**Documentary**

SUMMARY

Documentaries involve self-conscious reflections on modern life. Early newsreels and [actualities](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JGugm8Dzmuc) displayed film’s capacity to document events and everyday life as they happened, leading viewers to believe “what you see is what there was” and contributing to documentary’s association with fact and truth. The transition from document to documentary occurred when filmmakers like Robert Flaherty and Dziga Vertov expressed a perspective on what they recorded. This perspective became a way to persuade, especially in national documentaries and propaganda. After World War II, growing scepticism prompted filmmakers to pursue more immediate and spontaneous experiences and invite audiences to interpret material for themselves. Since then, documentaries have highlighted and examined conventions of representation and documentary theory and practice, a process resembling modernism’s questioning of knowledge, authority, and authorship.

MAIN ENTRY:

Since documentary’s beginning, filmmakers have constantly searched for ways to analyse modern life and explore human nature. The formal experiments resulting from this search have catalysed the creation of new documentary practices over time that address key issues within documentary filmmaking and modernism: the distortions of representation, the ideology inherent within art, and the construction of reality and truth in film and knowledge.

Documentary’s development

*Newsreels and actualities*

Early unedited newsreels and actuality films, like those of [Auguste and Louis Lumière](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JGugm8Dzmuc) and [Thomas Edison](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CsFKt4i9vcA) in the 1890s, documented modern life and displayed film’s capacity to capture everyday and historical events as they happened. These films gave viewers a chance to witness the unusual or see the familiar in a new way, but they also leveraged film’s indexicality, the physical relationship between the object photographed and its image, and provided a vivid impression of fidelity that led viewers to believe “what you see is what there was.”

*Ethnographic, city symphony, and avant-garde films*

According to Bill Nichols, the transition from document to documentary occurred in the 1920s with the production of ethnographic films, like Flaherty’s [*Nanook of the North*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bVbQVWkdcFk) (1922), considered by many to be the first documentary and Merian C. Cooper and Ernest Schoedsack’s [*Grass: A Nation’s Battle for Life*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xZQlRgj1UwM)(1925); city symphony films, including Walter Ruttmann’s *Berlin: Die Sinfonie der Großstadt* ([*Berlin: Symphony of a Great City*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5ej84nN1WcE), 1927) and Dziga Vertov’s *Chelovek s kinoapparatom* ([*Man with a Movie Camera*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4RZB69JUsAU), 1929); and avant-garde films, such as Man Ray’s *Le Retour à la Raison* ([*Return to Reason*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zwLD5WWQptw), 1923) and Fernand Léger and Dudley Murphy’s [*Ballet Mécanique*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9SgsqmQJAq0)(1924). Filmmakers drew their material from the historical world but began to express a perspective on what they recorded by integrating poetic experimentation, narrative storytelling, and rhetorical oratory with indexical documentation. Film’s indexicality indicates a direct connection to the historical world and provides empirical evidence that substantiates a film’s perspective. Poetic experimentation produces that perspective by prioritizing the filmmaker’s unique view over the camera’s ability to record. These formal experiments also emphasize the constructed nature of onscreen reality and the influence of authorial voice. Using narrative, filmmakers subtly reveal their perspective through plot and character development. Since narratives tend to dramatize conflict and seek order, they also became effective instruments for posing problems and solutions. Persuasion became a documentary convention when filmmakers integrated indexicality, experimentation, and narrative to align viewers’ thoughts and feelings with the values and perspectives of the film. Creativity and actuality merged with ideology, morality, and social practice and gave rise to the use of documentary in national cinema movements around the globe.

*National cinema and propaganda*

In the 1930s, governments around the world were using non-fiction film to consolidate national identity and support for their policies. [John Grierson](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9_CatrGAI2s) in Great Britain, [Pare Lorentz](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3L8IseE7W-Q) in the United States, and [Leni Riefenstahl](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xGSnVAjqQFw) in Germany provided documentary cinema with an institutional base by cultivating government production support and gathering a community of practitioners as they created films that oriented citizens to affiliate with the nation and support state policies. They also established a propaganda documentary practice, with Riefenstahl’s *Triumph des Willens* ([*Triumph of the Will*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OitnMp8MWb0), 1935) and [Grierson’s counter-propaganda](http://www.cbc.ca/player/Digital+Archives/War+and+Conflict/Second+World+War/Propaganda+in+WWII/ID/1479106316/) for the Canadian National Film Board. Grierson, a theorist and filmmaker, also influenced documentary’s institutionalization by championing select conventions and encouraging specific audience expectations. He was the first to give documentary a name and define it as the “creative treatment of actuality.” In his “First Principles of Documentary” (1934-1936), he provides one of the first elaborated theories of documentary and advocates a particular practice. Drawing from Flaherty, who lived among and collaborated with the Inuits who were *Nanook of the North*’s subjects, Grierson insists dramatic stories can be drawn from an intimate understanding and interpretive presentation of the raw material of reality. But in contrast to Flaherty’s embrace of the exotic individual, Grierson promotes socially responsible stories grounded in city streets, factories, slums, and marketplaces. These stories provide “a cross section of reality” that reveals the modern world’s workings by demonstrating how social forces impact individuals. His theory, and debate with Flaherty, touch on a long-standing documentary issue: how to adapt practice to the “mind and spirit of the times” to portray compelling stories that examine a changing world and our changing understanding of it.

World War II changed the power dynamic inscribed in documentaries. The war’s traumas contributed to a scepticism of authority. Also, technological advancements in filmmaking equipment produced mobile cameras and audio recorders that freed filmmakers to pursue more immediate and spontaneous experiences. These postwar films attacked conventions and tradition and worked to capture an unmediated understanding of reality. Perhaps most importantly, filmmakers invested authority and knowledge in viewers rather than in a government, author, or narrator. They invited audiences to discover insights about the world for themselves.

*Direct cinema and cinéma vérité*

In the late 1950s, Michel Brault in Quebec and Robert Drew and Ricky Leacock in Boston pioneered the [direct cinema](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8TsAnUmIzYY) movement, which presents dramas of people living through significant events. In Brault and Gilles Groulx’s [*Les raquetteurs*](https://www.nfb.ca/film/raquetteurs_en)(1958) and Drew’s [*Primary*](http://www.tcm.com/mediaroom/video/737053/Primary-Movie-Clip-A-Candidate-s-View.html)(1960), we can see evidence of an observational style, with the camera acting as a “fly on the wall” in the midst of stressful or diverting situations to encourage subjects to ignore the camera and be (or act) like themselves and thus reveal truths about human nature. Though the stories seem to tell themselves, extensive filming and editing is required to give the material shape and drama. As this observational form developed, practitioners disagreed on the role of filmmaker involvement. Direct cinemafilmmakers, like Albert and David Maysles, who gave the movement its name, aspire to invisibility so they can objectively observe events and acts as they take place, though their subjective understanding of the situation prompts them to film certain elements within it. They look for epiphanies in the “spontaneous juxtapositions” of captured moments and present them to viewers to interpret. In contrast, [*cinéma vérité*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S0dOLHemSgs) filmmakers, like Jean Rouch and Chris Marker, espouse the theories of Vertov’s *kino pravda,* or “cinema truth,” and believe filmmakers should be provocateurs, creating circumstances that reveal truths, since invisibility and objectivity are impossible when filmmaking influences the events filmed. They believe the camera should be a catalyst for revelation, by having subjects film their experiences, as in Rouch’s [*Moi, un Noir*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RVfA_HJk-2c)(1958), or engage in reflection, as in Rouch and Edgar Morin’s *Chronique d'un été* ([*Chronicle of a Summer*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VpxVtFQgS4o), 1961). These different approaches may be explained by the filmmakers’ backgrounds. Most direct cinema filmmakers were journalists while *cinéma vérité* proponents had backgrounds in anthropology or sociology. Other observational filmmakers, notably Frederick Wiseman, fall in between, believing filmmakers should capture events as they unfold without interference but also acknowledge the influence of the filmmaker’s presence and interpretation.

*Social documentary*

Inspired by direct cinema and *cinéma vérité*’s interest in individual responses to historical situations, socially committed filmmakers in the 1960s used documentary to discover and define the denied and devalued realities of silenced or voiceless populations. According to Julianne Burton, documentary became a source of counterinformation, a means of reconstructing historical events and challenging elite interpretations, especially in postcolonial Latin American countries. It also became an instrument for exploring cultural differences by eliciting and preserving the testimony of those otherwise unable to record their experiences. Additionally characterizing this movement was a widespread belief that, since filmmaking reproduces intellectual, political, social, and economic contexts, one could change these contexts by changing the filmmaking process. Argentines Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino developed the concept of *Third Cinema*. In contrast to Hollywood films (“first cinema”) and European new wave cinemas (“second cinema”), which they believed condition viewers to accept global capitalism and its ideology, third cinema films are committed to “constructing a liberated personality” through self-consciously revolutionary form and content that engenders political action, an approach exemplified by their *La hora de los hornos* ([*Hour of the Furnaces*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3v0e1w3YeZE), 1968).

*Mockumentary and fake documentary*

The mockumentary form of the 1970s and 1980s continue these reflections on the influence of the filmmaker, conventions, and techniques to mediate documentary’s ability to get at truth. Mockumentaries work to produce consciousness and uncertainty about documentary’s codes, assumptions, and processes. Films like Jim McBride’s [*David Holzman’s Diary*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UDsRhMVpADw) (1967) and Rob Reiner’s [*This is Spinal Tap*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4xgx4k83zzc)(1984) apply documentary conventions to a fictional narrative to challenge documentary’s truth claims, implied moral and social content, and appeals to viewers’ trust. Fake documentaries like Mads Brügger’s [*The Ambassador*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6T5LOf5yQIo) (2011) and Casey Affleck’s [*I’m Still Here*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WEI4LUqhfn8)(2010) integrate fiction film conventions or fictional constructs into real-life situations to “force” lies to surface. And self-reflexive films like Orson Welles’s [*F for Fake*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IXTIxPeaASM) (1973) appear to explore a subject but actually examine the illusions produced by filmmakers.

*Personal essay documentaries*

Personal essay documentaries use such self-reflexivity to challenge conventions and their social and political implications. According to Paul Arthur, this politicized form emerged after World War II as part of the philosophical meditations on the Holocaust (as in Alain Resnais’s *Nuit et brouillard* [[*Night and Fog*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KQ2VtZ1P1SU)]), totalitarianism, and colonialism. In the 1980s, documentary essays addressed the intersection of personal experience and social history as individual lives became lenses for universal issues and questions. Michael Moore’s films, including [*Roger & Me*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6FCs4WQyaFE)(1989) and *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004), exemplify this form. They valorise unstable knowledge by contrasting found footage and sound with original footage and interviews. Commentary, intertitles, editing, cinematography, and sound manifest a strong filmmaker voice. Fragmented narratives present alternate views and contradictions and self-reflexive structures replicate the process of making sense.

Documentary theory

Bill Nichols identifies six principal modes that encompass these diverse documentary practices and help give definition to documentary as a genre. The [*expository mode*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vTFuGHWTIqI), often associated with documentary generally, develops an argument through a series of assertions, usually made by an invisible voice-over narrator, and the film’s images provide evidence for these assertions. The impressionistic and lyrical films of the [*poetic mode*](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8_4VPoZKqqE) emphasize visual associations, description, and tone or rhythm to make indirect assertions about the world. In the [*observational mode*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fEJpu5LCpQ4)*,* unobtrusive camera techniques allow filmmakers to observe events that reveal insights about humans in ordinary and extraordinary situations. Filmmakers working in the [*participatory mode*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MrlQAlR9Dds) believe the filmmaking process influences the events filmed so the interactions between filmmaker and subject become crucial to the film’s narrative. The [*reflexive mode*](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cId3MgHgKpo)calls attention to documentary’s assumptions and conventions to increase awareness of how they construct reality. And in the [*performative mode*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tWuPLxMBjM8), which replaces objectivity with emotion, personal films enacting particular events provide viewers with the opportunity to share a filmmaker’s experience and unique perspective.

However, the diverse approaches to documentary practice demonstrate the difficulty of defining documentary. Filmmaker-theorists like Trinh T. Minh-ha even insist there is no such thing as “documentary,” since the concept applies to a style, genre, and set of persuasive techniques. Her challenge exemplifies recent attempts to reconsider what constitutes documentary and documentary theories. These debates provide an opportunity to question knowledge and its formation. How do we know what we know? What assumptions comprise that knowledge? And how is knowledge expressed through the conventions of cultural forms like film, which can reinforce or challenge what and how we know?

References and further reading:

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List of works:

*Annabelle Serpentine Dance* (William K.L. Dickson & William Heise, US, 1894, 1 min)

*Ballet Mécanique* (Fernand Léger and Dudley Murphy, France, 1924, 19 min)

*Berlin: Die Sinfonie der Grosstadt* (*Berlin: Symphony of a Great City*, Walter Ruttmann, Germany, 1927, 65 min)

*Chelovek s kino-apparatom* (*Man with a Movie Camera,* Dziga Vertov, USSR, 1929, 68 min)

*Chronique d’un été* (*Chronicle of a Summer*, Jean Rouch & Edgar Morin, France, 1961, 85 min)

*David Holzman’s Diary* (Jim McBride, US, 1967, 74 min)

*Grass: A Nation’s Battle for Life* (Merian C. Cooper and Ernest B. Schoedsack, US, 1925, 71 min)

*I’m Still Here* (Casey Affleck, US, 2010, 108 min)

*La hora de los hornos: Notas y testimonios sobre el neocolonialismo, la violencia y la liberación* (*Hour of the Furnaces*, Fernando Solanas & Octavio Getino, 1968, 260 min).

*La sortie des usines Lumière* (*Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory*, Louis Lumière, France, 1895, 1 min)

*L’arrivée d’un train à La Ciotat* (*Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat*, Auguste & Louis Lumière, France, 1896, 1 min)

*Le retour à la raison* (*Return to Reason*, Man Ray, France, 1923, 3 min)

*Les raquetteurs* (*The Snowshoers*, Michel Brault & Gilles Groulx, Canada, 1958, 15 min)

*Moi, un Noir* (*I, a Negro,* Jean Rouch, France, 1958, 70 min)

*Nanook of the North* (Robert Flaherty, US/France, 1922, 79 min)

*Nuit et brouillard* (*Night and Fog*, Alain Resnais, France, 1955, 32 min)

*Primary* (Robert Drew, US, 1960, 60 min)

*Repas de bébé* (*Baby’s Dinner*, Louis Lumière, France, 1895, 1 min)

*Roger & Me* (Michael Moore, US, 1989, 91 min)

*Sandow, No. 1* (William K.L. Dickson, US, 1894, 1 min)

*The Ambassador* (Mads Brügger, Denmark, 2011, 93 min)

*The Kiss* (William Heise, US, 1896, 1 min)

*This is Spinal Tap* (Rob Reiner, US, 1984, 82 min)

*Titicut Follies* (Frederick Wiseman, US, 1967, 84 min)

*Triumph des Willens* (*Triumph of the Will*, Leni Riefenstahl, Germany, 1935, 110 min)

*Vérités et mensonges* (*F for Fake*, Orson Welles, France, Iran, West Germany, 1973, 89 min)

Sarah Childress

Bowdoin College