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definition → what are docs?!

Key words

commonly accepted modes or subtypes of documentary as a form, but first of all we need a working definition of the term 'documentary'. Documentary is, broadly speaking, a subcategory of nonfiction – it is a form that tells stories, makes assertions or observations about the real historical world, rather than the fabricated worlds of fiction. It is often believed that a documentary must use literal 'actuality' footage – images and sounds recorded as they happened – and it is certainly the case that a great many documentaries do rest on this foundation of things observed and recorded. However, it is entirely possible for a text to be considered a documentary, even if it consists predominantly of reconstructed or re-enacted scenes. (Of course, those documentaries that do function in this way have been labelled with some other name – e.g. drama-documentary – something we return to below.) Documentary, in this sense, is a very broad church; the key defining factor is that the film or programme in question makes assertions about the real world, and provides audio-visual evidence to back up such assertions. This 'assertive' stance and 'evidential' basis need not necessarily mean that documentaries are explicitly laid out as 'arguments' (as we shall see, this is the preserve of a specific kind of documentary, the expository). Documentaries can and do use a variety of techniques as fits their aims and purpose – explicit argument, more allusive or associative connections between things, dramatic reconstruction, and different levels of filmmaker 'intervention' in the reality they are interpreting.

The most useful delineation of documentary modes has been provided by Bill Nichols (2001). He identifies six modes 'that function something like sub-genres of the documentary film genre itself: poetic, expository, participatory, observational, reflexive, performative' (2001: 99). We briefly consider each of these in turn. The poetic mode will seem more allusive and use 'associative' editing to capture a mood or tone rather than make an explicit argument about a subject. The so-called 'city symphony' films, such as Walter Ruttmann's *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* (1927), Alberto Cavalcanti's surrealist portrait of Paris, *Rien que les heures* (1926) or Ron Fricke's epic environmental visual poem *Baraka* (1992) may all be seen as 'poetic' documentaries – they evoke a mood rather than stating or asserting things directly. Expository documentaries on the other hand do use explicitly rhetorical techniques in order to make points about aspects of actuality. The expository mode often uses voiceover and has a relatively straightforward

'show and tell' structure to guide the viewer through the material. Many television documentaries follow this template, where the voiceover provides the connection, the logic, between what might be disparate shots. Such films and programmes that are labelled expository are often didactic in nature - for example, the *Why We Fight* (1943-45) series of films about the Second World War 'tell the story' of the War (and make a case for US involvement) using voiceover and other expository techniques such as maps and diagrams. Such direct address may be contrasted with the observational mode, where the documentary appears to take a detached and thereby 'neutral' (or 'objective') stance towards its subject matter - overtly 'interpretive' techniques such as editorialising voiceover or music (which are common in other modes of documentary) are eschewed in favour of an apparent capturing of reality as it unfolds. The films of Frederick Wiseman are excellent examples of this mode in that Wiseman presents his material in a detached, observational style with no voiceover, thereby seeming to allow viewers to make up their own mind. The fact that Wiseman's subject matter is generally US institutions - for example, education in *High School* (1968), the military in *Basic Training* (1971) - gives this seeming detachment a cumulative power, rather than offering an obviously didactic viewpoint on what he is representing. Wiseman allows the people and situations shown to apparently 'speak for themselves'. However, it is possible to discern a critical 'voice' running through Wiseman's films; in his editing and shot decisions we can discern that even the seemingly detached observational mode involves choices. Juxtapositions and contrasts. The participatory (sometimes referred to as the 'interactive') is a documentary mode where the filmmaker does not remain aloof from the subject matter, but actively engages with it - by openly participating or interacting with the people and institutions on show. Michael Moore's first film for the cinema, *Roger and Me* (1989), exhibits many participatory characteristics: Moore is directly implicated in the subject matter (he is of course the 'me' of the title) and arguably many scenes would not unfold in the way they do without his specific participation. This results in a documentary form which is very far removed from the detached or straightforwardly didactic. The reflexive mode is a mode that attempts to offer a commentary on the means of representation itself. A reflexive documentary is a film which uses techniques that encourage the viewer to question the very idea of 'documentary' as a category or mode; this questioning can also lead to a critique of larger categories such as cinematic realism. For instance, in Errol Morris's *The Thin Blue Line* (1988), the story of a miscarriage of justice, the highly stylised reconstructions and repetitions of scenes from different viewpoints are reflexive strategies that Morris uses to encourage the viewer to think about relative levels of 'truth' and self-deception. Finally, the performative is a mode that raises all sorts of questions about filmmaker and subject 'performance' - not simply in the commonsense meaning of 'performing' in front of the camera (which is often referred to in the negative, as if it detracts from the essential truth of what is going on), but the notion of the filmmaker and their subjects actively creating the documentary by performing certain social actions. As Stella Bruzzi has noted, there are some documentaries that are 'given meaning by the interaction between performance and reality' (2000: 154); far from berating some documentaries for containing self-conscious performances, it follows here that such performances are actually central to this specific mode of documentary filmmaking. The films of Nick Broomfield are central to the performative mode, and are discussed below.

The most important thing to note about this typology of different modes is that it is constantly evolving. In addition, these modes are not mutually exclusive, and they can and do overlap across the history of documentary as a form, and co-exist, sometimes within the same documentary. It is entirely possible for a single documentary to use expository, poetic and observational techniques as suits its purpose at any one time. It is also important to remember that, despite some overviews of documentary (including this one) taking a roughly chronological form, this way of constructing history is precisely that - a construction. The vibrancy of documentary as a type of filmmaking resides in the

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crowd pleaser, or little or no interest to anyone but those who actually appear become an important social document. Again, though, it is in the creative juxtaposition of this footage with something else (the modern-day footage) that specific points are made.

THE SHIFT TO NARRATIVE STRUCTURE IN DOCUMENTARY

Despite their historical importance and the possibility that they can be read as 'proto-documentaries', however, such early film actualities lack the decisive creative shaping that distinguishes documentary from other forms of nonfictional filmmaking. It is in the dramatic narrative structures imposed on real material by a filmmaker such as Robert Flaherty (1884-1951) that we first see the move to a more immediately recognisable type of documentary form. Flaherty's work is often held up to be among the most influential of the early documentary filmmakers. Apart from anything else, films such as *Nanook of the North* (1922), *Moana* (1926) and *Man of Aran* (1934) were a huge influence on John Grierson, who went on to become an important figure in the British documentary movement of the 1930s and 1940s (and, later, founded the National Film Board of Canada). As with many of the most influential documentary filmmakers, Flaherty's work is both important and controversial for its methods.

Flaherty was not interested in merely recording reality - instead, his films were dramatically structured, with clear narrative goals and expectations set up for the viewer. Richard Meran Barsam points out that 'it would be misleading to think of Flaherty as the originator of the documentary film as we know it: the socio-political didactic film ... [instead, his filmmaking] poetically celebrates man and his life; his films are humanistic statements, not political ones' (1974: 124). Time and again in his films, Flaherty focuses on real people in real situations, attempting to draw out some of the mythic resonance of certain lifestyles. This approach has not gone uncriticised however - there are issues relating to Flaherty's methods and the romanticising of his subject matter that raise problems for much contemporary documentary practice.

In *Nanook of the North* (1922), for example, Flaherty immersed himself in the lifestyles of the Inuit people, spending a year living with them. Such a method perhaps implies

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These films do so in the recent past. In this respect, the makers of the documentary named Mick Judge views a rugby game from 1901 where views the footage on his home and blood. The ordinariness, out that his relative was not a traces of things are usually ant here though is the fact that a 'frame' that draws out some such a way as to emphasise made by virtue of the clever

a participant observation approach, where the filmmaker observes unobtrusively and creates as objective a record as possible. However, when it came to the construction of the documentary, Flaherty was not averse to fabricating events. It is often remarked that he constructed a special open-sided igloo to allow filming of interior shots, even more notorious is his filming of Nanook hunting with traditional harpoon rather than the more modern weapons that he actually used. Flaherty's *Moana* (1926) also included scenes of the Polynesian natives performing for the camera rituals they had long since stopped doing in everyday life.

Such methods are in fact central and arguably unavoidable techniques in documentary production, and most certainly were in the period where filming on location, with handheld cameras and portable sound recording (things that were to become commonplace in the post-Second World War era) was simply not possible. However, the 'justifiable' use of reconstruction has remained as controversial as it is important in the intervening years since Flaherty, and is something that links into debates about drama and re-enactment, discussed below. It also raises the spectre of ethics: is it ever admissible for a documentary filmmaker to fabricate things in order to achieve the 'higher' aim of revealing the 'inner truth' of the subject matter? Flaherty certainly thought so, as he consistently (re-)constructed things before the camera in order to reach what he saw as the essence of what he was portraying. As Jay Ruby points out, for instance, "'Family members' in *Nanook of the North*, *Man of Aran* and *Louisiana Story* (1948) are not related to each other; they were selected because they suited Flaherty's conception of what makes a good Eskimo, Irish or Cajun family' (2005: 215).

JOHN GRIERSON AND THE BRITISH DOCUMENTARY MOVEMENT

As noted above, Flaherty's work was a direct influence on John Grierson. Grierson was born in Scotland in 1898 and went on to have a profound influence on the documentary movement. He directed only two films

descriptive about Flaherty

participant observation
A more active methodology where researchers immerse themselves in the social context, and they are studying often for years at a time. In documentary terms, such an approach arguably leads to more 'natural' responses, as the subjects have become used to the filmmaker and camera.

ethics
Concerning morality, or codes of conduct. There is a strong ethical discourse running through the history of documentary, and debates to be had about the ethical dimension of things like reconstruction, filming people without their consent, informing the viewer of the extent of filmmaker intervention, and so on.

filmic reality. ... going to move on to examine some of the post-Second World War developments in documentary - developments that incorporate details about the objectivity and neutrality of the filmmakers, and the extent to which they creatively interpret their material.

POST-WAR DEVELOPMENTS IN OBSERVATIONAL DOCUMENTARY

Alongside the influential Gherosonian idea of documentary and the more narrative-driven films of Flaherty, the most dominant form, especially in the post-Second World War era, has been the observational documentary. This arguably covers a number of styles, but it is easy to see why the notion of a more or less detached observationalism might pervade ideas about what constitutes documentary. There is a sense that it distils all the ideas about the camera (and film) as a recording device that can capture an unmediated slice of actuality, with attendant beliefs in accuracy, objectivity and impartiality. The fact that there are distinct problems with an overly naive belief in the ability of the camera to objectively record things that happen before it has made the various types of observational film and their proponents hugely controversial. The immediacy and apparently unvarnished nature of the images and sounds produced in such documentaries are emphasised by the technological developments of the era - more portable cameras and (usually) sound-recording equipment made filming on location more feasible, without recourse to reconstructing scenes or dubbing the sound in post-production.

It is important to make a distinction between different types of filmmaking practice that are often lumped together and referred to as 'cinéma vérité' (or sometimes just 'vérité' or 'fly on the wall'). The original cinéma vérité practitioners were the French anthropologist Jean Rouch and sociologist Edgar Morin. Their approach was not one of simple, detached observation, but involved much more interaction between filmmaker and subject. In this respect, a cinéma vérité film like Rouch and Morin's *Chronicle of a Summer* (1960) would come under Nichols's category of the 'participatory' rather than 'observational'. The adaptation of the notion of cinéma vérité in the US context saw it transformed into so-called 'Direct Cinema', as exemplified by the work of filmmakers such as Richard Leacock, Robert Drew (founder of Drew Associates) and Don Pennnebaker. Films such as Leacock's *Primary* (1960), on the campaign trail with John F. Kennedy and Hubert Humphrey, and Pennnebaker's *Don't Look Back* (1967), a behind-the-scenes look at Bob Dylan on tour, had an unobtrusive style far removed from that of Rouch and Morin. The direct cinema practitioners believed that the presence of the camera and filmmakers did not have an impact on the subjects - or not much of one, at least. As Leacock said in an interview when asked about the differences between him and his colleagues and Rouch:

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We don't think that [the filmmaker's presence] affects people very much, at least I don't. Let me add that, of course, it affects them in Jean Rouch's films, since the only thing that's happening to them is the fact that they're being filmed. There's nothing else to think about. How can they ever forget it? (quoted in MacDonald and Cousins 1996: 295)

This comment touches on one of the abiding distinctions between different types of documentary – the relative 'obviousness' of the filmmaker's presence and the extent to which they are acknowledged by their subjects. It was noted earlier how in Frederick Wiseman's films, even though the viewer might discern some level of authorial 'voice' or critique stemming from Wiseman's choice of shots and how they are combined, what really comes across is that the subjects of his films do tend to carry on with their business as if the camera is not present. This is the key signifier of direct cinema and what marks it out as very different from cinéma vérité.

As with all these categories, though, there are grey areas, overlaps and hybrids – this is what keeps documentary developing as a field. Even with filmmakers such as the Maysles Brothers, often described as proponents of Direct Cinema, we can discern in their work some tensions between different documentary modes, and it is worth exploring these tensions, since they help us to understand the documentary field more fully. The Maysles Brothers, Albert and David, began working with Drew Associates in the late 1950s but formed their own production company in the mid-1960s. They directed some of the most memorable documentaries produced in the US in the 1960s and 1970s, including *Salesman* (1969), which follows a travelling Bible salesman, *Gimme Shelter* (1970), which documents the notorious Rolling Stones concert at Altamont in 1969, and *Grey Gardens* (1975). We are going to focus on the last of these films, as it is an interesting example of what happens when different documentary modes meet.

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THE MOVE TO PERFORMATIVE AND REFLEXIVE DOCUMENTARY

There are, then, different degrees to which the subjects of a documentary might be perceived to be performing for the cameras. From the very first actualities, through apparently purely observational films such as *Primary*, to more recent films that foreground the notion of a self-conscious performance, the playing out of social roles has always been central to the documentary project. Likewise, there have been degrees of self-consciousness or recognition by the filmmakers of the role they are performing in the construction of a documentary. The categories of reflexive and performative documentary filmmaking are arguably where the most interesting current work is being produced. The reflexive refers to those documentaries where the actual process of representation and construction is somehow foregrounded. The performative may be seen as a subcategory of the 'reflexive'. Due to the fact that documentaries will always be about the real world, real people and real issues, the notion of performance within them is potentially radical and reflexive, as it seems opposed to notions of authenticity and unvarnished reality. As Stella Bruzzi has pointed out though, it is important to see this in context: there have always been films of this kind, documentaries that foreground those elements of construction (and reflexivity) and draw attention to the varying types of performance going on within them. As she says about the work of Nick Broomfield, he is 'acting out a documentary' (2000: 155). His very presence suggests that the objective, detached observer is a myth and his 'performance' as 'documentarist' implicitly (and sometimes explicitly) draws attention to the performances of his subjects. For example, his interventions in his two films about convicted killer Aileen Wuornos (*Aileen Wuornos: The Selling of a Serial Killer* (1992) and *Aileen: Life and Death of a Serial Killer* (2003)) consistently and self-consciously draw attention to his role as filmmaker and mediator of meaning. This means, ultimately, that his films are as much about him and the process of image-making as they are about Wuornos; this, in fact, works very well, as there is a sense that the 'truth' behind the Wuornos story was never going to be definitively told, and the Broomfield films end up being a savage indictment of the media circus and a legal system gone mad (see Ward 2005: 40-8). Broomfield's films therefore foreground the role of the documentarist, and the ways in which the filmmaker's interaction with the reality they are filming impacts on the resulting footage. In *The Leader, His Driver and the Driver's Wife* (1991), a documentary about the South African white supremacist leader Eugene Terreblanche, Broomfield uses (deliberate) miscommunication and foregrounding of 'hitches' in the filming process to draw out and emphasise the ludicrousness of Terreblanche, his beliefs, and his inflated sense of his own importance. This is a technique that results in a strong critique of Terreblanche (as well as being highly amusing) – but would not have been possible without Broomfield's explicitly 'performative' strategies. In many respects it is Broomfield's explicitly like a documentarist that so infuriate Terreblanche and lead to most of his outbursts.

□ CASE STUDY 3: GRIZZLY MAN (WERNER HERZOG 2005)

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