



Documentary

Conventions

Definitions, examples

and why used

Sp Adobe Spark

English- Documentary Conventions

Documentaries are visual texts that provide carefully constructed records or reports on selected issues. These issues usually deal with cultural, social, political, and historical matters of *some* significance. All documentaries present a version of the truth on an issue, not a completely objective, unbiased examination.

They focus on questioning actual people and events, often in a social context, placing the audience in a position to form an opinion about whom or what they are seeing. A documentary's purpose is to present factual information about the world; we know it is a documentary as it is often flagged up using on-screen labels for example and a person's name and job title, leading the audience to believe that the people and events actually exist and that the information being conveyed is correct.

Documentary makers use devices when presenting information; firstly, record events as they actually occur; secondly, information may be presented using visual aids, such as charts and maps; and lastly, some events may be staged for the camera e.g. a historical document. Documentary crew usually consists of only one camera operator and a sound person so that they can stay mobile whilst filming.

They seek to convince the audience of the "truth" of their interpretation of events and issues. The documentary genre allows the expression of a point of view as well as the illustration of the 'truth' in a way which is flexible yet understood by audiences who have become accustomed to the conventions of the genre. No documentary tells 'the truth' or present unbiased, objective material. Instead, they deal with 'truths' and present them in a light so that the audience will more than likely side with the filmmaker. There are many different styles of documentary, including:

Expository

This style is characterised by a 'Voice of God'; this is narration that directly addresses the viewer. Voice-over anchors the meaning of images that are shown and explicitly states the text's preferred meaning (that is the viewpoint that the filmmaker wants you to have.) Expository documentaries expose a problem or an issue.

Images are used to illustrate what the narrator is saying making the voice-over seem more objective and honest.

These documentaries are usually centered on a problem that needs solving, for example 'Who do you think you are?' or 'why are they doing this?'

Observational (fly on the wall)

Observational narrative avoids voice-over or commentary and the camera is usually as unobtrusive as possible. Very close to the 'window on the world' idea as if the audience is allowed to see an unmediated reality.

Techniques include: Indirect address to the audience, diegetic sound (including music), relatively long takes (showing nothing has been cut or edited). They usually focus on specific individuals, thus why they are people-based documentaries.

Obvious problems with these types of documentaries: impossible to create a genuine 'window on the world' because the presence of the camera in a situation affects the people being observed. The documentaries are usually superficial and apolitical. Although they give the impression of being honest and impartial, the director can make editing choices which means that observational documentary is as full of bias and subjectivity as any other form of documentary.

Reality TV

Real people in a non-realistic environment (Big brother, I'm a celebrity). It is now categorised by a high degree of hybridisation between different program types. The term 'reality TV' has become used to describe the most high-impact of the new factual television.

It is a mix of 'raw', 'authentic' material with a seriousness of an information program. Reality TV is categorised by: camcorder surveillance or observational camera work, First person or eye witness testimony, studio or to-camera links and commentary from presenters.

Current affairs

These are usually journalist-led programs who aim to address the news and the political agenda in greater depth than the new bulletins allow. (News night). Emphasis is on the investigatory and the political, seeking out atrocity and political scandal.

Objectivity vs. Subjectivity

Objectivity

Objectivity is when a person and/or their judgments are not influenced by personal feelings or opinions in considering and representing facts. Objectivity provides facts, not judgment, and is unbiased and based on truth. In documentaries this used to be the dominant style and is the form most are familiar with. The traditional documentary is in this category. The common thread that runs through these documentaries is that they do not draw attention to the documentary process. That is, they try to make the film seem like an untouched reality. The documentary tries to make the viewer feel as though they are a fly on the wall.

It is important to note that documentaries generally construct themselves to appear to be objective; they use all of the conventions of documentary to make it seem factual. They adopt an objective viewpoint because the purpose of the filmmaker is to make the audience have a dominant reading of the text; that is that they accept what is being shown. If the filmmaker constructs the text to appear too subjective the audience will think that it is just a personal opinion and can easily resist it.

The camera and equipment are never seen and the camera is generally placed in the position of an observer of third person. A good example of this is the travel or adventure documentary where we see the intrepid adventurer struggle to climb the mountain while the film crew who have recorded all this remain invisible.

Some critics argue that these objective documentaries are not objective at all. They argue that objective documentaries clearly deliver a single point of view, a point of view that is hidden by the techniques, which make it seem impartial.

Subjectivity

Subjectivity is based on or influenced by personal feelings, tastes or opinions. Subjectivity is something that no filmmaker can escape because unless they film an event as it happens and present it without editing and music, the information has been specifically selected and adapted for a specific purpose.

In the late twentieth century an opposition traditional documentary films began to develop. Some critics said that the objective method was a dishonest way of making a film. They claimed that the act of filmmaking 'changed' reality. They believe that audiences should be aware that the film is a construction and the work of a film maker. They referred to the voice-overs of film makers such as David Attenborough as 'the voice of God' and claimed it stopped viewers from interpreting things for themselves.

The film makers of the new style of subjective documentaries did not try to conceal the camera or the equipment. Film equipment was allowed in shot, because it was part of the filmmaking process and should be seen. These film makers did not attempt to pretend that their work was showing an objective reality; rather, they continually pointed out to their audiences that the film was their personal interpretation. The film maker plays an important role in subjective documentaries and usually appears on camera.

Graphics/Writing

Graphics are used for a variety of reasons in a documentary:

- They are normally just two lines and in a simple font not to distract the audience, while at the same time providing necessary information
- They are used on screen to note down an interviewee's name and relation to the subject
- End credits are also used to credit everyone involved in the production of the documentary
- To communicate complicated information in a way that the average viewer can understand
- It underlines and highlights words that have been spoken; often you will hear a conversation or interview and then have the dialogue written down. This emphasizes to the viewer what has been said

Experts

Experts are people who are well learned in a specific area or field; such a cardiac surgeon or a marine biologist. Interviewing experts give the documentary and the filmmaker's viewpoint credibility. Experts play on the audience's context of naturally believing what experts say. As a society, we place great value in experts and people who have studied in a particular area for a long time- we trust and value what they say. Therefore, if an expert is used on screen to affirm the documentaries position on a particular issue, the audience is more than likely to accept what is being said. Without experts, the documentary appears to be subjective. Experts add a feeling or sense of 'objectivity', even though only specific experts are selected to appear- ones that agree with the documentaries' viewpoint.

SWAT 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.

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.

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.)

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.

Diegetic and non-diegetic sound

Diegetic and non-diegetic sound is used to represent emotion or a topic.

Diegetic sound is sound whose source is visible on the screen or whose source is implied to be present by the action of the film. Voices of characters, sounds made by objects in the story or music represented as coming from instruments in the story space (= source music.)

Diegetic sound is any sound presented as originated from source within the film's world. Diegetic sound can be either on screen or off screen depending on whatever its source is within the frame or outside the frame.

Non-diegetic sound is sound whose source is neither visible on the screen nor has been implied to be present in the action. Narrator's commentary, sound effects and sound that are added for the dramatic effect or mood. Non-diegetic sound is represented as coming from the source outside the story space.

Interview

Interviews are a key element of documentaries; they bring the story together, usually talking heads/interviews with eyewitnesses, experts and persons related.

During interviews, the camera remains mainly static so the audience isn't distracted away from the interview by any movement. Interviewee looks at the interviewer not the camera. Eye line of the interviewee is in line with the top 3rd frame. Interviews are mostly in close up or a medium close-up shot filmed on a left or right alignment. Cutaways are edited into an interview to illustrate what the interviewee is talking about.

Interviews in a documentary give the viewer a sense of realism, that the documentary maker's views are mutually shared by another person or source, and thus more valid. To achieve this much detail from what may be a one-hour interview, clips of only a few minutes are shown. Interviews on opposing sides of an issue may be shown to give the viewer comprehensive information about a topic. Interviews can be constructed so that we 'get to know' a person and warm up to them, or can be used as a way to expose people. Audiences also tend to accept what an interviewee is saying; that is, that we believe they are speaking the truth. If the filmmaker does not want us to believe what they are saying, they will use other techniques to accompany the interview, such as music or juxtapositioning.

Editing

Documentaries contain lots of cuts because there is such a variation of interviews, archival footage, etc. Conventional editing is used, which means in the final product only answers and no questions will be on screen. Although the director usually addresses the 'other side' of the argument, editing will be used to manipulate and persuade the viewer throughout the whole film so that by the end the audiences will more than likely side with the director.

Everything that is included in a documentary has been selected by the filmmaker. Therefore everything shown has been chosen to fit the purpose of the film; whether it is to educate, entertain and inform, or make money. Whilst documentaries attempt to show 'both sides' of the arguments, the detail selected will often argue one side. It is important to note who is given a voice and who is silenced.

Juxtaposition is a popular form of editing. This is where two shots are placed immediately after each other for effect; it usually compares two things to provoke a reaction; i.e. a shot of a character eating, and then a shot of a pig- this implies that they are a pig.

Narrator

A narrator is used to move the narrative along. They are also used to pushy an idea or a view on the topic forward. A narrator is important to hold the narrative together. The gender of the narrator depends on the topic and target audience. The tone of voice, accent and vocabulary of the narrator all depends on the target audience.

'Voice of god narration'- this term has developed to describe the use of voice over in documentary films. The voice is usually male, disembodied and omniscient. Many expository documentaries use 'authoritative voice' whom we are already familiar and who we trust. Listening to a familiar voice has the effect of making the audience trust the information being imparted. Conventionally, voice-overs tend to be male but recent documentaries, particularly those aimed at a younger audience, have started to introduce the female voice-over.

Archival Footage

Archival footage is used to show a variety of views on a topic. A sound track may accompany the visuals. This footage helps give the viewer historical knowledge easier and show past events which are important to the subject matter. Think of it as old footage that has already been filmed, usually from a library or archive. It is inserted into the documentary to show historical events or to add detail without the need for additional filming.

Characterisation

Even though documentaries have real people in them, the way that they are dressed, filmed, interviewed, the music playing when they are on screen, is constructed by the filmmaker to ensure they are seen/characterised in a certain way. It is important for the viewer to have some sort of feeling towards the character; this can be a sense of liking and accepting them, or it could be hating/mistrusting them.

Introduction of Characters

First impressions are as important in film as in real life.

- Look carefully at the way each character is introduced. Our responses to them will develop from this initial introduction. How does the director want us to respond? What techniques are used to create this response?
- Where is the character when first seen? What can be inferred from this?
- What are they doing? saying? thinking?
- What can we infer from costume, hair, makeup?
- What camera shots are used?
- Is contrast with other characters established?

Development of Characters

- As the film progresses, measure each character against your first impressions.
- Do subsequent events reinforce or contrast with the first impressions? Do we learn more?
- Does the character change and develop or stay the same?
- Look for 'character defining' moments.
- Consider also the role, the function that each character has in the narrative.
- What do they contribute to the story that is being told?