

Documentary Storytelling Through History

Lifelong Learning Centre

June 2016

Dr Rachel Walls.

Course outline:

Week 1, June 9th: Stories we tell about ourselves: *Stories we tell*, *Waltz with Bashir* and the 21st century documentary.

Week 2, June 16: Stories of technology: *Leeds Bridge/Roundhay Garden Scene*, *Man with a Movie Camera*, *Nightmail* and the early innovations of the genre.

Week 3, June 23: Stories of injustice: *Kanehsatake*, *When the Levees Broke*, *The Square* and the power of documentary to give voice.

Week 4, June 30: Stories of collaboration: *Grizzly Man*, *Age of Stupid*, *Exit through the Gift Shop* and the collaborative transformation of footage into film.

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Welcome!

This course proposes that documentary films are stories yet seeks to question how documentary modes of filmmaking differ from fiction and / or use fictional elements in order to document "reality" or tell a "true" story. It has been a tough choice choosing a limited number of figures and themes for this short course but hopefully the chosen selection will introduce participants to a wide range of documentary approaches from diverse times and places, bringing to attention lesser-known filmmakers and finding new ways of looking at familiar figures.

Bill Nichols has categorised documentary filmmaking into four periods, suggesting that there was a fairly linear progression from an expository mode of filmmaking, to observational, interactive and finally reflexive modes (definitions to follow.) It was tempting to focus on one of these categories per week, yet hopefully this more jumbled approach will make use of Nichol's instructive categories while illustrating that, as Stella Bruzzi argues, all four modes of filmmaking have occurred throughout filmmaking history. Moreover, some films fail to fit in any one of these categories or suggest that new categories are required. Recently a number of films have been seen to have elements of documentary while also challenging this label and as such terms such as "real fiction," "true-false film," "docuganda" and "mondo-films" have been suggested by journalists as appropriate labels. This course explores whether these terms are really necessary since documentary has always taken diverse narrative approaches: the term should be recognised as describing a wealth of narrative and visual styles with differing relations to reality. As Michael Chanan has suggested, documentary is a family rather than a singular genre. It describes films with a shared family tree but which branch off in multiple directions.

As our sessions are only ninety minutes, I will only be showing excerpts from films. With a couple of exceptions, the films are easily available so hopefully you will be able to get hold of anything you are interested in (try [Leeds City Library](#) first - if they don't have it they there are links to Amazon and other providers). I have included some introductory information that it would be useful to read early on in the course. I will also provide a few additional materials from week to week to supplement learning and prompt discussion. I enclose my bibliography and if there are one or two articles that are of particular interest I'd may be able to photocopy them.

Please bring your questions to class or feel free to email me and I will do my best to reply promptly.

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Non-fiction film timeline (adapted from a BFI education resource available online in 2010)

- **1888:** Louis Le Prince shoots the world's first film – [a Roundhay garden scene and Leeds Bridge](#)
- **1895:** Auguste and Louis Lumière stage the world's first public film screening on December 28, 1895 in the basement lounge of the Grand Café on the Boulevard des Capucines in Paris.
- **1899:** *The Kiss in the Tunnel* GA Smith and the Bamforth Company in Britain both lay claim to the first edit in a film.
- **1900-1913:** Mitchell and Kenyon based in Blackburn in Lancashire make hundreds of actuality films showing everyday life in Edwardian Britain.
- **1916:** The War Office commissions *The Battle of the Somme* for morale-boosting and patriotic purposes. Shot by Geoffrey Malins and John McDowell with some staged scenes, it shows a very graphic portrayal of trench warfare, and features actuality material of the battle.
- **1919:** Russian film-maker Dziga Vertov insists that the future of cinema depends on reporting the truth. He begins to produce *Kino-Pravda*, a series of news reportage films.
- **1922:** Robert Flaherty films *Nanook of the North*, generally cited as the first feature-length documentary.
- **1926:** John Grierson coins the term 'documentary' in a review of Robert Flaherty's ethnographic film *Moana* for the *New York Sun* (February 8, 1926).
- **1920s:** Various European experimental film-makers create impressionistic, highly poetic works including various 'city films' such as Walther Ruttmann's *Berlin: A Symphony of a Great City* (*Berlin, die Symphonie der Grosstadt*) (1927) and Alberto Cavalcanti's *Rien que les heures* (1926).
- **1928:** Dziga Vertov releases *Man With The Movie Camera*.
- **1928:** John Grierson joins the British Empire Marketing Board (EMB), a governmental agency, and organizes the EMB Film Unit.
- **1933:** The General Post Office Film Unit is formed in Britain and produces ground-breaking films such as *Night Mail* (1936) directed by Harry Watt and Basil Wright, and the spirit of the Blitz inspired *London Can Take It* (1940) directed by Humphrey Jennings.
- **1934:** German film-maker Leni Riefenstahl films *Triumph of the Will* a film of the Nazi Party rally of 1934.
- **1934:** The Shell Film Unit is created and features a host of personalities from the British documentary movement such as Edgar Anstey, Arthur Elton and Stuart Legg. Its incorporation of graphics and animation typified by *Birth of the Robot* (1934) directed by Len Lye, typifies the stylistic innovation of the Unit's work.
- **1935:** The *March Of Time* newsreel series is inaugurated in America which aims to bring a popular approach to newsreel presentation.
- **1940:** The Crown Film Unit is formed in Britain under the Ministry of Information, with responsibilities for wartime and postwar propaganda. Its output includes *Fires Were Started* (1943) directed by Humphrey Jennings.
- **1942-1945:** Hollywood film director Frank Capra oversees the production of the documentary/propaganda series *Why We Fight*.
- **1949:** The British Transport Commission established a films section to enable it to use film as a tool for internal training and external promotion, and British Transport Films is formed.
- **1952:** One of Britain's most substantial and long-lasting industrial film units, the National Coal Board Film Unit is formed.
- **1952:** The Coronation of Queen Elizabeth II sees a significant rise in the number of Television sets in public use and gains an estimated television audience of 20 million.
- **1953:** *Panorama* starts as a fortnightly magazine programme on BBC television to become as an investigative flagship current affairs programme.
- **1956:** The term 'Free Cinema' is coined by critic and film-maker Lindsay Anderson in early 1956 when he, Karel Reisz, Tony Richardson and Lorenza Mazzetti show a programme of their short films at the National Film Theatre. Five more programmes are shown under the same banner between 1956 and 1959.
- **1959:** *Whicker's World*, featuring travelling journalist Alan Whicker, introduces interviews and reports from around the world.
- **1950-60's:** Using newly developed, lightweight, hand-held cameras with synchronised sound, a new generation of film-makers attempts to redefine the nature of the documentary film. *Cinéma vérité* emerges from France. *Candid Eye* films and Cinéma Direct emerges in Canada, and American filmmakers also produce their own version of *Cinéma vérité*.

- **1960:** Drew Associates produces *Primary*, the first film in which the sync-sound camera is able to move freely with characters throughout a breaking story (John F Kennedy and Hubert Humphrey in the 1960 Wisconsin Democratic presidential primary). *Primary* is widely regarded as the earliest example of American 'Direct Cinema'.
- **1963:** *Horizon*, a science magazine programme, begins on BBC2.
- **1965:** Peter Watkins' controversial drama-documentary about a nuclear attack on Britain, *The War Game* (1965), is banned by the BBC.
- **1965:** Sony introduces the first consumer 1/2-inch video tape recorder. Philips introduces the compact cassette for consumer audio recording and playback on small portable machines.
- **1967:** Naturalist David Attenborough starts the long-running natural history series *The World About Us* on BBC2.
- **1968:** A meeting of film students in London leads to the creation of Amber Films, who move to Newcastle in 1969. The local community is inspiration for their documentaries and docu-dramas.
- **1973:** Dr Jacob Bronowski presents a major 13-part series called *The Ascent of Man* exploring great discoveries and the evolution of human thought.
- **1973:** *The World at War*, produced by Thames TV and narrated by Laurence Olivier, features a wealth of dramatic footage and eyewitness interviews from World War II.
- **1974:** *The Family*, a 12-part documentary serial following, fly-on-the-wall style day-to-day life of the Watkins family of Reading is based on the US *An American Family*.
- **1980:** Sony introduces the first consumer video camcorder.
- **1988:** *Around the World in 80 Days* presents Michael Palin as a latter-day Phileas Fogg with a generally humorous documentary travel programme later reprised in programmes such as *Pole to Pole*.
- **1989:** The revolution in television viewing habits in the UK begins with the launch of the Sky satellite television network. BSB and Sky merge a year later to form British Sky Broadcasting.
- **1991:** The Broadcast Act of 1991 introduces increased competition for commercial TV networks. Commentators view this as the beginning of ratings-led programming.
- **1995:** The BBC's major series *People's Century* chronicles the changes of the 20th century as seen from the point of view of ordinary people.
- **2000:** Channel 4 launches the first series of *Big Brother* and the spate of Reality TV programmes soon becomes a reality for TV viewers.
- **2002:** Freeview, the digital television service run by the BBC in conjunction with Crown Castle and BSkyB launches after the collapses of OnDigital and ITV Digital.
- **2002:** Michael Moore's *Bowling for Columbine* receives a 13 minute standing ovation at Cannes. The following year the film wins an Academy Award.
- **2004:** Some 800 Mitchell and Kenyon films are found and then restored by the bfi, creating an unprecedented social record of early 20th-century Britain and forming the basis of the popular BBC series *The Lost World of Mitchell and Kenyon*.
- **2004:** Michael's Moore's furious attack on the Bush regime *Fahrenheit 9/11* becomes the top grossing documentary film of all time, taking \$119,194,771 in the USA and £6,049,187 in the UK.
- **2005:** Channel 4 launched FourDocs, a broadband channel designed by Channel 4 as a place for users to showcase their documentaries on their website.
- **2005:** The trend for successful documentary films continues when *March of the Penguins* directed by Luc Jacquet takes over £3m at the UK box office.
- **2006:** Acclaimed German film-maker Werner Herzog releases *Grizzly Man*.
- **2009:** Fanny Armstrong's crowd-funded film, *Age of Stupid*, premieres in a solar powered tent in Leicester Square.
- **2010:** *Exit through the Gift Shop*, directed by street artist Banksy and an unknown (unreal?) Thierry Guetta, premieres at Sundance in January.
- On July 24th, five thousand hours of footage are submitted to YouTube for the documentary *Life in a Day*, an experiment with user generated content.
- **2013:** Sarah Polley breaks new ground with her innovative personal essay, *Stories We Tell*.
- Netflix signals its intention to be a major buyer of documentaries with Jehane Noujaim's *The Square*.
- **2015:** British documentary *Amy* surpasses *March of the Penguins* to become the 2nd biggest grossing documentary film ever made.
- Commentators declare that we're experiencing a Golden Age of documentary film.

Key terms and modes:

Documentary: The term documentary was first used by John Grierson in 1929 to describe Robert Flaherty's film *Moana*. He suggested this film had "documentary value." The term was used as a noun within a few years. Grierson famously suggested documentary is the "creative treatment of actuality." Michael Chanan suggests this speaks to central tensions within the genre, but that it is not an adequate definition. However, he also finds the term indefinable, instead suggesting it is "a family, or better, an extended family or maybe a network of families, even a whole tribe, with a genealogy that extends from the Lumière actualities to the latest *Panorama* reporting from Afghanistan; from travelogue to ethnography to *Cinéma Vérité*; from the scientific films of Painlevé, or the poetic propaganda of Humphrey Jennings, to the television docudrama, the docusoap, and the varieties of 'alternative' or 'new wave' documentary shown in independent screen venues up and down the country."*

Cinéma Vérité / Direct Cinema: These terms are sometimes used interchangeably but have also been used to distinguish between two different attitudes to the question of truth in documentary cinema:

1. The filmmaker tries to avoid interfering with reality in order to provide evidence of the way things really are, as in American Direct Cinema / *Cinéma Vérité* (e.g. the films of Wiseman, Kopple) or Canadian Candid Eye Cinema (the films of Koenig, Kroitor)
2. The filmmaker accepts that the presence of crew and equipment must affect the reality being filmed, and the film is a record of this intervention in the way things are, as in French *Cinéma Vérité* (Edgar Morin and Jean Rouch) and Canadian Direct Cinema (Michel Brault).**

The expository mode of documentary filmmaking is characterised by:

- 'Voice of God' narration directly addressing the viewer
- Direct relationship between images and voice-over
- Interviews used only in support of the film's argument
- A conventional narrative structure
- A narrator who also may appear as a 'character' in the film (such as David Attenborough)

The observational mode is characterised by:

- 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 'lived' or 'real' time
- Speech which is overheard and not directed to camera or audience
- Synchronous sound
- Only diegetic music (originating in the documentary's world)

The interactive mode: is characterised by:

- The acknowledged presence of the camera and crew
- 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

The reflexive mode: is characterised by:

- Acknowledgement of the medium to problematise it
- Discussion of the problems of making the documentary
- Making explicit the process of representation
- Making explicit institutional issues (such as who is funding it)

The performative mode

Where the documentary maker 'stars' in his/her own film, is also self-reflexive, such as in *Kurt & Courtney* (1998).***

(Sources: *Chanan, 35; **Giannetti & Leach, 318 and ***

<http://www.bfi.org.uk/education/teaching/realshorts/thinking/nfd/doc-modes.html>)

Quotes on Documentary (originally posted at ["Reel Life Stories: Documentary Film and Video Collections in the UC Berkeley Library's Media Resources Center."](#))

In documentary we deal with the actual, and in one sense with the real. But the really real, if I may use that phrase, is something deeper than that. The only reality which counts in the end is the interpretation which is profound

—*John Grierson*

I am eye. I am a mechanical eye. I, a machine, am showing you a world, the likes of which only I can see.

—*Dziga Vertov, Kinoglas*

It's all movies for me. And besides, when you say documentaries, in my case, in most of these cases, means "feature film" in disguise.

—*Werner Herzog*

I don't know what truth is. Truth is something unattainable. We can't think we're creating truth with a camera. But what we can do, is reveal something to viewers that allows them to discover their own truth.

—*Michel Brault*

Every cut is a lie. It's never that way. Those two shots were never next to each other in time that way. But you're telling a lie in order to tell the truth.

—*Wolf Koenig*

My obsession has been — and is still — the feeling of being there. Not of finding out this and analyzing this or performing some virtuous social act or something. Just what's it like to be there"

—*Richard Leacock*

We are really only successful in finding out anything when we are filming somebody who is more concerned with what he is doing that with the fact that we care filming him.

—*Richard Leacock*

Of course there's conscious manipulation! Everything about a movie is manipulation ... If you like it, it's an interpretation. If you don't like it, it's a lie — but everything about these movies is a distortion."

—*Frederick Wiseman*

Sometimes you have to lie to tell the truth.

—*Robert Flaherty*

Give us adequate images. We lack adequate images. Our civilization does not have adequate images. And I think a civilization is doomed or is going to die out like dinosaurs if it doesn't develop an adequate language for adequate images.

—*Werner Herzog*

Documentary operates in the crease between life as lived and life as narrativised

—*Bill Nichols*

Online resources about featured filmmakers (in order of appearance)

Ari Folman

<https://www.theguardian.com/film/2008/oct/25/waltz-with-bashir-ari-folman>

Sarah Polley

<https://www.theguardian.com/film/2013/jun/23/sarah-polley-stories-we-tell-interview>

Louis Le Prince

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-33198686>

<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/films/reviews/the-first-film-film-review-the-mysterious-disappearance-of-inventor-louis-le-prince-10362358.html>

Dziga Vertov:

<http://sensesofcinema.com/2003/great-directors/vertov/>

GPO:

<http://www.newstatesman.com/film/2009/03/film-unit-gpo-post-public>

<http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/MRC/gpo.html>

Alanis Obomsawin

<https://www.nfb.ca/explore-all-directors/alanis-obomsawin/>

<http://sensesofcinema.com/2002/great-directors/obomsawin/>

Spike Lee

<http://flavorwire.com/534956/new-orleans-talks-back-documentaries-in-the-decade-since-hurricane-katrina>

Jehane Noujaim

https://www.ted.com/talks/jehane_noujaim_inspires_a_global_day_of_film?language=en

<http://www.npr.org/2013/10/11/232061299/the-square-tightens-lens-on-egypts-revolution>

Werner Herzog:

<http://www.sensesofcinema.com/2006/great-directors/herzog/>

<http://www.newstatesman.com/film/2009/04/film-course-nature-strange>

Franny Armstrong:

http://www.spannerfilms.net/people/franny_armstrong

<http://www.newstatesman.com/lifestyle/2009/10/climate-change-feel-end-deal>

Banksy and Thierry Guetta:

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/2010/mar/04/exit-through-the-gift-shop-review>

<http://www.wired.com/underwire/2010/04/banksy-exit-through-the-gift-shop/>

Film magazines / journals:

<http://www.vertigomagazine.co.uk>

<http://sensesofcinema.com/>

Documentary festivals: Sheffield <http://sheffdocfest.com/> and London <http://www.lidf.co.uk/>

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