a region where citizens have been economically exploited and living in undervalued conditions, and O'Connor wanted the world to know it and become motivated, perhaps, towards the extinction of this situation. Instead, media image has managed to motivate crime and made Ison feel he had to defend his private life and property, somehow. It seemed that, for a variety of reasons, people of Appalachia were angered by the presence of the media, including wealthy landowners.

Barret's filmmaking managed to showcase opposing viewpoints to her own, in regards the crime that had taken place in the area she grew up, and enhance her documentary with some videos O'Connor's had filmed, while in Appalachia. It is interesting to note what comes out of the interviews of local people and what they thought of the murder: there was a strange unity among them and it seemed that the majority, if not all, believed Ison was just defending his own, and consequently the entire region's, reputation. The world could not see how miserably they were living. However, O'Connor's filmmaking was noting alike with others that only focused on showing the ugliness of poverty and hunger. Instead, he also showed moments of fun and happiness, alongside many local traditions and cultural aspects of the Appalachian people. It convinces the viewer that when it comes to the struggles of the times period, they affected not only the Appalachian people, but they also affected the photographers and filmmakers. Barret has managed to make a more spherical approach to the issue discussed, which is

appreciated by her audience. One-sided, shallow filmmaking makes people either fanatics, or rejecting to further watch, out of their personal beliefs. Neither is beneficial when a director wants to let the truth shine.

## **Personal Reflection**

Like Barret said, “ Can filmmakers show poverty without shaming the people we portray? I came to see that there was a complex relationship between social action and social embarrassment”, I also believe that the key point when approaching a societal problem is to do so with extreme care. People feel shame for exposing their lives and been finger-pointed as poor.

What added more richness to the film was the fact that Barret had not only interviewed the crew, producers, local people, Ison’s lawyer, local journalists and the coal miner O’Connor was filming back then, but also included footage from a magazine account of the crime in Appalachia in New Yorker, as well as War on Poverty film clips. Also, the contrast of black and white, and colored videos made the film more interesting.

In its essence, the Stranger with a Camera is a deep analysis of the media power and how it affects the lives of the people it focuses on. Undoubtedly, there is not only good or bad In O’Connor’s case. Barret has showed that the media can do both good and bad at the same time: the world could get motivated by seeing, rather than reading or listening, about poverty-stricken areas, but, on the other hand, people living in those areas might feel ashamed by others seeing about it, especially if they are rich and wealthy.

## **Conclusion**

Barret's documentary has demonstrated the power of the media and how media image can significantly affect people's lives. Some people feel ashamed to be exposed for their poor social status, while others are ashamed to be seen as part of a generalized lousy situation that affects their region, yet not them personally. Barret was against the crime that took place, but she also understood the reasons behind it, which is has showcased in her film. She tried to include both sides of the same coin and eventually make the world understand that everybody trying to help with a camera at hand, was nothing but a Stranger with a Camera.

## **Works Cited:**

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Weisbrod, Burton, ed (1965). The economics of poverty: an American paradox. Englewood Cliffs, N. J. : Prentice-Hall