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Dogme & Documentary
Strand Introduction

With its rules of hand-held cameras, no artificial lights and the forbidding of genre conventions, Dogme 95 created a fresh aesthetic to rival the constipated mainstream. But in the UK has Dogme been misunderstood by lazy commissioning editors as a cheap way of making late night television, cynically reduced to a style, rather than a movement? Can and should the British Film Institute learn from the Danish model and revitalise the culture? Like the French New Wave before it, Dogme's back to basics approach derives from the documentary tradition, taking to the streets and finding the instant, capturing the truth. In the era of Big Brother and Pop Idol, the appetite for reality TV in this country has never been greater, yet the documentary film continues to be marginalised to festival screenings and the arthouse. Has the documentary syntax become smoothed out and dumbed down for a prime time format? Can the formula be reclaimed and reinvented for its cinematic origins?
Introducing the Documentary

Student / Teacher Activity

- What do we mean by a documentary film?
- What type of film do you expect to see when watching a documentary?
- What did you expect when watching a documentary film?

Now watch a documentary and answer the following questions:

- What was the documentary about?
- What film devices and/or techniques were used to make the documentary?
- How is watching a documentary different from watching a fiction film?

Task

Combine the findings from above and summarise under the following headings:

- Documentary title
- Subject and information gained
- Devices/techniques used to present information
- Experience of watching

Task

What other documentaries have you seen recently and what devices did they use? Add them to your list.
What is a Documentary?

Firstly, documentaries concentrate upon actual evidence relating to real events in history and the world around us rather than fictional stories. For example, a documentary may consider an issue, such as, the smuggling of illegal drugs in Britain by filming the activities of police officers, whereas a fiction film about smuggling may have famous film actors playing characters in a tense and exciting story.

Secondly, the way documentaries are made, that is the devices/techniques used to film real people and real events or explain historical events and scientific discoveries tend to be different from fiction films.

These devices/techniques may include the use of:

- commentaries
- archive ‘actual footage’ of events
- interviews with participants in those events
- location filming and sound recording
- editing techniques that emphasise and illustrate points in a scene and the overall story

Thirdly, documentaries speak about or allow others to speak for themselves. The documentary filmmaker often acts as a representative of the public. The people involved play themselves - social actors - that is people in their everyday roles and activities such as nurses, doctors, juvenile delinquents, mothers or fathers etc.

Fourthly, documentaries provide a particular view, interpretation or understanding of the evidence put before us. Documentaries rely upon a story or narrative.

This may be for example:

- Solving a problem. Why did the Titanic sink?
- An argument. Should drugs be legalised?
- An assertion or claim. Life for the poor in nineteenth century England was very bad.

It is such factors that help you recognise that what you are actually watching is a documentary film.

Documentaries therefore are often seen as informing or entertaining us about real situations and real issues. When telling their story, they are in part called documentaries because they are not fiction films. They are regarded as a different type of film with different aims and objectives with different approaches and styles, that is conventions.
What do we expect from a Documentary film?

Documentaries are not just about entertainment. More importantly, the documentary filmmaker hopes to reveal to us something we are probably unaware of about the past or present. This sets up for the viewer a series of expectations of what a documentary may include, for example:

- The nature of their content may be seen as ‘serious’. It represents the historical world, not a fictional one, by focusing upon social, historical, scientific or other types of issues. For example, explaining battles in the Second World War or how an airport or a hospital emergency unit works.
- The content is taken in some form from real life. What we see in the documentary is real, that is authentic. For example, it will use actual film of combat, real passengers and airline officials, real doctors/nurses and accident victims.
- The way it is filmed or the images used are representative of the subject and help us understand the issue under consideration for example, eye witness accounts, officials speaking to camera, the editing of material etc.
- Often a commentary may be used on the soundtrack to explain something and help us make sense of what we are watching.

The documentary puts forward an argument or a case through which we expect to learn something. By explaining events or putting forward an argument documentaries have an instrumental power to alter the way we think about the world. They can educate and inform and perhaps help change our own attitudes and minds.

How are these expectations fulfilled?

A very important point to remember is that documentaries are not reproductions of reality but representations of reality.

Task

Using a dictionary define the following terms:

- Reproduction
- Representation
- Authentic

What is the difference between a reproduction and representation? Illustrate your answer with an example.

As mentioned earlier, any documentary presents a particular understanding of the subject under consideration. There is no one-way of filming people and no one-way you can explain historical incidents. Choices have to be made by the
filmmaker, therefore a documentary can only present a particular point of view. Sometimes the story that unfolds before us is completely different to what we may have thought possible before, this is because of the way the filmmaker has decided to present the subject matter.

**Task**

A documentary is to be made on ‘The Day in the Life of a School/College’ therefore consider the following:

- What film techniques would you use?
- What would you regard as the important issues to include?
- Who and what would you want to include?
- What shape would you give to the narrative?

**Task**

Imagine that the documentary is to be made by three different individuals in the school/college as follows:

a) student
b) teacher
c) member of the refectory staff

In what ways do you think that the finished documentaries may be similar and different?

The life of the school on that day of filming is a representation from the particular point of view of that group making the documentary. It is the same school, perhaps the same individuals filmed, but the experiences and understandings of what being at school/college on that day means will be different for the three groups.

The life we are presented with as a viewer of the documentary is made up of decisions and choices made by the filmmaker(s). Their choices are influenced by what they see as important. A documentary therefore is in the words of the famous documentary filmmaker and producer John Grierson the creative treatment of actuality. It is a partial representation of life from a particular point of view.
Forms or Modes of the Documentary Filmmaking Style

The documentary as a film form has been around since the nineteen twenties. Many technical changes have occurred in filming since then as well as the conditions under which filmmakers work. Over time such changes have shaped the nature and form of the documentary film. For example, technical advances in cameras and sound recording equipment, the arrival of video and now digital recording systems have given filmmakers new more flexible methods to film and edit material. Also, the organisations funding the production of films have expanded and particularly with the arrival of television the reasons behind why documentaries are made in the first place and in what particular form they are made have also been influenced.

Today the filmmaker has a variety of documentary styles to choose from. Many of these styles are used today and some filmmakers may mix different styles or approaches within the same documentary. It is these styles/approaches that provide the formal ‘language’ of the documentary film. That is the techniques used in making documentary films that help create a particular style of representation. It is these styles/representations that are often recognised and associated by viewers as signalling they are watching a documentary. However, with technical developments and changes in documentary production has seen the boundaries between the documentary and fiction film becoming increasingly blurred.

What follows is an outline to a number of these major approaches and the styles associated with them. The examples chosen contain significant elements for the particular approach they are associated with but may contain elements of other approaches. For example, the documentary series Seven Up (1964 and onwards) is a classic documentary series of a longitudinal study of children from the age of 7 onwards and is still in progress. Over time this series includes commentary, an interactive style and now archive footage of the children.

Task

- Screen clips/examples of the different types of documentary films to illustrate the differing forms of film practice.
- Take a short sequence from each and break it down into a rudimentary storyboard to show how the narrative is constructed.
- Discuss the advantages and disadvantages for the filmmaker in the use of each type of approach. (Some points for discussion are provided.)

Record your findings in the table on the following page:
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Performative</th>
<th>Reflexive</th>
<th>Cinema Vérité</th>
<th>Fly on the wall</th>
<th>Direct Cinema</th>
<th>Poetic documentary</th>
<th>Classic documentary</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Documentary Format</strong></td>
<td>Definition of Format</td>
<td>Devices/Technique</td>
<td>Examples</td>
<td>Issues for Debate</td>
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**Classic documentary**

**Poetic documentary**

**Direct Cinema**

**Fly on the wall**

**Cinéma Vérité**

**Reflexive**

**Performative**
The ‘Classic’ or Expository Documentary

Approach

The major characteristic is the use of commentary to organise the visual material either shot in the field and/or taken from archives. Sometimes referred to as the ‘Voice of God’ the commentary is an exposition, that is it tells you how to interpret the material that you see in front of you. The filmmaker is represented by the commentary that is used to organise the material so that the images and sounds illustrate the points being made by the commentary.

Techniques/Style

The commentary may be given off or on screen. The classic documentary may use a compilation of archive film, music on the soundtrack, the reconstructions of events, interviews with participants or academic specialists – that is, people with authority – who have an informed understanding. The impression given is of an objective and informed analysis and judgement of the issue/events under consideration. The drama in this type of documentary can lie in, for example the need to find a solution, the unfamiliar story that is being told or the nature of the images used.

Aim and Objectives

- to present a clear story or narrative
- explaining what events mean
- offer some solution to the problem or issue considered

Examples

- Housing Problems (1935) considers the need for slum clearance and the rehousing of slum dwellers. This is a classic example of this type of documentary from the British Documentary Movement of the 1930s.
- The World at War, a prestigious television documentary series about the background to and the consequences of the Second World War (Dir - Ted Childs, Michael Darlow, 1974).
- The Nazis: A Lesson from History (BBC, 1997)
- The Cold War (Jeremy Isaacs/BBC, 1998)
Programmes can be found on the major terrestrial channels that consider scientific, wildlife and historical themes.

**Issues for Debate**

- Can issues be analysed succinctly and with certainty?
- Emphasis and stress is put on those themes regarded as important to the narrative.
- To what extent can the viewer believe that the commentary is objective and that the presentation is not partial?
- What is included in the documentary is determined by the filmmaker but what is left out?
- Those involved may have little understanding of what the finished documentary is about or if they do how much control have they over being represented?
- Does the documentary narrative reflect a common sense point of view of the time, which is taken for granted and not questioned?
The Poetic Documentary

Approach

Developed at the same time as the ‘classic’ documentary and often uses similar techniques. The emphasis is more upon an aesthetic and subjective representation of life, which is how we live life and experience the world around us, rather than a commentary upon an issue or event. For example, people are located in the world of urban or rural life to make comparisons between modern and traditional life.

Techniques/Style

The poetic documentary may stress mood and tone through the subject matter, lighting, camera angles and editing. It appears to stress a more subjective response by the filmmaker to his/her material. Commentary may be minimal with the focus upon the images and sounds.

Aim and Objectives

- to evoke a more artistic understanding of the world
- to make us think about the nature and meaning of life

Examples

- Song of Ceylon (1933-4) - The traditional life of Ceylon and the arrival of international commerce.
- Coalface (1935)
- Spare Time (1939) - A depiction of working class leisure in the industrial north of England.

Issues for Debate

- Emphasis and stress is put on those themes regarded as important by the filmmaker.
- What is included in the documentary is determined by the filmmaker but what is left out?
- Does the documentary narrative reflect a common sense point of view of the time that is taken for granted and not questioned?
Direct Documentary

Approach

This type of documentary emerged in the 1950s when new portable cameras and sound recording systems had been developed. Up to this point filming outside the studio had relied upon bulky and unwieldy equipment now filmmakers were able to be more mobile and flexible in their approach to filming. Smaller, portable equipment allowed filmmakers to ‘merge’ in with their surroundings. Being less conspicuous they believed they could be part of the event, to look, listen and even speak on the spot to people and engage in face-to-face conversations. They had the choice either to observe and/or participate if they so wished.

Out of these technical developments came two significant types of documentary the observational fly on the wall approach and interactive cinéma vérité. Some filmmakers regard them as very similar but others see them as very distinct forms of documentary approach, but what these two approaches share is the idea of giving to the viewer a testimony – ‘I was there and this happened.’
Observational Documentary - Fly on the wall

Approach

As the title suggests this technique stresses the non-intervention of the filmmaker acting as an uninvolved bystander merely recording the sights and sounds that occur in front of the camera. In doing so the camera and soundtrack captures what happens in everyday situations. This includes people’s behaviour, overheard speech and conversations as people interact with each other. In some ways this approach is like an unscripted fiction film. We observe and overhear people and individuals in situations and watch their responses. People ‘perform’ before our eyes and we follow their responses to events that affect them. In its pure form there is no commentary or music on the soundtrack, re-enactments and interviews are not used. Because what is being filmed is unpredictable it may mean poor sound, images or ‘wobbly’ camerawork.

Techniques/Style

The main technique in the field is to use long takes of specific moments in time and place. This may well create a huge amount of material that must be edited into a form which gives the impression of real time while ensuring it is appropriate for the assumed length of the documentary. The dramatic element in this type of documentary comes from our involvement and identification with those being filmed.

Aim and Objectives

- The filmmaker is secondary to the action. What we see is supposedly what would have happened if the camera and tape recorder were not present.
- The audience has the opportunity to see revealed people’s attitudes and behaviour and the meanings behind social situations that may not be obvious or apparent to the participants.
- It encourages the idea that we are watching a slice of unaffected ‘real life’ allowing us to get ‘under the skin’ of the participants.
- It is assumed that there is a high degree of indexicality, that is the image we see, actually reflects what has happened.

Examples

- The Police (Roger Graef, BBC, 1982)
Issues for Debate

- The technique is the closest in attempting to capture real life?
- The material organises the filmmaker not the other way around?
- Does the presence of the camera and filmmaker still alter the reality of the situation filmed?
- Does the documentary respect the lives of those shown? To what extent are they represented ‘objectively’?
- To what extent should the opinions of those filmed be represented? If so how should they be represented?
- If dangerous situations emerge should the filmmaker intervene or carry on filming?
Interactive Documentary - Cinéma Vérité

Approach

In this approach the filmmaker does not hide his/her presence. The aim is not just to record events but also to listen and ask questions as well. The filmmaker may be seen or just heard on the soundtrack actually participating in the documentary process, however the focus remains with those being interviewed.

Techniques/Style

Individuals and groups may be asked to explain themselves or justify their actions. Commentary is not used but editing provides continuity. Unusual shots or framing may be used to draw attention not just to the speaker but some other aspect of the scene. For example, filming in a house the camera may move to the décor while the interviewee continues to speak on the soundtrack. The comments combined with the visual representation of how the room has been furnished or decorated may reveal something about the interviewee’s character which reinforces what they say or is not particularly evident from their statements.

Aims and Objectives

- To go past what is expected of observational documentary.
- They reject the ‘classic expositional approach which puts all the control in the hands of the film maker.

Examples

- Shoah (Dir - Claude Lanzmann, 1985)
- Rosie the Riveter (Dir - Joseph Santley, 1944)

Issues for Debate

- What influences occur when the filmmaker and the subjects interact with each other?
- Who has the overall power, the filmmaker or those being filmed?
- To what extent is it acceptable for the filmmaker to intervene?
- How accurate and objective is the filming?
- How much privacy should the interviewee be allowed?
Reflexive Documentary

Approach

This form of documentary attempts to make clear to the viewer that in fact they are watching a documentary – that is a type of film constructed by a filmmaker which presents or represents the world in a particular way. They call into question the assumptions behind the other forms of documentary by being ‘self-conscious’ in form and style. They attempt to disrupt the accepted notions of documentary by raising questions about the relationship between the filmmaker and the viewer rather than the filmmaker and the subject of the documentary.

Techniques/Style

The filmmaker may draw attention to the film-making process by talking on the soundtrack or appearing on screen showing his/her involvement in the process of filming people and events. Sometimes they may use actors to ‘play’ particular individuals because actors may be better able to represent what those people think and feel and be able to state their case more realistically than they could themselves on film. Editing can include unexpected cutting between different images or very long takes that go beyond what we may normally expect. This unsettles the viewer and encourages questions about what they are watching.

Aims and Objectives

- To emphasise to the viewer that the documentary is a construction which tells a fabricated story.
- To make the audience think about what they are actually watching.
- To raise questions about representing reality and realism.

Examples

- The Man with a Movie Camera - Chelovek s kinoapparatom (Dir - Dziga Vertov, 1929)
- The Thin Blue Line (TV series, Dir - John Birkin, 1995)

Issues for Debate

- Is it possible to draw the viewer into thinking about whether the documentary is a construction of reality?
- Can this form of documentary adequately represent anyone or anything?
- Can actors be used in a documentary?
Performative Documentary

Approach

Similar to the poetic style this type of documentary asks questions about how we understand and make sense of the world. Emphasis is put upon the subjective nature of understanding and how we as individuals ‘perform’ different roles and identities in life. That is as individuals we make sense of the world through our experiences, emotional responses and our memories. These are shaped by how we see ourselves and others see us. For example, this can involve the filmmaker, as well as the people being filmed, in an exploration of what it is like to be unemployed, female or a member of an ethnic minority.

Techniques/Style

A filmmaker may use an autobiographical approach to explore ideas of identity. This may include re-enacting past events and the use of actors. The emphasis is to move away from supposedly realist representations of the world found in other types of documentaries such as the observational documentary.

Aims and Objectives

● To emphasise that knowledge about our world is not fixed but relies upon how we interpret life and events and how others see us.
● To consider the emotional and expressive, that is the subjective rather than the factual and supposedly objective.

Issues for Debate

● Can a documentary be so subjective without becoming a fiction film?
Fact or Fiction?

All documentaries are concerned with telling a story. The process of making a documentary is in some ways like a fiction film, choices have to be made concerning what is to be filmed, how it will be filmed and lastly how the material filmed will be edited into a narrative.

Each of these decisions is influenced by the assumptions, values and attitudes of those involved in the making of the film. A documentary is the product of human decision-making much like a fiction film. It is a social construction, that is what we see on the screen is a representation of the world around us or an argument or statement about the subject matter filmed from a particular point of view and based upon particular assumptions.

There are pressures and choices to be made at every stage of production that may influence the overall meaning and style of the finished documentary.

For example:

**The Organisation**
- Who is providing the funding?
- Government?
- Commercial Television?
- Charity?

**The Filmmaker**
- Why choose this subject?
- What story will the documentary tell?
- Will the director have complete control?

**How much funding?**
- Is there a time limit on production?
- How much research and filming?
- How will it be edited?

**Choice of material to be included?**
- What will be filmed?
- How will it be filmed?

**Why do they want a documentary made?**
- Propaganda/ ‘Impartial Investigation’?
- Ratings/advertising/competition?
- Education?

**Are there ethical issues involved?**
- Need for ‘entertaining’ material?
- Choice of participants?

**What type of audience is it aimed at?**
Docu-Drama/
Drama Documentary

Whereas the documentary can use a dramatic style of presentation, similarly directors of feature films have adopted the documentary style. Directors such as Ken Loach use a combination of actors and/or ordinary people to be in their films. They also use many of the techniques associated with documentary filming such as natural lighting, hand-held cameras, improvised dialogue and stories based on social issues such as mental health, housing problems, industrial disputes and social inequality that documentaries address.
Documentary Resources

Film Education Resources

- CD-Rom Pearl Harbor to construct own documentary out of film footage provided. One showing positive/other negative representations.
- Documenting D-Day study guide/video - Make a short documentary using two of the modes of documentary. Assess the advantages and disadvantages of each approach.

Essays

- To what extent can the observational documentary style filmmaking provide a truthful account of life?
- With reference to two examples outline two types of documentary format and assess the usefulness of each approach.
- Compare and contrast two types of documentary format. Illustrate your answer with examples.

Further Reading

- Introduction to Documentary by Bill Nichols (Indiana University Press, Bloomington & Indianapolis, 2001)
- The Art of Record by John Corner (Manchester University Press, 1996)
- Claiming the Real: The Documentary Film Revisited by Brian Winston (British Film Institute, 1995)

Videos

The following films have been available through ‘Movie Mail’ on the internet:

- Britain in the Thirties – British Film Institute. Includes the poetic Song of Ceylon, Coal Face, and Spare Time and along with the ‘classic’ Housing Problems plus a variety of early avant-garde films.
- 30s Britain Vol.1 – The GPO Classic Collection. Includes the poetic Coal Face, Spare Time, two ‘classic’ documentaries A Job in a Million and The City also an early experiment with sound and image Granton Trawler.
- 30s Britain Vol.2 – The GPO Classic Collection. The Saving of Bill Blewitt and North Sea two early examples of the ‘drama documentary’ using real fishermen to act out a reconstruction of a vessel in distress (North Sea) and a fictional story to promote Post Office Savings (Bill Blewitt) also two ‘classic’ approaches one
including acting (The Islanders) and the other poetic elements (A Midsummer Day’s Work).

**Other films available include**

- The Last Bolshevik – Chris Marker
- Triumph of the Will and Olympia – Leni Riefenstahl
- The Great War
- The World at War
- The People’s Century