What is a Documentary Film: Discussion of the Genre.

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"I'm an eye. A mechanical eye.
I, the machine, show you a world
the way only I can see it.
I free myself for today and forever
from human immobility.
(…) Freed from the boundaries of time and space,
I co-ordinate any and all points of the universe,
wherever I want them to be.
My way leads toward the creation
of a fresh perception of the world.
Thus I explain in a new way
the world unknown to you."[1]

INTRODUCTION

Documentary film, a fuzzy concept.

As Barry Keith Grant and Jeannette Sloniowski remarked in 1998,

> There is, at present, an intense interest in documentary, an interest perhaps unmatched since the 1930s. The Rodney King video and news coverage of events such as the Gulf War and the O.J. Simpson "slow speed chase" and trial have given documentary a renewed position of importance in daily life.[2]

In the recent years, the progressive diffusion of affordable technology, along with a frustration with traditional media, the pressure of an audience eager for information and political discussion, and the works of outstanding (and often controversial) filmmakers such as Errol Morris or Michael Moore, have led documentary film to go mainstream. As Bill Nichols suggests[3], it is sufficient to consider the movies that have been awarded an Oscar from the mid-eighties on to realize to what extent documentary has risen as a compelling form, and how much interest it has aroused in both scholars and the general public. On the Internet, amateur and professional movies proliferate, dealing with new topics and pushing the boundaries of the form as never before.

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[1]Dziga Vertov, "Manifesto Kinoks Revolution", 1923, quoted in John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 1972), 10.
[2] Barry Keith Grant and Jeannette Sloniowski, *Documenting the Documentary: Close Readings of Documentary Film and Video* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1998), 19.
[3] Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 2.

However, if it is true that contemporary filmmakers are showing an exceptional vitality, it is not to forget that innovation is peculiar to documentary itself: already in the 1950s, Basil Wright observed that

> Some thirty years ago, the documentary thesis offered, apart from anything else, a chance of freedom from the irons of the commercial cinema. Because documentary was concerned with a new use of film (…), it provided immense opportunities for experiment with the film medium.[4]

Thus, as Nichols observes, it would be impossible to formulate a definitive set of constraints that a movie has to fit in in order to belong to the genre. Even after the 1930s, when the term "documentary" began to indicate a filmmaking practice which was actually born with the Lumières brothers' first recordings of everyday life scenes, but on which no critical analysis had been produced, documentary has always been, "a practice without boundaries"[5], "a fuzzy concept"[6]. As Nichols explains, the notion of documentary changes in space and time, according to the idea that individual filmmakers and collective institutions have of the works they are producing.

Therefore, apparently contradictory statements such as Grierson's

> I am convinced that the surest way to apprenticeship in documentary is a good degree in political science or economics.[7]

and Jon Bang Carlsen's

> I see documentary filmmaking as an art form.[8]

should not be considered as prescriptive rules, but as different poles of attraction in an ongoing dialectic, whose complexity constitutes the richness of documentary as a genre.

John Grierson first used the term "documentary" in relation to cinema in his review of Robert Flaherty's *Moana*, which was published in *The New York Sun* on February 8, 1926. In the article, he simply affirmed that the movie had documentary value because it was a visual account of the everyday life of a Polynesian youth; however, some years later he provided the following definition:

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[4]Basil Wright, "The Documentary Dilemma", *Hollywood Quarterly*, vol. 5, no. 4 (Summer 1951): 321, http://www.jstor.org/stable/1209611.

[5] Bill Nichols, foreword to Barry Keith Grant and Jeannette Sloniowski, *Documenting the Documentary…*, *cit.*, 12.

[6] Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*, cit. (2001), 20.

[7]John Grierson, "Postwar Patterns". *Hollywood Quarterly*, vol. 1, no. 2 (January 1946): 160, http://www.jstor.org/stable/1209557.

[8] Jon Bang Carlsen, "How to Invent Reality: extracts from a forthcoming book", *A Danish Journal of Film Studies*, no. 16 (December 2003): 96, http://pov.imv.au.dk/pdf/pov16.pdf.

> The documentary is the branch of film production which goes to the actual, and photographs it and edits it and shapes it. It attempts to give form and pattern to the complex of direct observation.[9]

This statement, which dates 1946, already contained all the issues which would prove crucial in the realization and reception of documentary films of all periods, and which still lie at the basis of most critical discussion.

According to Grierson, the roots of documentary are in what can be called "reality". However, actuality is submitted to the creativity of the filmmaker, who manipulates it through more or less deliberate processes of selection and association, in order to go beyond the boundaries of direct observation, and to give it a precise, often politically-oriented meaning.

As William Rothman[10] observes, in his commentary to Flaherty's film Grierson moved the term "documentary" from its modern meaning of factual and authentic record, or of primary, evidentiary and official source of information, back to its Latin etymological root *docere*, "to teach". Thus, the educational purpose, which has been fundamental in all Grierson's activity, is intrinsically related to the notion of documentary: through the application of refined rhetorical devices to images drawn from the actual, documentary film imposes itself as an authoritative voice, and at the same time it gives the illusion to serve as a window open on the world.

It is precisely this connotation of persuasiveness that makes it necessary to approach documentary film from a broader point of view, focusing not only on its technical peculiarities, but also on issues related to its reception. Moreover, the fuzzy borders of the genre and the problematic issues that it raises require to be observed through a non-prescriptive, exclusively descriptive approach.

Thus, the aim of this paper will be to discuss the main questions that arouse when trying to define documentary film, not with the ambition to provide any definitive solution, but with the purpose to gain a better understanding of the processes that have determined the development of contemporary documentary forms.

In this view, the main dynamics that affect both the creation and the reception of documentary film will first be considered, in order to explore the context in which formal features are put into practice. Consequently, documentary filmmaking will be approached from a technical point of view, with a particular attention to the similarities and differences that the genre entertains with its natural antagonist, fiction film. The final section will be focused on the

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[9] John Grierson, "Postwar Patterns", *cit.*, 159

[10] William Rothman, *Documentary Film Classics.* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 4.

developments that the genre has undergone in the last sixty years, and on the new forms which have emerged.

1. CULTURAL CONTEXT AND QUESTIONS OF RECEPTION

As Jonathan Kahana observes,

> Since the late 1920s and early 1930s, when filmmakers and critics in the United States, England and other Western industrial nations began regularly to use the term "documentary" to refer to a discrete practice of filmmaking, it has been understood as a form of democratic and social pedagogy.[11]

Grierson's faith in documentary as a form of social political communication, aimed at promoting education and eventually mechanisms of social reform, is confirmed not only by his assertions, but also by his founding of what has been called the "documentary film movement".

Moreover, in the classification of documentary film typologies theorized by Eric Barnouw[12], a role of great importance is attributed to explicitly educational modes, such as the "chronicler" and "compilation" film , which are supposed to transmit knowledge on historical events and other fields of formation, or as the "advocate" mode, whose purpose is to draw the attention of the audience on those aspects of reality that are neglected or misrepresented by the main media, and to promote social involvement.

But the educational purpose of documentary reveals fundamental ambiguities that should be acknowledged and understood.

On the one hand, as argued by Kahana, documentary can be seen as a "democratic" form of culture, as it represents "real" people (often belonging to the lower part of society), raises social discussion, addresses a public belonging to all spheres, and imposes itself as "a form of mass communication"[13].

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[11], Jonathan Kahana, *Intelligence Work: The Politics of American Documentary* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008): 1.

[12] Erik Barnouw, *Documentary: a History of the Non-fiction Film* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974).

[13] David Chaney, *Fictions of Collective Life: Public Drama in Late Modern Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 128.

But on the other hand, any educative process is based on a hierarchical relation, in which one part assumes an authoritative role and is given the right to instruct, or to inform, the other part. According to Paul Swann, since its origin documentary film has made no exception:

> John Grierson Believed in the individual fulfilling his or her social obligations. He thought, very much in a nineteenth-century liberal way, that ruling élites had a commitment to inform and educate those over whom they held "stewardship".[14]

Consequently to these considerations, the aim of this section will be to bring out, and discuss, the main social processes that are involved in the realization and in the reception of documentary film.

A collective discourse.

An overview of some of the main critical works on documentary makes us realize to what extent the notion of collectivity is pervasive in discourse on documentary film.

According to Kahana,

> Documentary has always leveled distinctions, challenging traditional oppositions between official and vernacular speech, between high art and mass culture, and between academic knowledge, folk traditions, and popular belief. (…) Documentary is an essentially transitional medium: it carries fragments of social reality from one place or one group or one time to another, and in transporting them, translates them from a local dialect to a lingua franca.[15]

Therefore, the power of documentary film would depend on its capacity to create emotional and intellectual bounds, to such an extent that this would be its most distinctive feature, as Chaney confirms while stating that

> 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.[16]

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[14] Paul Swann, *The British Documentary Film Movement, 1926-1946* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 5.
[15] Jonathan Kahana, *Intelligence Work…, cit.*, 1.
[16] David Chaney, *Fictions of Collective Life…, cit.*, 128.

Bounds are established among the members of the audience, who are pushed to feel engaged in a community, as well as between the public and the subjects on screen, also according to the dynamic that the sociologist Luc Boltanski[17] has labeled "distant suffering", and which consists in the capacity of films to induce emotional effects in the viewers corresponding to the physical struggle that they depict. No need to tell, common understanding and common feeling are meant to provoke common practice.

A strong feeling of belonging to a community is also shared by documentary making practitioners, who, as pointed out by Dunne[18], have defined their own identity in radical opposition to entertainment filmmakers. Despite differences in their aesthetic and technical approach, as well as competition for finding subvention and distribution, documentary filmmakers share a common sense of purpose, and their tendency toward innovation is always in dialogue with an acknowledged tradition.

Moreover, the process of documentary shooting involves a high degree of cooperation among the members of the crew, as well as between them and the people in front of the camera:

> Following the tradition of explorers, missionaries, colonialists, tourists, travelers, and ethnographers,[19]

documentarists may choose to live among the people whom they are filming or not, but their activity depends on the founding of a community in which all members can participate to bring to the film "their diverse perceptions and experiences of their different realities."[20]

However, it must be remarked that the parallelism which is established by Grant and Sloniowski is far from being innocent: just like explorers, missionaries, or colonialists, filmmakers investigate the world from their own perspective, and consequently tend to present their vision as "facts and truth": the authoritative and official status of documentary allows them to

> Represent what they discover, and believe, and want others to discover and believe as a result of their own representations.[21]

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[17] Quoted in Jonathan Kahana, *Intelligence Work…, cit.*, 5.

[18] Philip Dunne, "The Documentary and Hollywood". *Hollywood Quarterly*, vol. 1, no. 2 (January 1946): 167, http://www.jstor.org/stable/1209558.

[19] Barry Keith Grant and Jeannette Sloniowski, *Documenting the Documentary …, cit.*,12.

[20]David Wingate, "Confessions of a Documentary Teacher", *A Danish Journal of Film Studies*, no. 16 (December 2003): 103, http://pov.imv.au.dk/pdf/pov16.pdf.

[21] Barry Keith Grant and Jeannette Sloniowski, *Documenting the Documentary …, cit.*,12.

A discourse of authority.

As Aitken[22] reminds us, Grierson's "Documentary Film Movement" became first established within two government film units (the Empire marketing Board Film Unit, from 1927 to 1933, and the General Post Office Film Unit, from 1933 to 1939), and it was consequently integrated into the British Ministry of Information. During the Second World War, it produced propaganda in favor of the military effort, and in peacetime it serviced a wide campaign to promote political and cultural reform.

Since its very beginning, thus, documentary has been perceived as one of the most appropriate ways for spreading ideas and ideologies, either for or against the mainstream position. This is mainly due to the assumptions that characterize the public's reception of the genre: as Nichols[23] argues, even when we acknowledge the creative activity that informed the movie, we still tend to consider single shots and sounds as pure documents of a reality that we could have observed ourselves. This oscillation between trust and distrust depends on the close kinship that documentary holds with those nonfictional systems that can be called "discourses of sobriety"[24]. Nichols also points out that systems such as science, economics, politics, education or religion are based on the assumption that they have instrumental power, and that their discourse should effect action and entail consequences in the real world:

> Discourses of sobriety are sobering because they regard their relation to the real as direct, immediate, transparent. Through them power exerts itself. Through them, things are made to happen. They are vehicles of domination and conscience, power and knowledge, desire and will.[25]

Even if its image-based nature makes it impossible for documentary to be accepted as the equal partner of such discourses, it can still be considered as their very close partner because of its determination to intervene in the historical world by shaping our perception and our understanding of it, as well as our way to act within it.

Most of the power of documentary is a consequence of its double status of source of pleasure and of information. The pleasure that it engenders is not only due to its aesthetic and artistic features, but also to its educational purpose: documentary is appealing because of its capacity

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[22] Ian Aitken, *Film and Reform: John Grierson and the Documentary Film Movement* (London: Routledge, 1990), 1.
[23] Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary, cit.,* (2001), 38.
[24] Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 3.
[25] *Ibidem*, 4.

to generate what Nichols calls "epistephilia"[26], the pleasure of knowledge. Documentary establishes a process which involves an authoritative agency that possesses knowledge, an artistically refined text that transmits it, and an audience eager to receive it:

> Knowledge, as much or more than the imaginary identification between viewer and fictional character, promises the viewer a sense of plenitude or self-sufficiency. Knowledge (…) becomes a source of pleasure that is far from innocent. Who are we that we may know something? Of what does knowledge consist?[27]

Awareness of the power relations and of the sociological and psychological processes which determine the reception of documentary is fundamental for the establishment of an active audience. However, such an awareness is not possible to achieve without some understanding of the rhetorical strategies and formal features according to which documentary is made.

2. A FORMAL APPROACH

In the introduction to their book *Documenting the Documentary*, Grant and Sloniowski complain that

> Much of the critical writing on documentary- both the old and the new- ignores or undervalues the significance of aesthetic pleasure and complexity that distinguish many documentaries.[28]

However, they argue, the increasingly crucial role that the visual media play in our understanding of reality requires us to be deeply aware of the textual strategies which lie at the basis of documentary filmmaking.

Considering the impossibility to draw a list of the fixed criteria that would qualify a given film as a documentary, and bearing in mind Nichols' statement that

> the definition of "documentary" is always relational or comparative,

the most natural way to approach documentary as a genre is to compare it to fiction.

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[26] *Ibidem*, 31.
[27] *Ivi.*
[28] Barry Keith Grant and Jeannette Sloniowski, *Documenting the Documentary…*, *cit.*, 20.

Fiction and non-fiction: an unbridgeable gap?

The most relevant difference between documentary and fictional film, from which all its formal characteristics derive, is to be observed in the very origin of these two modes of representation.

In aesthetic terms,

> The fictional feature film is an extension of nineteenth-century artistic forms: the novel, drama and photography. The documentary mode appeared, was invented in a sense, to meet new artistic and communication needs arising in the twentieth century.[29]

According to Rothman, documentary is less closely linked to photography than one would expect: free from the boundaries of tradition, it constitutes a completely new tradition of its own. This affirmation, which may sound excessively radical in its attempt to separate documentary from all the pre-existing modes of representation, becomes much more eloquent when reformulated as such:

> Documentary is purposive; it is intended to achieve something in addition to entertaining audiences and making money.[30]

The two modes originated from radically different needs, and they were conceived as means to attain different purposes, that of documentary being the diffusion of an idea.

As a consequence, many differences can be observed between fiction and non-fiction film features.

First, unlike fiction movies, the logic of documentaries relies more on the rhetorical treatment of a central argument than on the narrative organization around a character. For this reason, documentary filmmakers tend not to use continuity editing, which establishes time and space relations in a narration, but they prefer what is called evidentiary editing: places, people, objects and voices are brought forward according to a precise rhetorical construction, whose aim is to organize the logic of the argument. The informing logic is also sustained by the intervention of a narrating voice (the so-called "voice of God"), which has been one of the most characteristic features of documentary at least until the 1960s, and which is generally absent, or only marginal, in fiction movies.

The typical documentary is filmed in a natural setting, and it stages nonprofessional performers, whom Nichols defines "social actors"[31]. As a consequence, production arrangements show a high degree of simplicity: the shooting is done by a small crew, using

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[29] William Rothman, *Documentary Film Classics, cit.*, 4.
[30] *Ivi.*
[31] Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary, cit.* (2010), 14.

not very elaborate –but light and very practical- equipment to record people whose acting ability is often far less crucial than the importance of their testimony.

The conditions under which documentaries are made implicate a wider space for improvisation and invention in the field than there is in fiction shooting: a huge amount of footage is produced following usually simple scripts, and it is the editor's duty to select and to arrange it so that it manages to express the writer's idea. However, unlike in Hollywood, where a sharp differentiation of functions between highly specialized craftsmen is at the basis of the realization of a good product, in the documentary field the overstepping of crafts lines and a high degree of cooperation are the norm.

Finally, important differences can be observed in the distribution and reception of the final product. As a rule of thumb, the distribution of the documentary aims at reaching relatively small group audiences, who often share social or political positions, while fictional movies are generally addressed to mass audiences (outstanding exceptions such as Michael Moore's movies will be discussed later). Moreover, the purposive intent of the documentary determines the criteria on which the audience judgment is based: by the general public as well as by scholars,

> Documentaries tend to be discussed as *documentaries* rather than closely read as rich work of cinema[32],

and their reception tends to be influenced more by persuasiveness than by aesthetic fascination.

Fiction and non-fiction: two sides of the same coin.

Despite all the features that seem to collocate documentary and fiction in radical opposition, the two genres are not so far from each other as one could think. In fact, documentary and fiction rely on the same rules, which are those of filmmaking in general.

To begin with, Dunne remarks that since both documentary and entertainment film are conceived so as to arouse the interest of the public, they both follow a very simple rule:

> The audience must be *for* one thing, *against* something else.[33]

To achieve this goal, Dunne continues, good documentaries make wide use of light and shade effects, suspense and dramatic motivation just as entertaining films do.

Juel observes that

[32] Barry Keith Grant and Jeannette Sloniowski, *Documenting the Documentary, cit.*, 20.
[33]Philip Dunne, "The Documentary and Hollywood…", *cit.*, 171.

> As a rule of thumb, a film is hardly a film without camera works, cuts or editing, and it is neither a fiction nor a documentary if it is nothing more than a "re-presentation" of what happened to be in front of a lens and a microphone.[34]

From this perspective, the discussion is not focused on the close relation that documentary is supposed to entertain with actuality, but on the creative activity through which the material is shaped into

> A willed presentation of something made by someone in a specific way and for someone.[35]

To make a further step, one could argue with Nichols that

> Every film is a documentary. Even the most whimsical of fictions gives evidence of the culture that produced it and reproduces the likenesses of the people who perform within it.[36]

Thus, every film has a documentary value, not because it is a mirror of "reality", but because it witnesses of the culture which selected, artistically manipulated and gave meaning to the images that inform it.

In an article dating 1946, Philip Dunne remarked that "the gap between the two media", fiction and documentary, "is not so wide that it cannot be bridged"[37], and he affirmed that wider exchange between practitioners of the two modes would lead to interesting developments in filmmaking. Even if signs of a certain tendency toward genre overlapping can be observed in most of the filmmaking tradition, never as in the last fifty years has this tendency been so evident, as an expression of the cultural changes that will make the object of the next section.

3. NEW TENDENCIES

After the end of the Second World War, a new tendency developed in contemporary culture as a reaction to the modernist confidence in objective, scientific observation of reality as a means of progress. Concepts like objective truth and factual reality were put under radical

[34]Henrik Juel, "Defining Documentary Film". *A Danish Journal of Film Studies*, no. 22 (December 2006) :8, http://pov.imv.au.dk/pdf/pov22.pdf.
[35] *Ivi.*
[36] Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary, cit.* (2001), 1.
[37] Philip Dunne, "The Documentary and Hollywood", *cit.*, 166.

questioning, while others, such as relativity, plurality and subjectivity emerged as the only principles through which the world could be approached.

As Roscoe and Hight pointed out, the collapse of the "real" in postmodernist discourse has involved ambivalent outcomes:

> As well as undermining some of the foundational discourses that documentary draws upon, postmodernist critiques have yielded certain possibilities for documentary. One of the consequences of the critique of "truth" and "reality" has been the blurring of traditional boundaries between documentary and drama, and between fact and fiction.[38]

Although the elements that contributed to the emergence of new, and often difficult to label, forms of documentary filmmaking would certainly require further investigation, an overview of the main perspectives that have aroused in western culture from the 1960s on will provide a useful context to our understanding of the changes that affected documentary filmmaking.

From "reality" to "realities".

The spread of new media, like the television, lies at the basis of what has been defined as the contemporary "image culture"[39]. The assumption that the only way to experience reality is through the lenses of subjective perception, necessarily implies that every attempt to give an objective and encompassing representation of the world is nothing but an ontological impossibility. Reality reveals itself as an abstract concept, fragmented into the infinite number of relative and constantly changing mental images that every person generates, and which are the only possible referent of all attempts of representation.

As Linda Williams remarks, the moving picture is no longer a mirror of reality: in fact, the only thing that it can represent is another mirror, the one that reflects an individual and subjective vision of the world.

However, the proliferation of images that characterizes postmodernity can also be regarded as the sign of a remarkable eagerness for some kind of documentary representation of the real:

> The contradictions are rich: on the one hand the postmodern deluge of images seems to suggest that there can be no a priori truth of the referent to which the image refers; on the other hand, in the same

[38] Jane Roscoe and Craig Hight, *Faking it: Mock-documentary and the Subversion of Factuality* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001), 29.

[39] Linda Williams, "Mirrors Without Memories: Truth, History, and the New Documentary", in *New Challenges for Documentary*, ed. Alan Rosenthal and John Corner (Manchester : Manchester University Press, 2005), 59.

> deluge, it is still the moving image that has the power to move audiences to a new appreciation of previously unknown truth.[40]

In response to these ambivalent tendencies, the aim of contemporary filmmakers is to seek the "reverberations and repetitions" that reveal multiple and contingent "truths", rather than trying to express the unitary, unproblematic "Truth".[41]

Despite some relevant differences in their technical and aesthetical features, as well as in their intent, the new modes of documentary representation that will make the object of the next section rely on the same principle: the blurring of borders between documentary and fiction.

Fiction or non-fiction? New modes of representation.

> It's a fine line between the real and the fake, and what is of far more interest to documentarists at the moment it seems to me is the complexity and productiveness of the relationship between the two.[42]

Conscious of the fact that "objectivity is a bad excuse for manipulation"[43], contemporary approaches to documentary filmmaking have led to an increasing rehabilitation of two features which are usually associated with fiction: subjectivity and storytelling.

In a very interesting article entitled "Narrative Journalism: subjectivity, no longer a dirty word", Nancy Graham Holm explains that in the so-called Information Age people are so much surrounded by voices, images and information that it is becoming increasingly difficult to get and keep their attention.

> Once the heart is engaged, however, more information will be sought. *Identification* is the solution to apathy, and comes naturally if stories are told in ways that reinforce our mutual humanity.[44]

Thus, the focus is moved from "epistephelia" to "identification", from intellectual to emotional satisfaction. Storytelling acquires a role of great importance in non-fiction film, not only as a medium to arouse interest and emotions, but also, if not mainly, as the only legitimate way to hold a discourse on reality, without misleadingly pretending to be "objective":

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[40] *Ibidem*, 60.
[41] Barry Keith Grant and Jeannette Sloniowski, *Documenting the Documentary…*, *cit.*, 22.
[42] Stella Bruzzi, *New Documentary* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 5-6.
[43] Jon Bang Carlsen, "How to Invent Reality…", *cit.*, 96.
[44] Nancy Garham Holm, "Narrative Journalism: Subjectivity, No longer a Dirty Word", *A Danish Journal of Film Studies*, no. 22 (December 2006): 53, http://pov.imv.au.dk/pdf/pov22.pdf.

> Whether you work with fiction or documentaries, you're telling stories because that is the only way we can approach the world: to fantasize about this mutual stage of ours as it reinvents itself in the sphere between the actual physical world and the way your soul reflects its back onto the world.[45]

The shaping activity of the eye of the filmmaker is explicitly recognized, to such an extent that it can become one of the objects of the movie itself. Sometimes, it can represent the main issue of the film: it is the case of the so-called *meta-movies*, which, developing a discourse introduced by Edgar Morin and Jean Rouch, reflect on the very act and conventions of filmmaking.

Processes of parody, irony and satire lie at the basis of a continuum of texts, whose main characteristic is a systematical blurring of the line between fact and fiction, and whose common purpose is to challenge all normative discourses on documentary conventions.

As Roscoe and Hight explain, *reflexive documentaries* are constructed from images that hold "a direct relationship to the real"[46], but they overtly acknowledge the filmmaker's presence, perspective and selectivity. An outstanding example is represented by Errol Morris' *The Thin Blue Line* (1988). This movie, which contains many re-enactment scenes that have been built carefully from witnesses' statements, depicts the story of Randall Dale Adams, a man who was convicted and sentenced to die because of a murder that he did not commit, and who was eventually exonerated, also thanks to the pressure that the release of the movie exerted for a further analysis of the case. As an able fiction filmmaker, "Morris gives us some truths and withholds others"[47], and even when he inserts an audio interview in which the real murderer almost confesses his crime, the truth that he captures is recognized as such only

> in the context of a film that is manifestly staged and temporally manipulated by the docu-auteur[48].

Unlike reflexive documentaries, the so-called *drama-documentaries* are based on an invented dramatic diegesis staging fictional characters. Despite their refusal to use original footage, these movies are positioned as close to the discourse of factuality because of their ambition to establish metaphors that would enable them to represent "absolute truths inaccessible through

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[45] Jon Bang Carlsen, "How to Invent Reality…", *cit.*, 97.
[46] Jane Roscoe and Craig Hight, *Faking it: Mock-documentary and the Subversion of Factuality* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001), 33.
[47] Linda Williams, "Mirrors Without Memories: Truth, History, and the New Documentary". In *New Challenges for Documentary*, edited by Alan Rosenthal and John Corner (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), 64.
[48] *Ivi.*

traditional documentary methods"[49]. An example is provided by Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List* (1993), the black-and-white movie based on a novel by Thomas Keneally, in which the only flash of color is represented by the red coat of a little girl, metaphor of all the innocent victims of the holocaust.

A further step toward entertainment filmmaking conventions has been made recently by Michael Moore, whom Steven Mintz[50] identifies as the central promoter of the rise of the so-called *docutainment,* a new hybrid genre based on the treatment of non-fiction topics through all the formal means which are normally applied to high production feature film. However, Moore's intentions go far beyond simple entertainment: with a movie such as *Farenheit 9/11* (2004), he placed himself and his work within a tradition of explicitly opinionated and rhetorically refined documentaries, aimed at convincing an audience and at leading to political action.

Finally, a genre of cultural relevance is *mockumentary*. This genre adopts documentary codes and conventions and applies them on completely fictional images. As Roscoe and Hight point out,

> Mock-documentary's point of departure is an audience which is not only familiar with the expectations and assumptions associated with factual codes and conventions, but is ready to explore a much more complex relationship with factual discourse itself.[51]

Paradoxically, the more mockumentaries insist in their using of documentary conventions, the more effective their subversive and deconstructive action is.

The audience is given a great role in determining what is true, and its action can go so far as to engender realities that did not exist before the making of the movie, as it happened consequently to the release of Bob Reiner's *This is Spinal Tap* (1984). This movie, which "documented" and satirized the life of a fictional hard rock music band called Spinal Tap, was so successful that a real rock band called Spinal Tap was founded, which sold albums and conducted a tour in the America. Ten years after the release of the film, a sequel was made, in which a real revival concert was held by another fictional band:

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[49] Jane Roscoe and Craig Hight, *Faking it…, cit.*, 45.

[50] Steven Mintz, "Michael Moore and the Re-Birth of the Documentary", *Film& History: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Film and Television Studies*, no. 35.2 (Spring 2005): 11, http://muse.jhu.edu/login?uri=/journals/film_and_history/v035/35.2mintz.html.

[51] Jane Roscoe and Craig Hight, *Faking it…, cit.*, 21.

> The audience, both within and outside the text, are encouraged to enjoy this contradiction, as part of a parodic stance toward cultural practices of which both they and the band are part.[52]

[52] *Ibidem*, 69.

CONCLUSIONS

In an interview that he gave in connection with the Encounters Documentary Festival in Cape Town in 2000, documentary maker Paul Watson claimed that "documentaries should be subversive".[53] At the end of this brief survey, it does not seem inappropriate to observe that a certain tendency to subversion intrinsically belongs to the very nature of the genre.

First, documentary escapes all attempts to encompass it in a concise, fixed definition, on the contrary, its constant movement toward innovation engenders

> an ongoing dialogue that draws on common characteristics that take on new and distinct form, like an ever-changing chameleon[54].

Moreover, it is subversive in its origins, since it is a form of art which emerged more as a response to a need for social action than as a form of aesthetic deployment, as well as in its formal development, because

> by its very nature the documentary is experimental and inventive[55].

By its being used as an instrument for more or less explicit propaganda, on a large scale documentary filmmaking plays the subversive function of keeping political and social discussion alive, and by its working within and onto the social imaginary, it enhances "a common understanding that makes possible common practices and a widely shared sense of legitimacy", since

> the function of social imaginary is not limited to the creation of consensus, but may also animate criticism and change[56].

Finally, documentary has proved subversive for its ability to reinvent itself when the cultural changes that took place in the contemporary era challenged its very existence, and for its capacity to push its own limits to such an extent as to converge toward fiction, in order to find new ways to represent not "the Reality", but the problematic plurality of the perceptions of it .

As a conclusion, one can argue with Ellis and McLane that the vitality,

> "the power of documentary and its uniqueness lay exactly in its fusion of social purpose with artistic form"[57].

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[53] Cited in David Wingate, *Confessions of a Documentary Teacher*, *cit*., 99.
[54] Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*, *cit.*, 6.
[55] Philip Dunne, "The Documentary and Hollywood", *cit.*, 167.
[56] Jonathan Kahana, *Intelligence Work*, *cit.*, 1-2.
[57] Jack C Ellis and and Betsy A. McLane, A New History of Documentary Film (New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group, 2005), 154.

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