

What is a Documentary Film: Discussion of the Genre.

1. Documentary: a “fuzzy concept” (Nichols: 2001, 21).

Grierson (1930s): “creative treatment of actuality”.-> actuality + reshaping.

Etymology: Latin word *docere* (to teach) + “a document” (official paper) + “to document” statements. -> Educational purpose +official status -> sociological + technical approach.

Sociological approach: idea of collectivity: “The audience is engaged as members of a collective who have some right to feel responsible for or involved with the individuals whose story is being told. It is this presumption of the public relevance of individual circumstance that gives documentary its distinctiveness as a genre” (Chaney, 1993) -> public address, education\propaganda + active participation of the audience.

“Documentary is deeply collaborative. [...] The people behind the camera [...], the people in front of the camera [...] brought to the film their diverse perceptions and experiences of their different realities.” (Wingate, 2003) -> ideal of relativism + ambition to represent all aspects of reality.

Technical approach: “Documentary film speaks about situations and events involving real people (social actors) who present themselves to us as themselves in stories that convey a plausible proposal about, or perspective on, the lives, situations , and events portrayed. The distinct point of view of the filmmaker shapes this story into a way of seeing the historical world directly rather than into a fictional allegory.” (Nichols, 2010) -> direct relation to actuality.

2. Non-fiction film (documentary) vs. Fiction film

	DOCUMENTARY	FICTION
First intention	to spread an idea	entertainment
Production	simple	elaborated
Shooting	in the field, no retakes	in studios, many retakes
Performers	nonprofessional	professional
Editing	evidentiary editing: organizes the logic of the argument	continuity editing: establishes time and space relations
Central element	idea\ logic\ argument	main character
Narrating voice	fundamental	absent (or less important)
Organization of the crew	overstepping of crafts lines	no overstepping: sharp differentiation of functions
Scripts	simple, lots of invention in	elaborated

	the field	
Subvention	from those who want to share\ to spread ideas	from those who sell commodities
Distribution	smaller group audiences	mass audiences
Audience judgment	based on persuasiveness	based on plausibility and fascination

3. New tendencies: blurring the line between fact and fiction

Reflexive documentary: it acknowledges the filmmaker's presence, perspective, and selectivity in constructing the film from images with a direct relationship to the real. E.g. Errol Morris' *The Thin Blue Line* (1988)

Drama-documentary: creation of fictional characters and of a dramatic diegesis, in which conventions of the documentary are inserted. It aims at establishing metaphors to represent “absolute” truths. E.g. Steven Spielberg’s *Schindler’s List* (1993)

Docutainment: the treatment of non-fiction topics using all the tools of high production feature film. E.g. Michael Moore’s *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004)

Mock-documentary (Mockumentary): it applies documentary codes and conventions to fictional images, in order to question and mock them through parody. Consequence of the postmodernist critique of the ideas of “reality” and “truth”. The audience should determine what is “true”: confusion and reflection. E.g. Bob Reiner’s *This is Spinal Tap* (1984)

New perspectives? “Only time will tell whether the recent gush in documentaries represents the beginning of a new phase in the history of popular filmmaking. [...] In recent years, fiction films have lost their preeminent place in American culture [...] Perhaps the recent flow of documentaries demonstrates that there is an audience in waiting, eager for politically-conscious films”. (Mintz: 2005)

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

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Roscoe, Jane and Hight, Craig. *Faking it: Mock-documentary and the Subversion of Factuality*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001