CIN105 (Summer 2025)
10 – Documentary

Housekeeping

Lecture

This week marks a turning point for us, since we are finished with our first section on the formal components of cinema, and our strict focus on the analysis of individual films.

Over the course of this first section, in our effort to understand how a single film functions formally, we dealt exclusively with one type of film: that is, fictional, narrative, live-action film.

Now, in the second section of the course, we will briefly turn our attention to other types of films: namely, documentaries, experimental or avant-garde films, and animation.

This is obviously not a comprehensive look at every type of film that there is. The nature of a course like this means I can't show you as many films as I wish I could, so we'll have to make do in this section with a sample of just some other types of films that differ from narrative live-action cinema in one way or another.

SLIDE

But even as we move away from studying the formal elements and techniques available to filmmakers, we still need to be thinking in terms of the ideas we've discussed so far, just in new kinds of films.

So you want to continue to pay attention to things like:

*The function of various cinematic elements;
*The strategic use of similarity and repetition;
*Difference and variation of techniuqes across the entirety of a film;
*Patterns of development that distinguish a film's start from its end;

*And, finally, the presence -- or not -- of unity to create cohesion across disparate parts.

Additionally, we still need to be thinking about a film's formal system in terms of the four components of film style that we studied: mise-en-scene, cinematography, editing, sound and music.

While these films we will look at in this section differ in ways from narrative live-action cinema, all films by definition must use these components of style to some end – those ends may just be slightly different now.

So we'll be expanding these definitions of form and style to include questions about types of films and how they differ from each other in form and content.

SLIDE

This week, we first turn our attention to documentary cinema.

One thing that distinguishes documentaries from films that we've seen so far is that documentaries aren't always narratives – while we have watched a lot of narrative cinema that lacks conventional narrative structure that you may be more accustomed to, every single film we've seen so far has been structured by narrative in some more or less cohesive way.

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Now, very often, documentaries *are* narrative films – they tell a story; they feature characters with goals and conflicts and resolutions. Even nature or animal documentaries often structure themselves around central narrative concepts like the family, the journey, or a battle between different species.

But in addition to featuring narratives, documentaries can also be categorical or rhetorical in their organization.

SLIDE

In other words, documentaries may be constructed to inform the audience about certain aspects of their subject matter in a systematic or categorical fashion or, alternately, they may be constructed to persuade their audiences to adopt a particular point of view on the subject, they may be making an argument more so than telling a story – none of this requires the kind of storytelling format found in most fiction films.

Documentaries can thus function less as narratives and more as catalogues, on the one hand, or as arguments on the other.

SLIDE

But before we talk about this issue of how a documentary is organized, we should spend a bit of time figuring out what a documentary is in the first place.

In order to begin to understand what a documentary is, it is helpful to go back to the moment when the term documentary was coined: 1926.

In that year John Grierson, the man who would go on to found the British documentary film movement and, later, to sow the seeds for the National Film Board of Canada, labeled Robert Flaherty's film *Moana* as a "documentary" and then defined documentary as the "creative treatment of actuality."

To a certain extent, this definition is really helpful:

First of all, it highlights this idea of "actuality" and acknowledges that the raw material of documentary cinema is social reality, the world that we inhabit and share -- rather than, say, fictional dramas. While we will contest this by pointing out, among other things, that documentaries are just as highly constructed as fiction films, this is an important distinguishing feature – documentaries are crafted out of

material that we interpret as being from our shared world that we live in, rather than from a fictional diegesis created for the film.

Second of all, however, this defintion also posits that there is some agent (the filmmaker) and some process (the filmmaking process) that treats, shapes, and transforms that raw material creatively.

So this second element eliminates certain kinds of footage from being considered a documentary. Take, for example, 2 hours of uninterrupted security camera footage. This, according to Grierson (who lived before security cameras existed of course), would not count as documentary insofar as it does not seem to involve a filmmaker or the shaping of reality [though we might debate whether that's really true].

Grierson's definition acknowledges the extent to which the various technical choices a documentarian makes -- which film stock and lenses to use, how to frame an event, how to edit a sequence of events, whether to provide any voice-over commentary, and so on — always shape the social reality under scrutiny.

SLIDE

For Bill Nichols, whose essay you're reading this week, this dual emphasis – actuality and creative treatment – is hugely important to understanding documentary cinema.

Nichols echoes and expands Grierson's definition when he suggests that "documentary re-presents the historical world by making an indexical record of it; it *represents* the historical world by shaping this record from a distinct perspective or point of view. The evidence of the re-presentation supports the argument of the *representation*."

While Grierson's definition is helpful in illustrating a starting point in defining documentary, it's a little too broad.

So we might expand the definition, then, and say that documentaries are also defined by the expectations of those watching them …

Those expectations are that the world on screen is, in some fundamental sense, **real**, and that the information being relayed about that world is trustworthy.

A major reason the spectator is led to have such expectations is because of the spirit in which documentaries are made and then distributed and exhibited. This is how documentaries are marketed and understood – as real in some way, expressly *not* fictional like a live-action narrative film, which we understand intuitively to be make-believe.

Both documentary filmmakers themselves and the institutions that support them, including certain television stations, distribution companies, and film festivals, tend to define their mandate as that of presenting some slice of social reality in a truthful manner.

Now, when we as audiences take those people at their word, we enter into a tacit contract of sorts: we expect something truthful from those who define their intentions to be the delivery of something truthful.

Another reason we are led to have certain expectations of documentaries, however, has to do with the films themselves, which typically operate by way of certain conventions that tend to inspire trust.

-So, what are these conventions?

Some of them have simply to do with the documentary film's capacity to re-present (as opposed to represent), the real world.

For example, most documentaries feature what we assume are real people and not actors … we call these people social actors.

Also, most documentaries are shot on location –they present visible evidence of whatever phenomenon they are documenting, which serves to locate that phenomenon in the world that we, the audience, also inhabit.

At the same time there are also certain formal techniques, certain means of representation, that we have come to associate with documentary and thus with truthfulness.

This is not to say that documentaries are defined by style alone …

but it is fair to say that, first of all, style contributes substantially to the way we perceive and in turn respond to material and …

second of all, that documentary has come to look and sound and feel a particular way at particular moments in history.

SLIDE

This fact, that documentary has a feel that we associate with a certain kind of truthfulness or trustworthiness, has been exploited countless times for purposes of, for example, comedy, with films like 1984's *This is Spinal Tap*, or, more recently, television shows like *The Office* adopting an intentionally mimicked version of this form that we often call "mockumentary."

These texts wring a lot of their humour out of the simple fact that we associate their formal conventions with documentary and thus real-life.

More recently still, artists like Nathan Fielder have exploited the thin lines between faux documentary form and reality in television shows like *The Rehearsal*, where it is not always clear what parts of what we are seeing are real and what parts are constructed.

PLAY CLIP

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So to illustrate documentary form and style more fully, in this lecture we will spotlight three different kinds of documentary approaches, all three still popular and in use today, but each originating in a different historical era and each marked by a different take on how truth can best be discovered, documented, and represented.

Each case has shaped our implicit understanding of this "documentary feel" that we are now, I would be willing to bet, all very familiar with.

And interestingly, this style that we're trying to pin down is probably a lot older than you may assume. In fact, you could argue that documentaries have existed as long as cinema has existed.

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After all, one of the first films ever screened publicly, the Lumière Brothers' Workers Leaving the Factory, sought to capture a slice of everyday life.

For this reason, it is classified as an early *actualité*, or actuality, a representation of "life happening now."

SHOW Lumiere's Workers Leaving the Factory

That is the entire film, by the way. You have now all watched one of the first films ever made, go log it on letterboxd.

When this film was first screened over 100 years ago the main draw, its main attraction, was precisely that it featured real people and the real world in motion – and over 100 years later, as we watch it now, that is still its main attraction. It is inherently interesting to us to see real, normal people alive in the mid 1890s.

Moreover, once the Lumière Brothers started employing a whole army of camera men to create films they could then exhibit for a fee, they pioneered the genre we now know as the travelogue.

They would send operators around the world to film exotic sights so they could then bring them back to French viewers who could assume the role of world travelers without leaving their home city.

SLIDE (CLIP)

But the film that is often credited with being the first proper documentary is actually Robert Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* from 1922.

– SHOW CLIP

What distinguishes Nanook from the earlier travelogues?

We could say that Nanook of the North is engaged explicitly in the production of knowledge and the dissemination of information.

How does it do so?

Through intertitle narration (it's a silent film) to give an objective version of events depicted on screen – and the use of everyday people over actors.

It also features clear examples of what Grierson meant by the "Creative treatment of actuality"

SLIDE

Nanook of the North is heavily edited – it only highlights certain features of these everyday people's lives.

The information conveyed through its narration is organized around a "day in the life" format – the intertitles actually invent occurrences to connect sequences together and make things more exciting.

It's also patronizing – think, for instance, about Nanook's interaction with the record album.

Flaherty twists the truth to make it appeal to us as an adventure story – an exotic tale. By this time in the 20s, the inuit population being depicted in the film were proficiently using technologies like guns and stoves, and the actor playing "Nanook," whose real name was Allakariallak, was familiar with the record album and told to pretend that he didn't know how it worked.

Flaherty changed Allakariallak's name to Nanook, which is a word for polar bear in Inuktitut mythology, because he thought it sounded more marketable. Allakariallak also had two wives, one of whom the film portrays as his sister.

SLIDE

Flaherty may have wanted to convey a sincere vision of northern life – but it's still all filtered through Flaherty's assumptions and his drive as a filmmaker to depict something exotic –so he intentionally manufactured most elements of it to suit his narrative, erasing parts of his subjects identity while creating others to appeal explicitly to what a white settler audience *expected* to see, not to reality as such.

SLIDE

Once sound cinema supplanted silent cinema -- from 1927 onwards -- the same impulse animating Nanook gained expression largely through manipulation of the soundtrack.

With the exception of compilation documentaries, which tended to foreground editing by linking together pre-existing footage, most documentaries through the 1950s tended to rely heavily on voice-over

narration to shape the viewer's understanding of the subject matter on screen (much as Nanook of the North relies on intertitles).

Here is one such example

CLIP from THE RIVER

Once lightweight and wireless sound equipment -- as well as 16mm cameras with which that equipment could be used -- were developed and made accessible to filmmakers, however, documentary form changed considerably.

Specifically, new equipment ushered in the era of what's called "direct cinema," which privileged the direct representation of spontaneous action and sound above any sort of explicit commentary.

SLIDE

The thing that drove direct cinema filmmakers was to let the world speak for itself with as little interference from the filmmaker as possible.

Documentary filmmakers conceived of themselves and their cameras as invisible, unobtrusive observers in the midst of action that would naturally unfold.

SLIDE

The film that's most associated with the direct cinema movement is called *Primary*, made in 1960 by a team of filmmakers including Robert Drew, Ricky Leacock, and DA Pennebaker, all of whom came to be really important figures associated with this documentary style.

CLIP

SLIDE

What you get here is quite different from *Nanook of the North* – most principally, the world feels like it is speaking for itself – there is less obvious manipulation on the part of the filmmaker, although manipulation is still present.

Note that:

• no one notices or directly addresses the camera

• the use of hand-held camera with lots of movement

• there is a sense of immediacy and randomness – the ambiguity created by lack of a focusing presence or a clear cause and effect chain of events

• marked by an equal interest in sound and image

• you are given no establishing shot or sense of where you are or what this action is leading up to

• fairly heavily edited which creates a sense of disorientation, momentum

And more than anything else, everything in the style seems to be subordinated to *observation of real events* – the events themselves are taken to be inherently interesting, so there is no commentary on what you are seeing or why – you are just observing real people living their lives.

Direct cinema, or the observational documentary, as exemplified in a film like PRIMARY, avoids interaction on the part of the filmmakers. This is often known as a "fly on the wall" approach – in which the filmmakers do not engage with their subject, simply letting the event unfold without their interjection.

SLIDE

In France, around the same time in the early 60s, a group of documentary filmmakers – led by Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin, were innovating a similar but distinct approach.

While the Direct Cinema group avoided interaction, the *vérité* group encouraged it. In fact, interaction between filmmaker and subject became the key defining aspect of the *vérité* movement in France.

And while direct cinema supposes a certain "objectivity" in their reporting, the *vérité* filmmakers suggested that objectivity was all but impossible.

In *cinema vérité*, filmmakers were deemed provocateurs who engaged with the world so as to incite some spontaneous action that could then be documented.

This question of objectivity vs. subjectivity is one that we'll come back to later.

Cinema vérité has an interesting stylistic link to the third type of documentary style or mode that I want to mention today, one that became increasingly popular in North America in the 2000s due in large part to the notoriety of director Michael Moore.

SLIDE

This type of documentary is one wherein the filmmaker acknowledges their role in the action and, moreover, their investment in the material. Rather than attempt to document events as objectively as possible, in this mode the filmmaker is open about the ways in which they are biased on the material – they participate in the action overtly.

As a result these films tend to be more personal and more self-aware in nature.

SLIDE: CLIP of Roger and Me

In presenting these three clips today -- one from Nanook of the North, one from Primary, and one from Roger and Me – we've been introduced to three of the six modes of representation that Bill Nichols associates with documentary cinema in the chapter of his that you are reading for this week.

Specifically, *Nanook of the North* typifies the expository mode; *Primary*, the observational mode; and *Roger and Me*, the participatory mode.

As I mentioned earlier, what distinguishes these three modes is the kinds of cinematic techniques they rely on…

And so the reason we need to pay attention to the kinds of cinematic techniques is that we, as an audience, have come to associate with truthfulness by virtue of their repeated use and our repeated exposure to them in a documentary context.

Through these techniques, each of these modes suggests something different about the nature of truth – how, in other words, truth can best be represented or should be represented to the viewer.

So let me recap and in the process make a link between style and truth:

First take the EXPOSITORY MODE, which was the first of these three to emerge historically.

Techniques that we associate with this mode include explanatory commentary of some sort.

In the silent era that commentary was delivered by way of intertitles.

In the sound era, it has taken the shape of voice-over narration, whether it be provided by someone who never appears on screen, which is called voice of God narration, or by someone who does appear on screen, usually in the guise of an expert.

They also include the use of what are called reality effects: maps, statistics, charts, graphs.

What this all adds up to: a film that locates the truth in an authoritative figure who assumes a posture of detachment and assumed objectivity as she or he crafts a well-supported argument, which is typically articulated verbally.

Next consider the OBSERVATIONAL MODE, which took shape through film movements like direct cinema and took advantage of emergent technologies that allowed the filmmaker to be extremely mobile.

As a result, the filmmaker conceives of their role as that of, at least in part, observer, and thus the spectator is forced into the position of having to take a more active role in determining the significance of what is said and done.

Formal techniques associated with this mode include:

Hand-held camerawork (noteworthy for its responsiveness to the action more than the precision of its compositions).

Very little, if any, acknowledgement of the camera on the part of the film's participants.

An equal emphasis on sound and image.

And, in some cases, especially those wherein multiple cameras are used to capture the action as it unfolds, a heavy reliance on editing.

This type of film locates truth in a world that is allowed to speak for itself.

The PARTICIPATORY MODE, the origins of which can be located in certain examples of cinema vérité, but which has gained its fullest expression fairly recently.

It's modeled on the participant observer mode, and films made in this mode make visible the filmmaker's involvement in the act of gathering information and drawing conclusions.

As a result, the techniques they rely on include interviews and the on-screen appearance of the filmmaker who lays bare the idea that knowledge is produced rather than simply existing and that it is historically contingent rather than universal.

This type of film locates truth in the experience of certain historically situated individuals as they investigate and reflect on the world around them.

Finally, I want briefly comment on Nichols other three modes of documentary, the poetic, performative, and reflexive.

The POETIC MODE is similar to and often part of avant-garde and experimental filmmaking, as it emphasizes the aesthetic qualities and associations between images. Let's look at a clip from 1983's *Koyaanisqatsi*.

CLIP

The PERFORMATIVE forgoes objectivity in favour of centering the filmmaker and their experiences with and interpretations of the subject matter at hand. Here's an example from Agnes Varda's film *Faces Places*, one of her final films, from 2017.

NOTE Today, a new media variation on this form would be the video essay – the two are not exactly the same, but share much in common, namely the filmmaker's voice guiding the viewer's interpretation.

CLIP

Finally, we have the REFLEXIVE MODE, which draws attention to the documentary as a constructed piece of work, often explicitly showing

us the processes of making the documentary. This forces us to confront the unstable nature of representation as means to access to fundamental or objective truths. Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera* is an example of this, as you'll see in this clip.

FILM INTRO

What mode or modes of documentary is *Paris is Burning*
Participatory, Observational, semi-reflexive

Participatory Mode: emphasizes the interaction between filmmaker and subject. Filming takes place by means of interviews or other forms of even more direct involvement. Often coupled with archival footage to examine historical issues.

Reflexive Mode: calls attention to the assumptions and conventions that govern documentary filmmaking. Increases our awareness of the constructedness of the film's representation of reality.

Performative Mode: emphasizes the subjective or expressive aspect of the filmmaker's own engagement with the subject and an audience's responsiveness to this engagement. Rejects notions of objectivity in favor of evocation and affect… The films in this mode all share qualities with the experimental, personal, and avant-garde, but with a strong emphasis on their emotional and social impact on an audience.

Expository Mode: emphasizes verbal commentary and an argumentative logic. … This is the mode that most people identify with documentary in general.

Observational Mode: emphasizes a direct engagement with the every-day life of subjects as observed by an unobtrusive camera.

Poetic Mode: emphasizes visual associations, tonal or rhythmic qualities, descriptive passages, and formal organization. … This mode bears a close proximity to experimental, personal, or avant-garde filmmaking.

What are *Paris is Burning*'s arguments or meanings? What kinds of evidence does it provide to support its arguments? How are we presented with the evidence?

What conventions of documentary filmmaking, as discussed by Nichols, are present in the film?

How does its form create its meaning or arguments?

- Editing, framing, voiceover