



Viewing Documentaries

LEARNING FROM THE TV SCREEN

What is a documentary?



DOCUMENTARIES ARE AN ATTEMPT TO DOCUMENT REALITY AND EDUCATE AUDIENCES. IN GENERAL, DOCUMENTARIES SHARE ONE OR MORE OF THE FOLLOWING GOALS:



TO DOCUMENT A SUBJECT IN ORDER TO PRESERVE KNOWLEDGE.



TO REVEAL SOMETHING ABOUT THE SUBJECT OF THE FILM.



TO ALLOW THE VIEWER TO EXPERIENCE WHAT IT'S LIKE TO BE THE SUBJECT.



TO ADVOCATE ON BEHALF OF THE SUBJECT.

Why make a documentary?

- ▶ Film-makers make documentaries to show the viewer a part of the world or community that they do not know about, or about issues in society which are significant, timely or controversial.

PRODUCTION _____

DIRECTOR _____

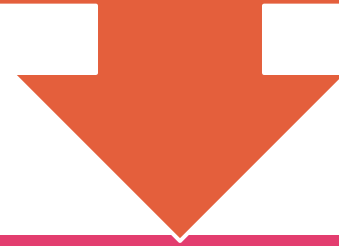
CAMERA _____

SCENE _____

TAKE _____

Types of Documentaries

Film-makers make documentaries on all sorts of topics.



Some of these topics include:

Nature (plants, animals, places,)

Environmental issues

Social issues

Biographies

Raising awareness about society

Why study Documentary?



As a non-fiction text, we can learn from viewing information about different topics.



We can learn from different points of view or perspectives from the film-maker.

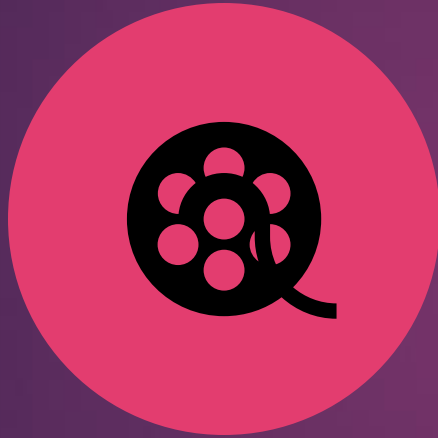


They are a combination of informational and artistic films created to inform and entertain the audience.



They could be called “factual works of art”.

Types of Documentaries



THERE ARE MANY TYPES OF
DOCUMENTARIES AND DIFFERENT WAYS IN
WHICH DOCUMENTARIES ARE PRESENTED
TO THE AUDIENCE.



THESE INCLUDE:

Expository Mode

- ▶ Narrator directly addresses the viewer and can see all or present all information
- ▶ Direct link between the image on screen and the voice over
- ▶ Interviews support the argument presented on film
- ▶ Uses a conventional narrative structure
- ▶ The narrator is like a “character” in the documentary

Observational Mode

- ▶ A non-interventionist or “fly-on-the-wall” style of presentation
- ▶ Unobtrusive camera work, appearing to offer a “window on the world”
- ▶ Relatively long takes connoting that nothing has been “cut out”
- ▶ Zoom lenses and hand-held camera following the action
- ▶ Editing which gives the impression of “live” or “real” time
- ▶ Speech which is overheard and not directed to camera or audience
- ▶ Synchronous sound
- ▶ Only diegetic music (originating in the documentary’s environment)

Interactive Mode

The acknowledged presence of the camera and crew in which:

- ▶ The film-maker speaking directly to her/his subjects
- ▶ An emphasis on monologues and dialogues
- ▶ Representation of multiple viewpoints, contributing different information
- ▶ Editing which maintains logical continuity
- ▶ No definitive argument, leaving the audience to decide

Performative Mode

- ▶ The documentary maker “stars” in his/her own film and is also self-reflexive. e.g. Morgan Spurlock’s SUPERSIZE ME (2004) or Sharkwater, Rob Stewart (2006)

Elements of Documentary



Within documentaries, filmmakers make artistic choices to communicate with their audience.



How they present their message will vary according to the style chosen and the purpose of the documentary.



The audience needs to be aware of the purpose in order to identify how the message is being communicated to the viewer.

Presenting the message

Does the film use a narrator? If so, what role does the narrator play? What attitude does he or she bring to the subject? How does this attitude contribute to the film's overall message?



If there is no narrator, who are the speakers in the film?



What forms of interviewing or other techniques are used to introduce these speakers? What perspectives do the speakers present to the audience?



Is the filmmaker a character within the film? If so, what role does he or she play? Can you determine the attitudes, ideas and perspectives does the filmmaker reveal? How does this role help clarify the film's message?

Presenting the message

WHAT DOES THIS
DOCUMENTARY REVEAL
ABOUT THE SUBJECT?

HOW DOES THE FILMMAKER
HELP THE AUDIENCE
EXPERIENCE THIS SUBJECT
FOR THE FIRST TIME OR WITH
NEW EYES?

WHAT STORY IS TOLD IN THE
FILM? ARE THERE PARTS THAT
APPEAR REHEARSED, OR
COMPLETELY NATURAL?
HOW HAS THE EDITING OF
THE FILM AFFECTED ITS FINAL
MESSAGE?

Presenting the message

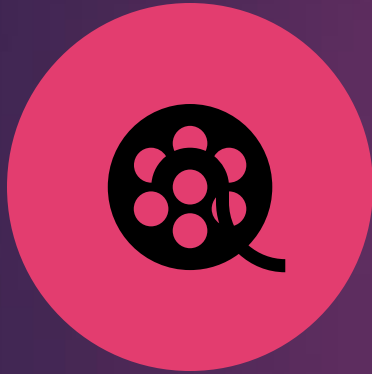


What kind of camera shots are used?
How does the choice of shot
advance the story in the film? How do
these choices help the filmmaker get
across the message?



What sounds are used in the film?
What dialogue, music, voice-overs,
commentary, and sound effects?
What purpose do they serve?

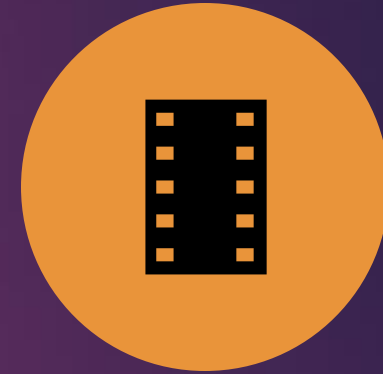
Shot types



DIFFERENT SHOTS ARE OFTEN CHOSEN TO COMMUNICATE INFORMATION ABOUT THE SUBJECT, THE ENVIRONMENT, OR POWER RELATIONSHIPS WITHIN THE FILM.



WHY ARE CERTAIN SHOTS ARE BEING USED?



OFTEN THE FILMMAKER IS ATTEMPTING TO PROVIDE THE VIEWER WITH ADDITIONAL INFORMATION ABOUT THE SUBJECT, THE ENVIRONMENT, OR RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN SUBJECTS WITHIN THE FILM, OR BETWEEN THE AUDIENCE AND THE SUBJECT OF THE SHOT.

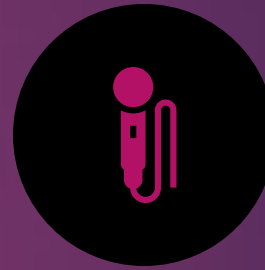
SWAT Codes



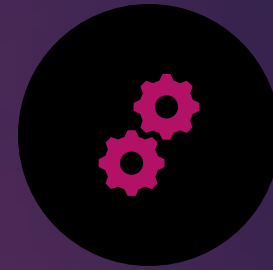
SYMBOLIC



WRITTEN



AUDIO



TECHNICAL

Symbolic Codes

- Symbolic Codes: The secondary meaning represented by particular objects or symbols in the film. We can find symbolism in objects (such as a cross symbolising Christianity), setting (beach symbolising reflection, contemplation), costumes (designer suit symbolising someone who is very well off, important), colours (black symbolises evil, white symbolises peace and purity) and many more. The symbolic meaning of elements of the film helps to add a deeper layer of meaning to the film as a whole. Symbolism often allows the film to comment on the world as a whole, rather than just the small world of the film.

Symbolic Codes



Symbols: An object or image that represents or suggests something else. These symbols can be used and focused on to influence the audience e.g. roses are often associated with romantic imagery.



Actors/interviewers/host: The type of person chosen can produce a certain reaction in the audience.




Costumes/make-up: Tells the audience the time in which the documentary was produced. Can indicate the personality of the character.



Props: Objects used throughout the film to assist the overall message.

Written codes

- ▶ Written Codes: Any text that appears on the screen, either as a part of the film itself (product names, signs, newspapers) or through credits, subtitles etc.  Written codes can often communicate specific information more easily than visuals. For example, if it is very important that the viewer know the exact setting of the film, the name of the town or country will flash on the screen as a subtitle when we first cut to that setting. This setting may have some symbolic significance, so the written code ensures we know where it is.

Written codes



Titles



Credits



Captions



Signposts, newspapers or any written elements in a scene that gives the viewer additional information.

Audio Codes

- ▶ Audio Codes: Any sound that we hear throughout the film, such as dialogue, music, sound effects, laugh tracks or applause. Dialogue assists in character and development, while music helps to set the mood of a scene. Sound effects are used to make the film seem real (our world is never silent, there is always background noise) or to add to the emotion of a scene (for example, a creaking door in a horror film adds to the suspense.)

Audio codes



Music



Special effects (SFX): Deliberately used to create a particular atmosphere or to provoke a response in the audience. Special effects are used to create illusions. This assists the creator in manipulating images or film to enhance the message they are putting forward.



Silence: Can be used to create or increase emotions. (Pause for effect)



Dialogue: The words that are used. Particularly chosen from footage, and sometimes a script is written and used – especially in the case of the interviewer/host.



Theme music: Helps to create the atmosphere of the film. It is often played behind opening credits to influence the audience to respond to the issue in a particular way.



Natural/ambient sound: Most often present. This helps convey the sense and feeling of the location.

Technical codes

- ▶ Technical Codes: Techniques used in the construction of the image. For example: camera shots, camera angles, camera movement, lighting, special effects. Technical codes are used because of deliberate choices by the film producers to construct scenes in a particular way. For example, in order to convey the person in position of power in a scene, he will film with different angles on characters to show who is in control and who is weaker or submissive. This assists in the characterisation and plot of the film.

Technical codes

- ▶ **Camera shots:** Extreme long shot: the viewer can see the subject in the context of their surroundings. Long shot: the viewer can see the subject from the waist up with some of their surroundings shown. Mid/Medium shot: the camera is in the face of the subject. Close up: the camera is in the face of the subject. Extreme Close up.
- ▶ **Camera angles:** Bird's eye view: The camera is positioned directly above the subject. High camera angle: the subject is filmed from above. Eye level: the camera is level with the subject. Low camera angle: the subject is filmed from below.
- ▶ **Shot duration:** The length of the shot, and where the editing cut is made. The shot length can create or promote an emotional reaction to or from the audience.
- ▶ **Lighting:** Lighting and colour can be used to convey different feelings and moods. It helps create tone and gives the audience cues as to how to respond to different characters/plot turns/settings. For example, bright colours and light are often used to convey a sense of fun and happiness, while dull colours and dim lighting may be used to convey gloom and sadness. Colours also may have specific associations e.g. red can communicate blood or danger.
- ▶ **Editing:** The choices in cutting that are made. Decisions are made to put a certain shot together in a sequence or for when to start and end shots, music or titles.
- ▶ **Framing:** Where the edge of the frame is positioned.
- ▶ **Focus:** Brings attention to certain parts of the frame.
- ▶ **Montage:** When several clips are put together through the technique of selecting, editing and piecing together separate sections of film to form a continuous whole.

Techniques of documentary

Documentary filmmakers will use a variety of techniques and elements to create their story. These include:

ACTION FOOTAGE

- People carry out everyday activities, interact with landscapes, inanimate objects, and each other.

ARCHIVAL FOOTAGE

- Uncut archive material or recycled footage

INTERVIEW

- Answers formal, structured questions with interviewer on or off-camera.

Techniques of documentary

PEOPLE TALKING

- Camera hidden or not: unobtrusive camera captures conversations.

RE-CREATION

- Factually accurate re-enactments of past situations.

DOCUMENTS, TITLES, HEADLINES, CARTOONS, GRAPHICS

- Written information that influences the telling of the story?

BLANK SCREEN

- Causes reflection and enhances sound.