

Documentary

“The creative treatment of actuality”

John Grierson

Definition

“Motion picture that shapes and interprets factual material for purposes of education or entertainment”

Encyclopedia Britannica

Other definitions

“A factual film depicting actual events and real people”

The Film Encyclopedia

“Motion picture or television program based on or recreating an actual event, era, life story, etc, that purports to be factually accurate and contains no fictional elements”

The Random House Dictionary

A broad category of cinematic expression united by the interest to remain factual or non-fictional

Types of documentaries identified by Bill Nichols

Expository

Poetic

Observational

Reflexive

Interactive

Performative

The Expository Documentary

An authoritative voiceover commentary combined with a series of images that aim to be descriptive and informative.

The voiceover addresses the spectator directly, offering a series of facts or arguments that are illustrated by the image track.

Expository documentaries

Nanook of the North

Drifters

Song of Ceylan

Night Mail

City of Gold

Unknown Chaplin

The Civil War

Unitas

Harold and Lillian, A Hollywood Love Story

The Poetic Documentary

Reassembles fragments of the world poetically

Lacks specificity; abstract

Sacrifices the conventions of continuity editing and specificities of time and place to explore associations and patterns that involve temporal rhythms and spatial juxtapositions

Poetic Documentaries

Rain

Manhatta

Sans Soleil

Koyaanisqatsi

Danube Exodus

The Observational Documentary

Characterized by the non-intervention of the filmmaker in the filmed events.

There is no voice of god commentary, no intertitles and no interviews.

The emphasis is to present a slice of life, or direct representation of the filmed events.

The filmmaker attempts to be completely invisible, an uninvolved bystander.

Also called “Direct Cinema” or “Cinéma vérité”

Observational documentaries

High School

The War Room

To Be and To Have

The Same River Twice

Restrepo

Armadillo

Anvil: The Story of Anvil

A Girl in the River

The Reflexive Documentary

The filmmaker exposes to the spectator the conventions of documentary representation, with the effect of challenging the documentary's apparent ability to reveal the truth.

Tries to demonstrate to the spectator how film images are constructed.

Makes the whole process of filmmaking known to the spectator.

Reflexive documentaries

Man with the Movie Camera

Ballet mécanique

Dawson City: Frozen Time

The Interactive Documentary

Makes the filmmaker's presence prominent, as he or she interacts with the people or events being filmed. Draws the filmed people and events into direct contact with the director.

Based primarily on interviews, which draw out specific comments and responses from those who are filmed.

Sometimes the filmmaker is the main person on screen and holds the documentary together

Interactive documentaries

Roger and Me

Bowling for Columbine

El General

In the Matter of Cha Jung Hee

Icarus

The Performative Documentary

Aims to represent the world indirectly. The poetic and expressive dimensions of film are emphasized.

Present its subject matter in a subjective, expressive, stylized, evocative and visceral manner

Performative documentaries

The Thin Blue Line

The Fog of War

Standard Operating Procedure

Exit through the Gift Shop