

Session 7

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1960s Documentary Film: Perceptions of the Vietnam War in the U.S. and in Germany

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Representing Reality: Documentary and Ethnographic Film



“The line between documentary and fiction film is tenuous. Both are created by editing and selection. Both, wittingly or unwittingly, embody a viewpoint.” Brian Winston (1978)

First documentaries

Before 1926 documentaries were known under the name of “Actuality films”

The first one of this kind was released by Auguste and Louis Lumiere in 1895. These film attempts were single-shot moments (one or less than a minute) capturing scenes of reality (a train entering a station, tree moving in the wind, horse running).

At the end of 19 century French surgeon Eugene-Louis Diven realized a series of surgical films and the Romanian professor Gheoghe Marinescu made science films at his neurology clinic from Bucharest. As Marinescu described them, they are “studies with the help of cinematograph”



1900-1920 – Travelogues, news and melodrama

Travelogues: early form of tourism or travel documentary

News pictures: natural disasters, parades, car races, funerals and other important social events were presented in theaters with regularity. They had the length of ten to fifteen minutes and were of great interest to the masses.

Melodrama: accurate representations mix with melodramatic plot; many directors were presenting their films as documentaries even though they were not entirely so.

Romanticism and the ethnographic film: the first feature-length film was presented in 1922 by Robert Flaherty. What is now considered to belong to the genre of “salvage ethnography”, *Nanook of the North* was at first destined to be an artistic film made for the large audience that would depict the Eskimos’ life through the means of documentary.

The film was later accused of lack of authenticity, as many of the scenes presented were in fact staged.

What makes a documentary film be considered ethnographic

Jay Ruby (1975) proposes four criteria:

- Films about whole cultures, or definable portions of cultures;
- informed by explicit or implicit theories of culture;
- Explicit about research and filming methods they had employed;
- using distinctively anthropological lexicon.



After World War I and until 1950

Many documentaries made in this period of time had propagandistic purpose and they were meant to shape the public's opinion about the military interventions or the ideology of a certain party. Famous film: Triumph of the Will about the Nazi Party Congress.

50's – 60's -70's

In the 50s and early 1960s ethnographic film came to be interpreted as “communication between filmmakers and filmed” (de Brigard).

Moreover, there was a shift between the way in which the camera used to look at the world to a new way of observing the reality as a product of one's inner world.

John Marshall (The Hunters) and the team Napoleon Chagnon and Timothy Asch are among the new wave of ethnographic film makers that incorporate biographies of their characters and use special techniques of filming and editing in order to present more simultaneous points of view.

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