**Television and Film Documentaries**

*'I believe if I'm not provoking people, then I'm not doing my job, which is to reveal certain realities, no matter how troubling they are. How can we progress, if we don't address these things?'*

*Dennis O'Rourke, documentary filmmaker, director of Cunnamulla (2001)*

**What is a documentary?**

Pioneer British filmmaker John Grierson first coined the term documentary in 1926 to describe a film made about life on a South Sea island. In doing so he defined a documentary as the creative treatment of actuality (or reality). Argument has raged ever since as to just how 'creative' such treatment of reality should be. Creative development over the years has meant the term now covers a huge range of production methods and forms. It is getting harder to find agreement among filmmakers on just what a documentary is. Some analysts have argued that the term should be replaced with an alternative such as **non-fiction programming.**

Despite the lack of agreement about styles, the common thread across all types of documentaries is the use of recorded images and sounds of reality or lived experience. Documentaries are not just about facts, though. Rather, facts are used to create critical argument, thereby inviting the audience to draw conclusions. Documentaries present facts about a subject using real events, persons or places, says Peter Mayeux, Broadcasting Professor at the University of Nebraska. They then creatively interpret or comment on those realities and people's concerns about them.

**Genre**

The television documentary belongs to the **expository genre**. It is related to the argumentative essay of critical inquiry and to the review genre. The documentary is a complex genre containing aspects of many others. It has some features of the report genre, with its relationship to news reporting. It also shares some of the characteristics of the narrative genre, particularly its heightened sense of drama and conflict. In addition, the documentary shares with the narrative an involvement with characters, events and settings.

**Features of documentaries**

There are **five central elements** of the television or film documentary, according to John Corner of the University of Liverpool. These are: **observation, interview, dramatization, mise-en-scene and exposition**. Different styles of documentary concentrate more on particular sets of elements. Some of the basic elements also apply to many current affairs stories.

**Observation**

Most documentaries contain sequences of observation. Usually the programs pretend that the camera is unseen or ignored by the people taking part in the events. This 'unseen' observation places the audience in the role of eyewitnesses to the realities portrayed. The observation sequence then works as witness evidence for the documentary producer's argument.

**Interview**

Television documentaries generally rely on interviews (nature documentaries being an obvious exception), which can he used to make a contrast with the observation sequences. They may be seen or unseen, heard or not heard. The speaker is questioned and addresses the interviewer rather than the audience. Sometimes pictures will accompany the speaker's replies to support what is said. Documentary makers structure interviews in two ways. They can intercut fragments of the interview with observation and other material. Alternatively, they can allow the interview to run uninterrupted.

**Dramatization**

All documentaries use a sense of drama through the observation element. The audiences are eyewitnesses to dramatic events that seem to occur naturally in front of the camera. Moreover, all program makers build in a sense of dramatic conflict to heighten audience involvement.

Some documentaries use dramatization to portray people and events that the filmmaker cannot gain access to in real life. These fictional sequences, are said to be 'based on fact'. Here, the narratives or stories are used to advance the arguments of the exposition genre.

**Mise-en-scene**

In the language of film and television, mise-en-scene refers to things 'put into the shot' - things that can be seen in the picture. Whereas in a fictional film the director and the creative team can devise a complete decor for any settings they create, in a documentary the filmmaker must usually use what already exists. Nevertheless, to advance the argument of the exposition the documentary maker can still carefully compose a shot so that it contains the images he or she wants the audience to see.

**Exposition**

The line of argument in a documentary is called the exposition. An exposition is made up of description combined with commentary; **the exposition is what the documentary is 'saying'**.

John Corner suggests the exposition in a documentary may be either **plain and direct** or **indirect and hidden.** Nevertheless it always exists. For example, some styles of documentary rely heavily on observation. Rather than being told by a narrator what to think, the audience is shown sequences that lead them to draw conclusions. These documentaries can be said to have strong evidence but weak exposition. Other documentaries can be the reverse of this.

Exposition in documentaries is usually serious but they can also use humour to make a point. The use of humour in Michael Moore's Fahrenheit 9/11 partly explains its success. Audiences associate his films with a comic take on serious issues, in contrast to the dry presentation of information typical of traditional documentaries.

**Types of documentaries**

Changing ideas about the role of documentaries, the nature of truth and different ways to reach audiences have produced at least **five main documentary styles**.

**Fully narrated**

In these documentaries an off-screen voice-over directly addresses the viewer to convey the exposition. The voice-over is used to make sense of the visual images and present their meaning. The full narration style is often used in nature documentaries and was popular in the cinema newsreels of the past.

The narrator gives an impression of authority about the topic, which has led critics to dub the style 'the voice of God' documentary. Nature documentaries are typical of this style.

**Cinema-verite**

This style of documentary relies almost totally on the observational element of the genre. These are fly-on-the-wall documentaries. There is no commentary or narration, and viewers draw their own conclusions. The documentary may consist of no more than a string of informal interviews in place of narration. The camera and its movements can also be used to convey, a chilling commentary, as happens in The Battle for Chile, for example, when the camera suddenly falters and drops to the floor, recording the moment when the cameraman was shot.

**Mixed**

These documentaries use a combination of interview, observation and narration to advance the argument. In contrast to the voice of God style, the narration is often from within the frame (and therefore the action). Narration from within the scene is also the style adopted in modern news reporting. The journalist speaks to the camera, and then pictures of the action continue over his or her voice. While this style uses aspects from most of the other styles, critics argue it still tends to suggest that it is representing objective reality and not just a selective construction.

**Self-reflexive**

The subjects of a self-reflexive documentary acknowledge the presence of the camera and often speak directly to the filmmaker. Self-reflexive documentaries make a point of drawing attention to the filmmaker's role in constructing a view of reality. For example, in Dennis O'Rourke's documentary Cannibal Tours, the subjects actually talk to O'Rourke while he is behind the camera. He replies and asks them further questions. Critics say self-reflexive documentaries can be confusing and perhaps the filmmakers are just showing off. By drawing attention to themselves as filmmakers, they are seeking self-publicity; the film is more about the filmmaker than the subject.

**Docudrama**

A docudrama is a dramatized re-enactment of events largely as they are supposed to have happened. It re-creates real-life worlds and characters. It does not invent its own dramatic world, unlike a fictional drama. Its primary focus is on real lives and actual events largely as they are documented. Docudramas are often described as nonfiction dramas. In this style, the elements of argument and exposition are combined with those of the fictional narrative. The resulting story, is then said to be 'based on fact'.

Critics say docudramas claim to represent truth but can only ever hope to deliver fiction. The program is not a filmed 'actuality'. Since docudrama is a hybrid genre combining features of factual genres and also fictional genres, there is an ongoing debate about how much fact and how much fiction is permissible.

**Docusoap**

Docusoap is a type of fact-based soap opera set in one location and with a small set of characters. Often a workplace or business is the central location. The focus is on the characters' lives and events as they unfold in front of the camera. Docusoaps have their heritage in cinema-verite, but the docusoap subgenre might also be regarded as a type of reality television. American Chopper, for example, is filmed in the workplace of a successful father-and-son business, Orange County Choppers, which builds custom motorcycles. The show is a docusoap - right on the border between documentary and reality television.