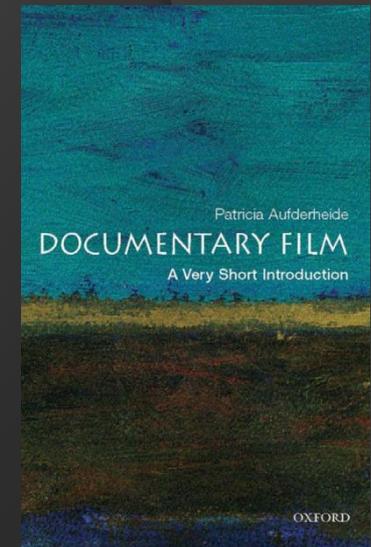




DOCUMENTARY FILM A VERY SHORT INTRODUCTION



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What is a documentary?

A simple answer might be: a movie about real life. And that is precisely the problem; documentaries are **about** real life; they are not real life.

They are not even windows onto real life. They are portraits of real life, using real life as their raw material, **constructed** by artists and technicians who make myriad decisions about what story to tell to whom, and for what purpose.

You might then say:

A movie that does its best to represent real life and that doesn't manipulate it. And yet, *there is no way to make a film without manipulating the information.* Selection of topic, editing, mixing sound are all manipulations.

Broadcast journalist Edward R. Murrow once said, “*Anyone who believes that every individual film must represent a ‘balanced’ picture knows nothing about either balance or pictures.*”

A documentary film tells a story about real life, with claims to **truthfulness**. How to do that honestly, in good faith, is a never ending discussion, with many answers.

Documentary is defined and redefined over the course of time, both by makers and by viewers. Viewers certainly shape the meaning of any documentary, by combining our own knowledge of and interest in the world with how the filmmaker shows it to us.

We do not demand that these things be portrayed objectively, **and they do not have to be the complete truth.** The film maker may employ *poetic license* from time to time and refer to *reality symbolically* (an image of the Colosseum representing, say, a European vacation).

But we do expect that a documentary will be a **fair and honest representation** of somebody's experience of reality. This is the contract with the viewer that teacher Michael Rabiger meant in his classic text: "There are no rules in this young art form, only decisions about where to draw the line and how to remain consistent to the contract you will set up with your audience."

Communications scholar James Carey noted, “Reality is a scarce resource.” **Reality is not what is out there but what we know, understand, and share with each other of what is out there..**

Documentary is an important reality-shaping communication, because of its claims to truth. Documentaries are always grounded in real life, and make a claim to tell us something worth knowing about it.

What does a documentary look like?

...several ways to consider the documentary set of decisions about how to represent reality with the tools available to the filmmaker.

These tools include **sound** (ambient sound, soundtrack music, special sound effects, dialogue, narration); **images** (material shot on location, historical images captured in photographs, video, or objects); **special effects** in audio and video, including animation; **and pacing** (length of scenes, number of cuts, script or storytelling structure)

Film makers choose the way they want to structure a story—which **characters** to develop for viewers, **whose stories** to focus on, **how to resolve the storytelling**.

Since there is nothing natural about the representation of reality in documentary, documentary filmmakers are acutely aware that **all their choices shape the meaning they choose.**

All documentary conventions—that is, habits or cliché's in the formal choices of expression—arise from the need to convince viewers of the authenticity of what they are being told.

SUBGENRES

1. Public Affairs Documentary

- ...specials on such issues as poverty, government welfare programs, corporate corruption, and health care, and other public service programs
- Such documentaries typically undertake an investigative or problem-oriented approach, feature sober exposition with narration and sometimes a host, make liberal use of background footage or b-roll, and focus on representative individuals as they exemplify or illustrate the problem.

- ◎ They promise **an authoritative**, often social-scientific view of an issue, speaking as professional journalists on behalf of a public affected by the problem.

1.A. History and culture

1.B. Public TV

1.C. Government Propaganda

- ◎ Propaganda documentaries are made to convince viewers of an organization's point of view or cause.

2. Advocacy

3. Historical

- ⦿ All history is written for people in the present, searching out for them what historians call a “**useable past**”—a story that is used in the construction of our understanding of ourselves.
- ⦿ History is also written on top of an earlier narrative—sometimes disagreeing, sometimes reinforcing, sometimes asserting a presence where previously there was only an absence.

- ⦿ Documentarians who tell history with film encounter all the challenges facing their film making peers. They face historians' problems with getting data.
- ⦿ Often they represent events for which there is no film, and as often they represent events using material never intended as a historical record.
- ⦿ They turn to photographs, paintings, representative objects, images of key documents, reenactments, and, famously, on-camera experts to substitute for images. They record music that evokes an era, they find singers to sing songs of the time, they build in sound effects to enhance a viewer's sense that what is shown is a genuine moment from the past.

3.A. Biographies

- ⦿ Biography is an immensely popular kind of documentary; it features a close focus on a particular person, promising viewers that they will learn about someone who is recognized as **important** (a politician, a celebrity, an artist, a sports champion), **unsuspectingly important** (an unknown inventor, an unsung social worker, an untutored artist), or **a witness** to history (a Holocaust survivor, Hitler's secretary).
- ⦿ These stories are character-driven by definition, but the filmmaker must interpret that character for the viewer.

4. Ethnographic

- ⦿ Definitionethnographic film as one about other cultures, exotic peoples, musical and food subcultures or customs.

- ⦿ Anthropologists would like to see the term used more scientifically.
- ⦿ Anthropologist Jay Ruby argues that only if a film is produced by a trained ethnographer, using ethnographic field methods, and with the intention of making a peer-reviewed ethnography should it be called an ethnographic film.



Through the Video in the Villages project, Amazonian Indians made films like *Cheiro de Pequi* (The Smell of the Pequi Fruit) that put ethnographic filmmaking into the first-person. Directed by Takuma ~ Kuikuro and Maric Kuikuro, with Vincent Carelli, 2006.

5. Nature

- The nature documentary, also called environmental, conservationist, or wildlife, is now a major subgenre, an established part of the broadcast schedule and a dynamic category.

6. Educational entertainment

- ⦿ In the late nineteenth century, scientific experiments with photography pushed forward the creation of motion pictures.
- ⦿ Scientists seized upon cinema **as a way to document objectively their observations**, but not only did they inevitably edit and design their films (something not always obvious to other scientists), mitigating the pure observational quality, but they also privileged the visual aspect of scientific observation.

Conclusion

- The documentary idea was not basically a film idea at all , but “a new idea for public education.” (John Grierson, 1942)
- The documentary form has evolved with technological possibilities. The advent of sound, color, and 16mm all transformed the way that filmmakers could capture reality and tell stories. The advent of video dramatically changed who could capture reality and expanded the range of people telling stories.

Documentarians will continue to wrestle productively with questions such as:

- ① How does a filmmaker responsibly represent reality?
- ② What truths will be told?
- ③ Why are they important, and to whom?
- ④ What is the filmmaker's responsibility to and relationship with the subjects of the work?
- ⑤ Who gets the opportunity to make documentaries, how are they seen, and under what constraints?

- ◎ The problem of how to represent reality will continue to be worth wrestling with, because the documentary says, “*This really happened, and it was important enough to show you. Watch it.*”
- ◎ ***Documentary makes connections, grounded in real life experience that is undeniable because you can see and hear it.***