

**FI501 – The Documentary Film**  
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**“The documentary film is characterised not by its role as a record of reality but as a constructed statement about reality using the sounds and images of reality. Discuss”**

“I’d rather reconstruct reality than compete with it”

F. Fellini

Documentary film is a rather extensive category of cinematic expression of the nonfiction. While sharing the basic principals of any kind of cinema, documentary film, primarily remains the most voyeuristic observance of reality (Even the 'performative documentary' is in fact an interpretation of an observance of reality). This 'observance of reality' trait of documentary film has been defined in various ways throughout the history of cinema. The question of 'What is a constructed statement about a reality and what is simply a footage of actuality?' lies in the heart of discussions about the character of the documentary film. Considering the essence of the earliest 'moving pictures', the realist films, the modern video-art, Reality TV and any news footage, one can say that a 'record of reality' is in many ways like 'photograph'. Therefore, the discussion of 'What is a constructed statement about a reality and what is simply a footage of actuality?' can be downgraded to the question of 'Is a mere record of reality, a work of art/constructed statement?' Under the light of this passably philosophical thesis - which is way parallel to the 19<sup>th</sup> century discussion of weather photography is art or not - this essay examines the character of the documentary film and the action of constructing a statement about reality.

The distinction between documentary and fiction film is ultimately clear and definite; The audience has to be told if they're watching a fiction or a non-fiction. Since both fiction and non-fiction rely on the same basic principals of cinema, theoretically, the audience can not understand the difference. The distinction between the non-fiction and documentary film however is rather blurred. The elements which characterize the documentary film have been altered throughout the history of cinema due to the evolution cinema and the evolution of the general concept of 'art'. Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, while the term 'documentary' was publicly used to refer to any non-fiction film, actuality film, educational film or 'Reality TV shows', the accepted definition comes from John Grierson, the man who was the first to use the word 'documentary', while describing "a type of factual film innovated by Robert Flaherty."<sup>1</sup> The definition is 'a creative treatment of actuality'.

"In the early thirties a new word and a new name began to appear with some regularity in the public prints. The new word was documentary and the new name John Grierson. Documentary had, indeed, made its first appearance in a review written by Grierson for the New York Sun in February, 1926. It derived from *documentaire*, a term applied by the French to their travel films... Grierson defined it as the 'creative treatment of actuality'. In some fifteen or twenty years it has come to represent a vast and far-reaching use of the film for social analysis."<sup>2</sup>

Not the word 'documentary' but the term 'documentaire' was applied to French travel films, which were mere footages of the landscape and settings from travels of some individuals. Today the use of film for social analysis exceeded the word/concept 'documentary' which is yet another alteration for the documentary film. For example, the TV shows like *Survivor*, *Big Brother* and *The Osbournes*... Stuck in between the capitalistic aim of making profit and the identity (or cover) of social analysis, 'Reality TV' is the most accurate and recent example of how the 'use of film for social analysis' exceeded Grierson's word/concept 'documentary'. An earlier example would be Andy Warhol's *Empire* (1964) which is a silent, black&white movie that

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<sup>1</sup> Jacobs, Lewis., *The Documentary Tradition* (W. W. Norton & Company, New York, 1971)

<sup>2</sup> Hardy, Forsyth., *Grierson On Documentary* (Collins Clear-Type Press, London and Glasgow, 1946)

consists of eight hours and five minutes of continuous footage of the Empire State Building.

‘Birth of cinema’ was basically presenting certain regular events to the audiences. Cinema was nothing more than the novelty of showing an event. Without any storytelling or other guidance, these short ‘actuality films’ had nothing but their own natural narrative (with some very few exceptions). The earliest copyrighted motion picture is *Record of a Sneeze* (1894) by W.K.L. Richardson. It was an Edison film and consisted a single sneeze of Fred Ott. Silent, black&white and 5 seconds long, it was all action, no plot. Other examples like *Arrival of the Train* (1895) and *Demolition of a Wall* (1896) were again ‘actuality films’, mere recordings of single actions. Today they are categorised as ‘short / documentary’ but during its day it was cinema itself!

At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as the ‘cinema art form’ was developed, the first feature length documentary was constructed under the influence of ‘romanticism’. *Nanook of the North* (1922) by Robert J. Flaherty was the first of its kind. The actors were actually Eskimos and the film depicted how they lived. However, the Eskimos were acting their daily lives in front of the camera. Moreover, Flaherty used some staging during the production. For example during some interior shots of the igloos, Flaherty built roofless igloos to shoot in. It was a necessity considering the technology of its day, but the concept of building a roofless igloo and directing an Eskimo to act in that igloo is against the nature of the documentary film today. This staging was a ‘romanticism’ factor and considered as the nature of the ‘cinema art form’ in the 1920s. So, at this point, -in the beginning of the century- the documentary film had quickly abandoned its ‘actuality film’ character and became the art of ‘constructing a statement of reality using the sounds and images of reality’.

‘Cinema’ did not really go through what ‘photography’ did as in being accepted as an art form. This was naturally due to ‘cinema’ evolving from ‘photography’. Like parents who learn with their first kid and be more experienced with their second kid, society embraced ‘cinema’ as art. The documentary film followed under this mission. When the realist tradition appeared with fiction masterpieces like *Battleship Potemkin* (1925) and *Bicycle Thieves* (1948), a search for not-staged and natural was raised again.

“Realism was an artistic movement in the 18<sup>th</sup> Europe. Realists would portray life as accurately and objectively they could, rejecting the more classical romantic notion that life was emotionally pleasing than it really was. Realism took hold in painting and literature and then found its way into motion pictures in the twentieth century. Italian neorealist cinema, such as *Bicycle Thieves* (1948), found prominence after World War II – turning the lens toward common people rather than actors and opting for actual locations rather than stages or studios.”<sup>3</sup>

But still the limits and definition of documentary film was not for certain. “There was a time, after all, in the early 1930s, when the terms ‘documentary’ and ‘realist film’ were treated as virtually synonymous.”<sup>4</sup>

Deriving from realism, *Blood of the Beasts* (1949) presented the ultra-realist view. It was definitely a step towards the not-staged, not-scripted, uncontrolled

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<sup>3</sup> Stubbs, Liz., *Documentary Filmmakers Speak* (Allworth Press, New York, 2002)

<sup>4</sup> Vaughan, Dai., *For Documentary Twelve Essays* (University of California Press, Berkeley, 1999)

cinema due to its strong and graphic content. However, practically it was very controlled indeed. It was a screaming call for the audiences to be aware of what they were looking at. This was a great literal example of a strongly and bravely 'constructed statement about reality using the sounds and images of reality'. After the ultra-realist approach, -growing from realism- came Cinéma Vérité in the 1960s. The cardinal element of Cinéma Vérité was 'non-involvement'. It was an attempt to capture the truth as much as possible. Pennebaker's *Don't Look Back* (1967) and Jean Rouch's *Chronicle of a Summer* (1961) are efforts for presenting their content in bold and natural truth. Trying to capture the truth so hard, in *Chronicle of a Summer*, the film itself gets stuck on the question of 'what is real and what is acted'. Edgar Morin and Jean Rouch, film themselves talking to the certain people to act in the film. Then, they film other people commenting on those certain people's acting and level of truth. Later, they show the film to the very people who acted in it. Every single person throws in a different view about the level of truth and level of acting in the film. Finally, after mirroring and filtering the reality through many levels human perception, Morin and Rouch just don't tie the knot and leave everything open-ended. In terms of content, one can say *Chronicle of a Summer* delivers one of the most objective views about anything filmed in the history of cinema. But still it was rather an extremely careful involvement than 'non-involvement'.

After documentary, the next step towards catching the truth became Reality TV. Still mainly regarded as a sub-category of documentary film, Reality TV seems like it is going to be a genre of its own in the near future. Primarily, due to its TV nature it differs from 'documentary film'. The amount of footage presented to the audiences in a 'Reality TV programme', enables a better observation of the actual content. Starting with the early 'candid camera' shows, Reality TV, is as close as documentaries get to depict the truth. As it's mentioned earlier in this essay, the aim of making profit is an essential element in Reality TV shows like *Big Brother* and *Extreme Makeover*. So, this inevitably brings-up questions about the construction of the statements in these shows. The question of 'how much is real and how much is acting?' becomes the main concern of the viewer. But then again, people do act in social life. Either in terms of role-playing or being responsible for something or working for a certain cause, people tend to act different roles all the time. These roles make up an individual's character. So it is possible to regard *Big Brother* -for example- as successful as *Chronicle of a Summer*, in terms of capturing the truth. In *Big Brother*, the contenders are aware that they are in a 'social experiment TV show'. They are people who know that they are being watched by cameras 24/7. So they perform a behaviour under the circumstances which are also explained to the audience. Once again, it becomes vital in the construction of a documentary film's statement, that the audience must be clearly told the level of fiction and non-fiction (or any film's statement).

So far, this essay followed the evolution of non-fiction film and examined different definitions and characterizations of the medium. In the light of these examinations, one can say that 'cinema' never came close to depicting the absolute truth as it did in its birth in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Returning to the origin of this essay, it is certain at this point that, the documentary film is not characterised not by its role as a record of reality. But then again, is it ever possible to make a 'film of only a record of reality'? Without a constructed statement about reality using the sounds and images of reality? Even screening a film, the mere action of introducing a 'recorded reality', means that the presenter of the film is constructing a statement. Frederick Wiseman says "A documentary, by whomever made and in no matter what style, is

arbitrary, biased, prejudiced, compressed, and subjective like any of its sisterly or brotherly forms." Furthermore, considering that cinema is such a capital-intensive and collaborative form of art, it is not likely for 'a documentary film' not to be constructing a statement about a reality.

Finally, every single work of art constructs a statement. Today, through different, raw, original and combined forms of art, 'man' is still exploring the world around him. The definition of 'art' is destined to be as limitless as possible. It is a phenomenon that constantly challenges the human mind and human work. Rapidly advancing technology, video-art, photographic-manipulation, social values, moral values, Reality TV, personal space, pornography and the 'hostage execution footages' from the most recent –still ongoing- war... they are all extensions and paradoxically elements of documentary film. However, regardless of the content, it will always boil down to how a material is constructed and presented. Even an 8 hour footage of a building can be characterised as a documentary film, if it's constructed in a way that it has a statement about a certain reality.

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