

What is documentary film? The subject of what constitutes a documentary has been debated ever since John Grierson labeled the non-fiction film *Nanook of the North* as a "documentary" because it was an example of the "creative treatment of actuality." What is meant by "creative" varies widely among film makers. Should documentary only display actual people and events, giving the straight story without the addition of drama, aesthetics, actors, etc.? As MacCann writes:

The makers of social action documentaries in the 1930s tended to cling to the belief that only 'real people' ought to be photographed in their films. This concept came out of an era of realism in still photography, when the man at the machine or the plow had to be real in order to seem real. As long as the daily routines of farm or factory are the central concern of the film, an amateur can easily duplicate those routines. He cannot ordinarily duplicate an emotional crisis. Therefore a whole range of realistic experiences, requiring the service of actors, must be left to the fiction film. *The important thing is not the authenticity of the materials, but the authenticity of the result.* (Emphasis added).¹

Film makers like Robert Flaherty believed it was acceptable to add fiction to documentaries, as long as the effect on the audience was real. It was content that mattered most and not the method. Editing, narration, and musical scores would be peripheral to the chosen subject matter. The result would be what Flaherty's wife Frances termed a "film of discovery and revelation," or a work that is art because of the aesthetic effect it has on the viewer.²

Film theorist Paul Rotha offers a more in-depth and analogous definition:

"Documentary defines not subject or style, but approach. It denies neither trained actors nor the advantages of staging. It justifies the use of every known technical artifice to gain its effect on the spectator....To the documentary director the appearance of things and people is only superficial. It is the meaning behind the thing and the significance underlying the person that occupy his attention....Documentary approach to cinema differs from that of story-film not in its disregard for craftsmanship, but in the purpose to which that craftsmanship is put. Documentary is a trade just as

carpentry or pot-making. The pot-maker makes pots, and the documentarian documentaries."³

Indeed, producing a documentary is a complex craft and just as any other creative endeavor, it demands several layers and a focus on the overall intent. The purpose of making a pot or building a home seems quite apparent. Yet why do documentarians make documentaries? As with any art, the purposes are multifaceted and are both functional and aesthetic. One "purposive" characteristic of film is that it is "intended to achieve something in addition to entertaining audiences and making money."⁴ A documentary teaches at the same time it appeals to the heart. Michael Renov believes there are actually four distinct although sometimes overlapping purposes of documentary film:⁵

- to record, reveal, or preserve
- to persuade or promote
- to analyze or interrogate
- to express

Since the camera was invented individuals have used it to record actuality, to preserve a moment in history, or to reveal the tragedies and delights of the world around us. As film became a more popular mode of representation, the purpose became not only to record reality, but to promote certain ideals of what was real, how the world should be viewed, and what social changes were necessary for the good of mankind. The camera was used to explore and analyze events and people, to inquire about meanings, to make the audience question their reality. Finally, documentary can be used aesthetically to express how the director sees the world through the camera lens.

Now that the definition of documentary is more clear, how does one "read" a documentary? What codes are embedded into the production and how are they then translated by the viewer? It is important to remember that although one of the purposes of the documentary is to present reality, it is *constructed* and can only be a *representation* of reality. By using specific techniques to form the production, documentarians can make their footage seem like the absolute truth and control to a large extent how the film is received by the viewer.

[<http://xroads.virginia.edu/~ma01/HUffman/Frontier/define.html>]

Documentary Ethics & Responsibilities

Privacy. Videomakers can get themselves into legal trouble if they violate the privacy rights of others. Securing personal releases and location releases can alleviate this concern.

Libel. When we disseminate untrue things about people that might harm their reputations, we run a serious risk of lawsuit. The best defense against libel is to double check our facts and make sure our videos speak the truth.

Filming Illegal Activities. If we film illegal activities, we are creating evidence that may be used against the participants in legal proceedings. Sometimes invoking the journalist's first amendment right can protect us against this possibility.

Distinction between Law and Ethics. Students should understand that ethical responsibilities

hold videomakers to higher standards than mere legal requirements. Treating our participants ethically is not only the right (moral) thing to do. It is, surprisingly, the smart (effective) thing to do.

Fairness. At the end of the day, we want the participants of our videos to feel that they haven't been exploited or harmed by our videos. The two most important tools available to the videomaker in this regard are the fully informed consent and the opportunity for the participant to review the video before completion and broadcast. In between, videomakers should put themselves into the shoes of their participants and ask at every step of the way, "How would I feel if I were portrayed this way?"

[<http://www.pbs.org/americanhigh/teachers/lesson4.html>]

Popular Documentary Styles

Cinéma vérité: combines naturalistic techniques with stylized cinematic devices of editing and camerawork, staged set-ups, and the use of the camera to provoke subjects. It is also known for taking a provocative stance towards its topics. It stresses the non-intervention of the filmmaker. Examples: *Hoop Dreams*, *Band of Brothers*

Interactive/Participatory: the encounter between filmmaker and subject is recorded, as the filmmaker actively engages with the situation they are documenting, asking questions of their subjects, sharing experiences with them. Heavily reliant on the honesty of the witnesses. Example: *Bowling for Columbine*

Docudrama: features dramatized re-enactments of actual historical events. Examples: *The King's Speech*, *The Social Network*

Expository: social issues assembled into an argumentative framework, with the viewer addressed directly by a voice-of-God narrator (titles or sound dubbing). Example: *An Inconvenient Truth*

Fly-on-the-wall: events are seen candidly, as a fly on a wall might see them. In the purest form, the camera crew works as unobtrusively as possible; however, it is also common for participants to be interviewed, often by an off-camera voice.

Questions

1. What separates documentaries from reality TV? From historical drama?
2. What kinds of documentaries interest you the most? Why?
3. What is the best documentary you've seen?
4. Why do you think non-fiction (in all its forms) has become so popular in recent years?
5. In your opinion, how responsible are documentaries for telling the unbiased truth?