



Paralympic Education Program



Rising Phoenix: A Study Guide – English

Introduction

Rising Phoenix (2020), directed by Ian Bonhôte and Peter Ettedgui, is a Netflix original documentary that tells the story of how the Paralympic Games have become the third biggest sporting competition in the world. This feature-length documentary follows nine elite athletes as they reflect on how the Paralympic Games have impacted a global understanding of disability, diversity, and excellence.

The documentary is rated M for moderate course language.

Resources

- A copy of the documentary, [Rising Phoenix](#), available on Netflix.
- Printed, colour copies of the promotional posters.
- Internet access for research and access to the official trailer.



Differentiation

- Teachers can modify the length and detail required in students' responses.
- Teachers might scaffold learning by modelling some activities first or completing as a class.
- Teachers can provide students with additional learning, including film/camera techniques, documentary styles and conventions.



Australian Curriculum Links

English

Year 9

- Understand that authors innovate with text structures and language for specific purposes and effects (ACELA1553)
- Analyse and explain the use of symbols, icons and myth in still and moving images and how these augment meaning (ACELA1560)
- Present an argument about a literary text based on initial impressions and subsequent analysis of the whole text (ACELT1771)
- Explore and reflect on personal understanding of the world and significant human experience gained from interpreting various representations of life matters in texts (ACELT1635)
- Analyse how the construction and interpretation of texts, including media texts, can be influenced by cultural perspectives and other texts (ACELY1739)

- Interpret, analyse and evaluate how different perspectives of issue, event, situation, individuals or groups are constructed to serve specific purposes in texts (ACELY1742)
- Use comprehension strategies to interpret and analyse texts, comparing and evaluating representations of an event, issue, situation or character in different texts (ACELY1744)
- Explore and explain the combinations of language and visual choices that authors make to present information, opinions and perspectives in different texts (ACELY1745)

Year 10

- Compare the purposes, text structures and language features of traditional and contemporary texts in different media (ACELA1566)
- Evaluate the impact on audiences of different choices in the representation of still and moving images (ACELA1572)
- Compare and evaluate a range of representations of individuals and groups in different historical, social and cultural contexts (ACELT1639)
- Analyse and explain how text structures, language features and visual features of texts and the context in which texts are experienced may influence audience response (ACELT1641)
- Evaluate the social, moral and ethical positions represented in texts (ACELT1812)
- Analyse and evaluate how people, cultures, places, events, objects and concepts are represented in texts, including media texts, through language, structural and/or visual choices (ACELY1749)
- Identify and analyse implicit or explicit values, beliefs and assumptions in texts and how these are influenced by purposes and likely audiences (ACELY1752)



Teaching and Learning Activities

1

Before watching the documentary

- Before telling the students anything about what they are about to watch, in small groups, give each group one of the film posters used to promote the film. These can be found on the internet. Guide students through a see, think, wonder strategy as they predict what the film might be about and what themes or issues it might explore.
- Using a think, pair, share strategy, ask students what they know about the Paralympic Games.
- Use the internet to research the Paralympic Games and the athletes featured in the documentary. Ryley Batt and Ellie Cole are two Australian athletes who appear in the documentary. Students can find out more about these two athletes by reading their profile here. The International Paralympic Committee also has some information and videos on the history of the Paralympic Games.
- Watch the trailer and/or official lyric video to introduce the documentary.

2

First impressions

- Guide students through a visible thinking routine to explore their initial impressions or summary of the film. These routines would work well for this:
 - Colour, Symbol, Image
 - Headlines
 - Word, Phrase, Sentence

After students have had a chance to think about their own perception of the film. A strategy such as The 4 C's could be used to stimulate a more in-depth response to the film.

- As a class or in small groups, discuss whether students agree or disagree with the following statements about the film and why. This could also be done physically by placing agree/disagree signs on either side of the classroom and having students move to the side they align with.

Statements

“There is absolutely no doubt that this film will transform every single person who watches it. This is a film that will empower so many people around the world and further bring to life the vision of the Paralympic Movement’s founder Sir Ludwig Guttman.” – **Andrew Parsons (IPC President)**

“People are going to start supporting Paralympics, people are going to start knowing what the Paralympics are, so it’s going to be a good platform for everyone in the Paralympics.” - **Ntando Mahlangu (South African Paralympian)**

““Rising Phoenix,” stacked with hero-worship, suffers from a lack of depth. Complicated topics, like the fraught relationship between the Paralympics and the Olympics, which take place in the same facilities but can receive uneven attention, are skimmed or skirted. And the highlighted athletes – to use the Avengers metaphor – appear far too much as Spiderman, rarely as Peter Parker.”

– **The New York Times**

3

Understanding the film

a) The documentary features nine athletes:

- Bebe Vio (Italy)
- Ellie Cole (Australia)
- Jean-Baptiste Alaize (France)
- Matt Stutzman (USA)
- Jonnie Peacock (Great Britain)
- Cui Zhe (China)
- Ryley Batt (Australia)
- Ntando Mahlangu (South Africa)
- Tatyana McFadden (USA)

For each of the following featured athletes,

- identify their sport.
 - describe their disability and how it was acquired.
 - summarise some of their main successes and challenges.
- b) Who is Sir Ludwig Guttman and how does he relate to the Paralympic Movement?
- c) What were the Stoke Mandeville Games?

- d) Describe how the local government and public received and prepared for the London 2012 and Rio 2016 Paralympic Games.
- e) What is the purpose of including Prince Harry in this documentary?
- f) There are a few references to Ancient Greek mythology. For example, the film's title 'Rising Phoenix' and the use of statues made to look like Ancient Greek Gods. Why do you think these references have been included and what meaning do they add to the film?
- g) What have you learnt about the Paralympic Games from watching this documentary? Go back to your brainstorm, or Think, Pair, Share, worksheet and add in what you have learnt.
- h) What are some of the main messages or themes in the documentary?
- i) Who do you think is the target audience for this documentary and what do you think is the directors' overall purpose for making this documentary?



4

Close reading

Below are some questions to guide an analysis of key scenes. Teachers could show students the specific scene, then on a second or third viewing, stop at specific moments to discuss the questions below. Times are approximate.

Opening sequence and title credits**(0:00:00 – 0:02:12)**

- What is the purpose of discussing superheros? What tone does it set for the documentary?
- We first see images of statues which are repeated throughout the film. Using the following terms, describe what you see on the screen:
 - Montage
 - Low-key lighting
 - Extreme close-up
 - Zoom out
 - Medium shot
 - Fade to black
- Describe the soundtrack that plays during the first shots of the athletes. How does this music make you feel?
- Camera movement such as zooming and panning is used in many shots during the opening montage. Why do you think the directors have chosen to use these techniques?
- The opening montage cuts between close-up shots and medium to long shots. What is the effect of each shot and what is the effect of cutting quickly between these shot types on the same athlete?
- We again see the statues just before the title credits. How do the images of the statues and the accompanying music make you feel?

**Introducing Ellie Cole (0:10:45 – 0:15:36)**

- What is the technique called when documentaries use video footage from the past? What is the purpose of including this type of footage?
- Look at how Ellie Cole is positioned when she is speaking directly to the camera. Look at the background, her outfit, the camera angle and shot type. Discuss why you think the director's made these choices? How does it compare or contrast to other images we see of Ellie throughout the film?
- The film quickly cuts from Ellie Cole diving into the Paralympic pool to a dreamlike underwater sequence. Why has the director included these shots of Ellie swimming underwater?
- Describe the underwater shots. You might like to use some of the following terms:
 - Low key lighting
 - Deep focus
 - Costume
 - Close-up shot
 - Long shot
 - Non-diegetic sound

- e) When Ellie starts talking to the camera about her cancer, a close up shot is used. Why? What is the effect of this type of shot?
- f) Archival footage is used again of Ellie as a child. How does seeing this footage make you feel?
- g) How does the accompanying soundtrack help to create meaning?

Sir Ludwig Guttmann (0:29:00 – 0:33:43)

- a) How does Sir Ludwig Guttmann’s Jewish heritage link to the challenges faced by people with a disability?
- b) What themes of the documentary are introduced or reinforced by exploring Guttmann’s history?
- c) Consider the techniques the directors use to tell us about Guttmann – archival footage, his daughter’s direct interviews, his own retelling, the soundtrack. How do these techniques combine to tell the story? How does it make you feel?

The origins of the Paralympic Games (0:41:50 – 0:46:30)

- a) Listen to how the music changes when we see footage of Guttmann working with patients at Stoke Mandeville Hospital. Describe the music and its effects on the audience.
- b) Guttmann’s voiceover says, “Paraplegia is not the end of the way, it is a beginning of a new life”. How does this link to the film’s title and overall themes?
- c) On-screen text is used throughout the film. In this case it gives the name of an event and date, other times it introduces an athlete. Describe how this text looks, for example, positioning on the screen, size. Why do you think the directors have made these choices?
- d) Watch the montage from the Stoke Mandeville Games to the Beijing 2008 Games. Describe the shots selected, the music and the voice over. What is the effect of these techniques combined and what is the purpose of this montage?

Bebe Vio’s (wheelchair fencer) gold medal (1:31:50 – 1:37:59)

- a) When the athletes are competing, the directors chose to mirror the athlete’s same movements in a dreamlike re-enactment. Describe the re-enacted shots with Bebe Vio. Consider costume, lighting, setting, music and camera shots, angles, and movement. What is the purpose and effect of these shots?
- b) How is music used in this scene to build tension?
- c) There is a very quick shot of Bebe a few years earlier carrying the Paralympic torch. What is the purpose of including this shot?
- d) Using the terms diegetic and non-diegetic sound, describe what happens to the sound after Bebe win the match. What is the effect of this?

Statues

(1:17:59 – 1:18:51 and 1:41:00 – 1:41:43)

- a) What camera shot is used to show the statues cracking and breaking?
- b) What does the cracking and breaking of the statues symbolise?
- c) Compare the music, camera movement and cuts between the shots to how the statues were first shown at the start of the film. How are they different and/or similar and why?
- d) Why do you think the directors start and end the film with close-up shots of the statues?
- e) What is the effect of the final shot of all the statues together with the lighting flickering off on each?





Further Discussion Questions

1. Ryley Batt, Australian Wheelchair Basketballer and one of the featured athletes in the documentary said: “There’s still a bit of a perception among people that ‘Oh, you’re a Paralympian. Good on you for having a go’”. What do you think he means by this and why do you think people have this perception? What can we do as a society to challenge this perception?
2. What is meant by the ‘objectification of disability’? Does this film objectify disability to inspire people without disabilities? Why or why not?
3. Think about some of the language used in the film and the song featured in the end credits. Phrases such as “disabled person”, “persons with a disability”, “handicap”, “cripple” are used. What are some connotations associated with some of these words? Why, and how, has language changed over time? When is it appropriate to use certain phrases?
4. What are some unique issues the Paralympic Games face that the able-bodied sports and the Olympic Games might not face?
5. What perspectives or who’s voices do you think are missing, or omitted, from this documentary? Why?

