

"Documentary, after all, can tell lies; and it can tell lies because it lays claim to a form of veracity which fiction doesn't."

-- Dai Vaugh

Conventions

As a type of film or television develops, filmmakers and directors find certain techniques that become useful or effective in creating texts. These techniques get used again and again, and eventually they are associated with and are used to define certain types of texts. The techniques then become known as conventions.

Documentary has its fair share of conventions, which we can recognize in such mockumentaries as *This is Spinal Tap* and the recent *A Mighty Wind*, for these films call heightened attention to the conventions in order to make fun of them.

Below is a list of some conventions in documentary, along with some example works. Note that not all documentaries possess all of these traits.

Archival Footage and Photographs

Archival materials include old photographs, newsreel footage, and even shots from fiction films. For example, *The Atomic Cafe* makes exclusive use of archival footage from the 1940s and 1950s to spoof American's Cold War fear of an atomic bomb, and *Feed* culls footage from the 1992 primaries to show presidential hopefuls being anything but presidential. *The Civil War* employs an endless number of still photographs.

Talking Heads

Talking heads are people interviewed to explain or comment on the text's subject. These people usually are shown in their offices (sometimes with a wall of books behind them) or in their homes. For example, *Hearts and Minds* includes interviews with both American and Vietnamese people to offer their perspectives on the war. *Vernon, Florida* also makes use of an interesting selection of talking heads.

Jiggly Camera

A wobbly camera is often attributed to documentary. As cameras became more portable and more affordable, filmmakers did more on-location shooting, and keeping the camera steady was somewhat difficult when it came to following the action. Steadicam, a camera stabilizing system, aids in correcting what some perceive as a problem. The fiction film *The Blair Witch Project* makes use of the jiggly camera as a means of reinforcing its documentary-like style.

Voiceover Narration

Voiceover narration occurs when a voice is heard on the soundtrack without a matching source in the image. In other words we hear the voice speak but we cannot see the speaker utter the words. The voice often explains or comments on the visuals. Early documentary made extensive use of this convention, including Pare Lorentz's *When the Plow Broke the Plains* and *The River*. A more contemporary example is *Ansel Adams*.

Re-enactments

A re-enactment stages real events that already have occurred. Sometimes they include the people who experienced the events originally, but more often they incorporate actors playing parts. *The Thin Blue Line* makes extensive use of this convention to assist in making its argument. Most documentary filmmakers shoot events where they actually occur.

Real People

For the most part, the people we see in a documentary are real people. We can assume that if we went to Flint, Michigan, we may meet the "Pets or Meat" lady from *Roger & Me*. Or if we went to Texas, we may meet the people participating in the contest to win a new truck in *Hands on a Hard Body*.

Glossary of Film Terms.

_____ accompanies action on the screen but coming from no discernible source within the film.

_____ a voice commenting on the action in the film. May be either seen or unseen.

_____ An individual strip of film consisting of a single shot; the separation of two pieces of action as a transition eg . from one shot to another

_____ method of making a transition from one shot to another by briefly superimposing one image upon another and then allowing the first to disappear.

_____ a moving shot taken from a camera on a dolly.

_____ the process of splicing individual shots together into a complete film.

_____ a transitional device in which either an image gradually dims until the viewer sees only a black screen(_____), or an image slowly emerges from a black screen to a clear and bright picture(_____).

_____ a segment of film that breaks normal chronological order by shifting directly to time past.

_____ a single frame repeated for an extended time, consequently looking like a still photograph.

_____ a shot taken from above a subject, creating a sense of "looking down" upon whatever is photographed.

_____ a place outside a studio where shooting occurs.

_____ a shot taken from below a subject creating a sense of "looking up to".

_____ a method of putting shots together in such a way that dissimilar material combine together to make a statement.

_____ a shot in which a stationary camera turns horizontally revealing new areas.

_____ a series of shots taken at one basic time and place – the basic structural unit of a film.

_____ a written description of the action dialogue and camera placements for the film.

_____ a single uninterrupted action of a camera as seen by a viewer.

_____ extreme long shot

_____ long shot .

_____ medium long shot

_____ medium shot

_____ medium close-up

_____ close-up

_____ extreme close-up

_____ movements on screen appear slower than in real life

_____ shots simulating what a character actually sees

_____ tilt shot – a shot taken by angling a stationary camera up or down

_____ any shot using a mobile camera that follows or moves away from the subject by moving on tracks or being mounted on a vehicle.

_____ any spoken language not seeming to come from images on the screen

_____ a shot accomplished with a lens capable of smoothly and continuously changing focal length.

Pan	tracking shot
Background music	script
Voice-over	ELS
Fade	LS
High-angle shot	cut
Subjective camera	zoom shot
Fade-out	Low angle shot
Commentator	fade-in
Dissolve	scene
Freeze frame	montage
MS	MCU
Dolly shot	shot
Slow motion	location
CU	Tilt shot
Flashback	ECU
Editing	MLS

Nature on Screen

Daniel J. Philippon

Derek Bousé. *Wildlife Films*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000. xv + 280 pages. Chronology, notes, bibliography, and index. \$55.00 (cloth); \$22.50 (paper).

Gregg Mitman. *Reel Nature: America's Romance with Wildlife on Film*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999. viii + 263 pages. Notes and index. \$29.95.

David Ingram. *Green Screen: Environmentalism and Hollywood Cinema*. Exeter, England: University of Exeter Press, 2000. x + 182. Notes, filmography, bibliography, and index. \$64.95.

American attitudes toward the environment have traditionally been traced to several sources, including books of nature writing and environmental advocacy, such as *Walden* and *Silent Spring*; landscape paintings and photographs, such as those of the Hudson River School and Ansel Adams; and, of course, people's primary experiences of the nonhuman world, whether it be in a backyard garden or a national park, an urban zoo or a wilderness campsite. Compared to these much-discussed subjects, films and television shows about nature and wildlife have received surprisingly little critical attention.

Fortunately, three recent books have begun to fill this gap, offering welcome insights into the aesthetic, scientific, political, and economic issues that accompany the representation of nature through motion-picture technology. *Wildlife Films*, by Derek Bousé, is the most focused of these three studies, looking specifically at wildlife and natural history films as a genre and asking how genre conventions have both helped and hindered science education and

nature conservation. *Reel Nature*, by Gregg Mitman, covers much the same ground as *Wildlife Films* but with a broader brush, approaching its subject from the disciplines of environmental history, history of science, and cultural studies and placing the history of natural history films into the center of contemporary debates about the idea of wilderness. Finally, *Green Screen*, by David Ingram, takes an even wider view, examining not only wildlife films but also films about wild and cultivated lands and the humans who exploit and conserve them, arguing that the wide range of films that could be called "environmental" engages an equally wide range of contradictory discourses.

Whether considered wildlife films, natural history films, or environmental films, motion pictures about the natural world are at least two orders of magnitude removed from what we might call "first nature," the world of primary human experience. The initial recordings could be said to represent "second nature," a reflection of the world from a particular perspective, much like Thoreau's journal entries reflect his perception of the environment surrounding Walden Pond. The finished film, spliced and overdubbed, could likewise be said to represent "third nature," existing at a further remove from second nature, much like *Walden* is the heavily edited product of Thoreau's journals. Unlike *Walden*, though, and unlike the photographs and visual art with which the American environment is also identified, motion pictures add the important variables of camera motion and a soundtrack. They also differ in their method of delivery, which is in a theater or on a television screen to a mass audience. Products original to the twentieth century, motion pictures also reflect the demands of the sophisticated industry that has grown up around the production and distribution of mass culture. In other words, as Derek Bousé observes in the introduction to *Wildlife Films*, "How film and television depict the natural world often has far less to do with science or real outdoor experience than with media economics, established production practices, viewers' expectations, and the ways each of these influences the others" (1). This fact—that film is no more transparent a medium than the printed word or image—is the major claim made by all of these books about nature on screen. How they go about illustrating and deepening this central observation depends on the discipline and methodology of each particular author.

For Derek Bousé, who is both a filmmaker and an academic, wildlife films are interesting examples of a particular genre of film, one whose conventions are shaped more by the aesthetics, economics, and technology of filmmaking than by the interests of environmental science or politics. The strengths of *Wildlife Films* thus reside in its attention to the formal aspects of wildlife filmmaking, the production demands of a competitive industry, and the details of film history. (Bousé received his M.A. and Ph.D. from the Annenberg School of Communication at the University of Pennsylvania, where he wrote his M.A. thesis on "The History and Tradition of Wildlife Films in America" and his Ph.D. dissertation on "The Wilderness Documentary: Film, Video, and the Visual Rhetoric of American Environmentalism." *Wildlife Films* is based on both of these texts.)

Wildlife Films contains six chapters, the first being an overview of what Bousé calls "The Problem of Images," or the nature of what I have called "third nature." Film and television, writes Bousé, "are about movement, action, and dynamism; nature generally is not. Film and television also have little tolerance for what is normal and usual in life, thriving instead on what is rare and unusual" (4). As a result, Bousé observes, "the image of nature found in wildlife and natural history television has been molded to fit the medium" (4). The issue, of course, is a familiar one: is realism a reproduction or is it artifice? Wisely, Bousé describes wildlife film as "an entertaining art that operates according to its own codes and conventions" (7), and he expresses more concern about the cumulative effects of films' artifice upon an unwitting public than about the accuracy of their reproduction. "The question," he emphasizes, "is whether, or to what extent, audience members recognize" the codes and conventions of a wildlife film (11). To ensure that his readers have a better understanding of those conventions, Bousé catalogs what he sees as the chief tendencies of "blue chip" wildlife films, which include their depiction of megafauna; a background of magnificent scenery; the presence of a dramatic storyline; and the absence of such subjects as science in practice, controversial issues, historical reference points, and people (14-15).

In particular, Bousé argues that wildlife films are closer to dramatic narratives than to documentaries, claiming that, "in wildlife films it is nearly always story that matters most" (36). He illustrates this, for example, through a

detailed discussion of the close-up, which he claims is used in wildlife films "to create characters, to promote feelings of intimacy and involvement with them, and to integrate them into a narrative structure" (29). Close-ups, Bousé explains, were possible only after the 1920s, when the introduction of the telephoto lens enabled filmmakers to simulate a physical proximity to creatures it would otherwise have been impossible or imprudent to obtain. Close-ups not only allowed filmmakers to isolate one animal from another and thus provide each with an individual identity; they also made possible a new editing technique—now taken for granted—that enables unrelated look-offs, point-of-view shots, and reaction shots to be assembled into what appears to be a continuous narrative. Such technological advances affected other aspects of filmmaking as well, such as the need to fabricate the sounds of wildlife in the studio. Since the telephoto lens was positioned at a considerable distance from its subject, recording the sounds that actually accompanied the images became virtually impossible. "When you're filming with a long-focus lens," Bousé quotes David Attenborough as saying, "you can't record the real sounds; many of those horrible bone-crunching noises are actually done by a man in a studio, carefully crunching bone in front of a microphone" (32).

Bousé's second chapter, the longest in the book, offers "A Brief History of a Neglected Tradition," tracing the development of wildlife films from Eadweard Muybridge's locomotion studies of Leland Stanford's racehorse through the formation of several categories of wildlife films, including the safari film, the scientific-educational film, and the narrative adventure film. As in the previous chapter, Bousé is at his best here when describing the effect of changing technologies on the evolution of wildlife filmmaking, such as when he observes that because mid-nineteenth-century still photographers had trouble getting animals to stay in place during the several seconds of exposure time their films required, most photographers ended up taking pictures of dead animals instead. Life, he notes, "was the very thing that both motivated and hindered" these early efforts at wildlife photography (40). While the many names of filmmakers, film titles, and release dates Bousé provides in this "brief history" will be of certain use to film scholars, general readers may find themselves overwhelmed by so much detail.

In the remainder of the book, Bousé turns to three of the most prominent issues in wildlife film criticism: the relationship of fact and fiction in nature representation, the classic narrative model used by most wildlife films, and the family romance at the core of that model. Chapter 3, "Science and Storytelling," most reveals the book's academic roots, as it consists largely of a historical survey of fact and fiction in nature representation, the definitive treatment of which appeared in Ralph Lutts's *The Nature Fakers* (1990). In this chapter, Bousé makes an observation similar to one David Ingram makes in *Green Screen*, noting that wildlife films "are the products of a vastly complex, heavily mediated global culture," and as such "can give rise to a number of different 'readings,'" which both reinforce and challenge dominant social values (94). Unfortunately, Bousé does not develop this observation in as much detail as Ingram by considering the various social functions these films might serve. Instead, he maintains his focus on the ways in which wildlife films consist of "traditional narratives that are repackaged for sale to popular audiences, . . . elements of folk cultural forms that have been appropriated and offered back to us at a price" (129).

In particular, in chapter 4, Bousé surveys examples of what he calls the "classic model" of wildlife films, which features versions of either the "separation-initiation-return" structure Joseph Campbell identified as the myth of the hero in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949) or the "journey-struggle-exaltation" structure Northrop Frye discussed as the form of the romance in *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957). Bousé traces its presence through Disney's *Dumbo* (1941), *Bambi* (1942), True-Life Adventures (1948-60), and other films; yet, as he eloquently points out, such structures "may all be among the categories by which we make sense of the natural world, but we project them onto it just as surely as we look into the stars and see a giant dipper" (129). Bousé expands on this idea in chapter 5, exploring how wildlife films reflect a range of family values, social mores, and behavioral norms. "Whether or not it is appropriate to apply such notions to animals has seemed to matter less than that they offer audiences a way of making sense of things, and a vision of a world in which things do make sense," Bousé observes. "What makes popular film and television 'popular,' after all, is that they do not pose concerted challenges to deeply held values, or to beliefs about the way the world works"

(152). Such an observation may lead one to explore, as Bousé does, the particular moral orientations through which animal portrayals are almost always filtered, but it may also lead one to reflect, as Bousé fortunately also does, on the pragmatic reasons for an emphasis on family life in wildlife films. "Species with a unified family life most resembling those of their television audiences," Bousé notes, "are simply easier to film than are nomadic creatures" (166). In keeping with his belief that a discussion of the representation of nature on screen can never be divorced from the technology that makes it possible, in his final chapter Bousé surveys the future of wildlife film and television, pointing to the challenges posed by high-definition television (HDTV) and the image manipulation made possible by digital technology.

In an appendix, Bousé provides a chronology of highlights from the history of wildlife and natural history films that, to some extent, reflects the strengths and weaknesses of his book as a whole. On the one hand, the detail of Bousé's appendix reflects the scholarly thoroughness that makes *Wildlife Films* the most comprehensive book of its kind. On the other hand, that same attention to detail prevents *Wildlife Films* from placing its subject into the broader cultural and environmental context it so clearly demands. If it is true, for instance, as Bousé declares on the penultimate page of the book, that "there is little evidence that the state of wildlife and the natural world today is directly related to wildlife film and television" (192), the reader is left to wonder why anyone should care about wildlife film and television at all.

Fortunately, Gregg Mitman asks and answers this question extremely well in *Reel Nature: America's Romance with Wildlife on Film*—and with a prose style that, for all of his attention to narrative, Bousé cannot match. A professor of the History of Medicine, History of Science, and Science Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, Mitman is especially well positioned to place film history in dialogue with the history of American popular culture. His previous book, *The State of Nature: Ecology, Community, and American Social Thought, 1900-1950* (1992), applied a similar method to the history of science, examining how the disciplines of evolution and ecology were shaped by the social and political concerns of early twentieth-century American society. In *Reel Nature* Mitman examines the way nature films, "like naturalistic displays found in animal theme parks, museums, and zoos, have sought to capture and

detailed discussion of the close-up, which he claims is used in wildlife films “to create characters, to promote feelings of intimacy and involvement with them, and to integrate them into a narrative structure” (29). Close-ups, Bousé explains, were possible only after the 1920s, when the introduction of the telephoto lens enabled filmmakers to simulate a physical proximity to creatures it would otherwise have been impossible or imprudent to obtain. Close-ups not only allowed filmmakers to isolate one animal from another and thus provide each with an individual identity; they also made possible a new editing technique—now taken for granted—that enables unrelated look-offs, point-of-view shots, and reaction shots to be assembled into what appears to be a continuous narrative. Such technological advances affected other aspects of filmmaking as well, such as the need to fabricate the sounds of wildlife in the studio. Since the telephoto lens was positioned at a considerable distance from its subject, recording the sounds that actually accompanied the images became virtually impossible. “When you’re filming with a long-focus lens,” Bousé quotes David Attenborough as saying, “you can’t record the real sounds; many of those horrible bone-crunching noises are actually done by a man in a studio, carefully crunching bone in front of a microphone” (32).

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Mitman.

Given the similarities between *Reel Nature* and *Wildlife Films*, which are especially apparent in the brief epilogue to *Reel Nature*, it is important to note that Mitman’s book appeared before Bousé’s, which may account for some of the overlap. Mitman, like Bousé, cites the case of Marty Stouffer, the filmmaker who produced the television series *Wild America* (1982-96) and who was accused in 1996 of staging scenes in his nature documentaries. The charges made national news (Bousé exaggerates their impact as eliciting “a wave of critical indignation” [87]), but their meaning goes well beyond the issue of “nature faking” for profit, as Mitman nicely articulates.

Our uneasiness with the exploitation of nature for financial gain reveals how much we wish nature to appear pristine, set apart from the hands of man. Nature films, naturalistic habitat displays, and animal theme parks like Disney’s Animal Kingdom capitalize on our desire to be close to nature, yet curiously removed from it. By making animals into spectacle, rather than beings we engage with in work and play, nature films and other recreations of nature reinforce this dichotomy of humans and nature. In nature as spectacle, the animal kingdom exists solely to be observed, objectified, and enjoyed. We have our world and they have theirs. This voyeurism precludes any meaningful exchange because we remain at a physically and emotionally safe distance, far removed from the shared labor of animals and humans, whose interactions have made such vicarious experiences possible. We no longer work with animals; instead, we predominantly watch them. And film—as a technology of art, science, and entertainment, but above all vision—overwhelmingly has come to mediate our relationship with animals and the natural world. (206)

Rayner, P., Wall, P. and Kruger, S., 2004, "Medical Studies: The Essential Resource", Routledge London.

pp 62-69

'Faking it' has never been so easy

Finally, within this discussion of recent transformations of the genre, we need to mention recent technological developments that have also impacted upon documentary in a number of ways. Advances in image construction and manipulation have allowed filmmakers a much greater latitude to mediate representations of the social-historical world. Such technological advancements can be seen as presenting the potential to capture new audiences through new formats, while also posing a direct threat to the integrity of documentary's claims to truth.

Digital technologies perhaps present the most potent challenge to documentary's privileged truth status. These advancements in photographic and computer technology have already had an impact on journalism. Computer programs such as Adobe Photoshop allow even the relatively unskilled to manipulate photographic stills. Extend this to the general post-production process and the implications are clear. Although documentaries are always 'constructed' to some extent, because of the need to select and structure information into textual form, these new technologies allow the referent itself to be manipulated – in other words, the basic integrity of the camera as a *recording* instrument is fundamentally undermined.

In this way, it has never been easier to 'fake it' and to be able to go as far as producing evidence, in the form of stills or film, of events, people and objects that really have no referent in the 'real world'. Feminist filmmakers have used particular stylistic strategies in order to break the direct relationship between the image and the referent, yet this was done in the knowledge that the process was highly constructed and was not necessarily meant to look natural or real. With these particular texts, we were not supposed to believe that such presentations were to replace such images of the real. However, technology now allows us to make the same breaks, to manipulate stills and film footage, without anyone being the wiser. This, more than any other development, challenges documentary's reliance on the power of referentiality.

This developing capability to play with the referential quality of documentary representation is obviously most 'dangerous' when combined with an intent to hoax. Popular documentary formats in Britain have recently been the target of media witch-hunts and of various official inquiries over fears of this very tendency. . . . [H]eadlines in British newspapers such as 'Can We Believe Anything We See on TV?' [are] typical of the panic over fakes. Documentary originally secured its privileged status as a representational form by promoting its trustworthiness. Recently, that trust has been eroded. Although it is widely acknowledged that documentary is inevitably 'constructed' to a certain extent, viewers nevertheless have trouble accepting that it may deliver images of the social world that are not true. Hence the public outcry when it was revealed that

a major producer of documentaries in the UK, Carlton TV, had set subjects up and lied to audiences.

Documentary is undergoing a number of quite complex transformations in the light of recent challenges to its status and public role. As a consequence the genre has been extended and developed in new and innovative ways. This process of transformation has always been an inherent, if not always openly acknowledged, aspect of documentary and in recent years has opened up space for hybrid formats such as docu-soap and Reality TV. Mock-documentary needs to be discussed in relation to these hybrid forms because it also partly derives from and reveals a weakening of the bond between factual discourse and the codes and conventions typically associated with documentary.

J. Roscoe and C. Hight, *Faking It: Mock Documentary and the Subversion of Factualty*, Manchester University Press, 2001, pp. 36–40

Many contemporary documentary makers have moved away from the codes and conventions of realism. The extract by Roscoe and Hight (2001) examines the way in which the documentary genre on television is being reinvented through a 'borrowing' of the codes and conventions of other genres (particularly soap opera) but also as a result of technological changes that have resulted in the miniaturisation of camera and sound equipment.

In the article 'The egos have landed', Jon Ronson looks at a new style of documentary film-makers like Nick Broomfield and Michael Moore. He describes them as film-makers who question and draw attention to the process of film-making itself. In their films we see the film-maker take prime position both in the narrative and in front of the camera. Rather than the anonymity of 'fly-on-the-wall', these film-makers address the camera directly, are shown being refused access to particular people or organisations, and in the case of *Biggie and Tupac*, reflecting on air about the dangerous nature of the documentary investigations.

Below is the dialogue from the opening scene of the film *Behind the Rent Strike* made in 1974 by Nick Broomfield when a student at the National Film School. The visual is a shot of a woman who lives on the local council estate talking to the camera in response to questions asked by Nick Broomfield.

Woman: Maybe it's just me, that I am so sceptical. I am so sceptical that the working-class position will ever change. I know it could change in actual fact, the working-class position could change, but it won't change through the media. And that's why I am so sceptical about the media. It won't change by films, television, newspapers. It will not change because as you have just said

BEHIND THE RENT STRIKE



Made with Phillip Jones Griffith, Diana Ruston, and Graham Berry; and a special thanks to the Singletons who were the inspiration for the film.

Running Time: 90 minutes

DIRECTOR'S COMMENTS:

"My graduating film from the National Film School. [Colin Young] the head of the N.F.S., helped me a great deal to structure the film, as did Brian Winston."

yourself it's middle-class views, it's controlled and owned by the middle class who put across what is in their own best interest. In actual fact I am very sceptical about them ever changing the working-class position. They just cannot. The only people who change the working-class position are the working class themselves.

Broomfield: So what do you think of me making a film down here?

Woman: Well I don't think anything about it, you can come in, you can make it and it will have no effect like I've just said. It will make people think for a few minutes and that's all, but the position of the working class won't change. It won't change by you making a film nor for that matter any other film-maker coming in, it just won't make any difference. There've been dozens of film-makers we've seen on local estates and . . .

Broomfield: Why do you think I am making it then?

Woman: I'm asking you that, why are you making it? It's only personal self-satisfaction that's all, it is, it must be. How can you get the interest to sort it all out unless you feel deeply enough about it? And the only way to feel deeply about it is for it to be bloody well happening to you and it is not happening to you, because at the end of the three months you know you can go back home.

(Behind the Rent Strike, Director Nick Broomfield, Lafayette Films, 1974)

In the spring of 2003 there was some controversy over the television programme *Living with Michael Jackson* made by Martin Bashir and broadcast on ITV1. Michael Jackson accused Martin Bashir of using film and interview extracts out of context and later broadcast his own version of the interviews using footage filmed by his own staff. Jackson claimed that Martin Bashir had been manipulative and had misrepresented Michael Jackson and Neverland.

ACTIVITIES

- Consider the questions that the Bloomfield extract raises about the role of the documentary film-maker. There is an assumption that films like this have the power to alter circumstances or that film-makers may wish to make films that alter circumstances or improve the lives of their subjects. Do you think that this is true?
- What do you consider to be the motivation of documentary film-makers like Nick Broomfield and Martin Bashir? What do you think is the motivation behind Nick Broomfield's latest film *Biggie and Tupac*?
- Using websites such as www.guardian.co.uk/Archive or www.pamediapoint.press.net research the controversy surrounding *Living with Michael Jackson*. Do you think that it is possible to provide a truthful and fair account of someone's life in a television documentary?
- What are the motivations for making docu-soaps or reality TV programmes? Do you think the motivation for making documentary films has changed over the years? If so, why is this?
- Consider a range of documentary films and try and identify those that might have led to some kind of positive change in the circumstances of those featured in the film.
- Are the criticisms made in the film about middle-class film-makers who can go home after three months justified? If so, does this mean that all documentary film-makers must come from within the situation that they are reporting on? What might the problems be with this idea?

Roscoe and Hight call these new hybrid forms of documentary 'mock-documentary' because they reflect a 'post-modern scepticism towards the expert and the professional' and instead offer a 'more general amateurism which is seen as being more truthful or 'authentic' (2001: 39). It is perhaps because these types of programmes are seen to use 'real' people and 'real' situations that they appear to give a heightened sense of realism. Roscoe and Hight suggest that the increasing sophistication of digital editing and post-production facilities means that the makers of these types of programmes are (at best) manipulating or (at worst) faking much of their content.

ACTIVITIES

- In recent years docu-soaps have been particularly popular with both television producers and television audiences. What reasons can you suggest for the popularity of docu-soaps with (a) television producers and (b) television audiences?
- Consider the range of documentaries that regularly appear on British television and consider the argument that market forces and the drive for ratings have undermined the standards of professional documentary film-making.

The current vogue for various types of docu-soaps and fly-on-the-wall documentaries has resulted in a series of scandals about faked scenes and other types of hoaxes (see, for example, the reference to the BBC programme *Driving School* in *AS Media Studies: The Essential Introduction*.) In 1996 Carlton was fined 2 million pounds by the ITC for its documentary *The Connection*. The programme was supposed to be a 'gritty' documentary about the drugs trade and included a scene where a courier swallowed heroin. However, it turned out that the whole programme was a fake and the heroin was in fact sweets. Other programmes exposed as fakes included several made for Channel 4, including *Too Much Too Young: Chickens* (1997) about rent boys in Glasgow and *Daddy's Girl* (1998) about an incestuous relationship between a father and daughter. This was pulled when it was discovered that the father and daughter were not related but rather were a couple, trying to cheat the television production company.

TV SCHOOLBOY WAS REALLY 30

CHANNEL 4 has been forced to scrap a £400,000 documentary after conning a school into thinking a 30-year-old TV producer was a teenage student.

The network claimed it was filming a 'fly-on-the-wall' series about a 16-year-old drop-out Howard Simmons, who wanted to return to sixth-form studies. 'Howard' attended classes for two months and socialised with other pupils – even throwing a rowdy joint '17th birthday' party with a girl classmate.

But the staff of Kingdown Community School in Warminster, Wiltshire, were outraged to discover the student with teeth braces was in fact Oxford graduate Sheridan Simove.

Head Sheelagh Brown halted filming after confronting Channel 4's Head of Entertainment.

She wrote to parents saying she was 'shocked and stunned'. Ms Brown added: 'The whole school, and especially the sixth form, had taken this man into their confidence and their lives.'

Our trust has been totally abused and many staff and pupils are upset and disappointed.

'It is now clear that all members of the production team and Channel 4 Television had planned their deceit from the outset in order to pass Howard off as a teenager.'

Channel 4 said it intended to reveal Howard's identity before filming ended. But, as the school had withdrawn permission, the project would now be scrapped.

The channel has been in trouble before. It was fined £150,000 for the 1997 documentary *Too Much Too Young*, where members of the production team posed as clients asking rent boys for sex. A year later, it was forced to pull a programme about a father and daughter's relationship after they turned out to be unrelated lovers.

F. Davern, 'TV Schoolboy was Really 30', *Metro*, 21 March 2002

The *Metro* front page relates to a more recent example where the producer of a fly-on-the-wall documentary based around a school pretended to be a 17-year-old student.

In a statement, Channel 4 said it accepted full responsibility for the undercover operation, declaring it had aimed to show what life was like for A-level students in a successful sixth form. The following public acknowledgement was published in *The Guardian* (20/03/2002):

The school was told that at the heart of the programme there was a unique experiment involving the introduction of an extra 17-year-old student, Howard, for a fixed period of one term only. At the time of the placement the school was not made aware that he was in fact a 30-year-old member of the production team.

From the outset it was always the channel's intention that his real identity would be explained to the school and its students, long before the completion of the experiment, and that the school would have the final say on whether it wished to continue to collaborate on the project.

It was always accepted that the completed programme would not be broadcast without the school's express consent . . . The school is entirely blameless and Channel 4 accepts full responsibility.

(O. Gibson, 'Channel 4 Takes Full Responsibility', *The Guardian*, 20 March 2002)

Channel 4 argued that it had always planned to tell the school of Howard's true identity and to give it the final say on whether it wished to continue with the project.

'There was no intention by the channel or the production team to compromise or hurt staff or students. Everyone knew they were being filmed and nothing would have been broadcast unless consent had been obtained,' added the Channel 4 statement.

Channel 4 insisted that it had complied with its regulatory code at all times and that full police checks and an independent psychological assessment were obtained to ensure Howard did not pose any physical or moral threat to students.

The station said the idea was 'unusual' but that it had allowed programme-makers to gauge teachers' and students' reactions to Howard (www.media.guardian.co.uk/broadcast/story/0,7493,670959,00).

ACTIVITIES

- Imagine a television company wants to do a documentary on your school or college. Consider what might be some of the main advantages and disadvantages from the institution's point of view. Could you suggest any safeguards that the institution could put in place to ensure that it is not misrepresented? Suggest some particular 'angles' or narrative strands that the film-makers might wish to include. To what extent do you think that people's behaviour would change when the cameras were present? How could this be minimised?
- Consider how audiences distinguish between 'reality' and fiction on television.
- Undertake a survey of documentaries across a range of channels over a short period of time. Consider how many of these documentaries present their subjects in a positive light and how many in a negative light. Are there particular difficulties in showing subjects in a positive light? What might be the advantages of showing the subjects of documentaries in a more negative light? If your research shows that there is a bias towards one particular approach, suggest reasons to explain this.
- Record and analyse the first few minutes of a recent television documentary. Consider the way in which the producers have used photography, sound, music, editing and narrative devices. To what extent do you feel that the producers have manipulated their subjects to present a particular 'version' of reality?
- The advert on p. 136 appeared in the *Guardian* in the summer of 2002. How do you think the producers might present the girls who reply to this advert? How might their stories be presented? Write a description of the type of programme that might result from this advert, consider the type of audience targeted and where in the television schedules this programme might eventually appear.

FURTHER READING

Burton, G. (2000) 'Television and Realism', *Talking Television. An Introduction to the Study of Television*. Arnold.

Accessible discussion of realism, its modes and categories and the relationship between realism and ideology. Contains a brief history of documentary on British television.

Casey, B., Casey, N., Calvert, B., French, L., and Lewis, J. (2002) 'Realism', in *Television Studies. The Key Concepts*. Routledge.

A short but comprehensive overview of the main issues in relation to television realism.

Winston, B. (1995) *Claiming the Real: The Documentary Film Revisited*, British Film Institute. One of the key texts on the development of documentary film-making.

Nick Broomfield's website: www.nickbroomfield.com/home.html

Contains much information on his films and awards as well as an opportunity to buy videos and posters.

7 INTERTEXTUALITY

Intertextuality is an increasingly significant concept in Media Studies. Its primary importance is that it encourages us to look at texts not in isolation, but to identify the key links through which they relate to one another.

Recognition is an important factor in the way in which we consume and approach media texts. For example, advertisers love to share a joke with their audience by making allusions in their advertisements to other media texts. In doing so they cleverly engage an audience with the text by allowing them to feel pleased that they have understood the allusion and can become party to the cleverness of it. In an article on 'Intertextuality' on the Media and Communication Studies website (www.aber.ac.uk/media/index.html), Daniel Chandler pinpoints how intertextuality is often used in media texts in order to appeal to audiences in this way:

The debts of a text to other texts are seldom acknowledged (other than in the scholarly apparatus of academic writing). This serves to further the mythology of authorial 'originality'. However, some texts allude directly to each other – as in 'remakes' of films, extra-diegetic references to the media in the animated cartoon *The Simpsons*, and many amusing contemporary TV ads (in the UK, perhaps most notably in the ads for Boddington's beer). This is a particularly self-conscious form of intertextuality: it credits its audience with the necessary experience to make sense of such allusions and offers them the pleasure of recognition. By alluding to other texts and other media, this practice reminds us that we are in a mediated

RealityFilm

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"Documentary, after all, can tell lies; and it can tell lies because it lays claim to a form of veracity which fiction doesn't."

-- Dai Vaughn

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Synonyms

Here is a list of synonyms for the word "documentary."

- Actualitie
- Anti-war films
- Anti-government films
- Compilation films
- Ethnographic film
- Government film
- How-to video
- Independent film
- Independently produced film
- Industrial film
- Journalistic film
- Network news magazines
- Non-fiction film
- Propaganda film
- Public television programs
- Reality series
- Reality show
- Reality TV
- Travel film
- Travelogue

This short list illustrates just how far-reaching the term "documentary" can be and how loosely it can be applied. It also shows the difficulty in drawing disciplinary lines.

The nebulous word "reality" (as opposed to "fiction") serves as a basis for defining what a documentary is. The word itself offers little help in narrowing things down, for "reality" never really is a constant. Almost out of hand some of these films have been excluded from the canon, such as the travelogues, government films, and how-to videos. Television has had a more difficult time gaining recognition in the field, though the situation is changing, as most documentaries now are seen on television, not in the movie theaters.

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Documentary Definitions

The word "documentary" poses many challenges in providing a quick definition. Here are some definitions from various reference guides and textbooks:

"**[A]ny film practice** that has as its subject persons, events, or situations that exist outside the film in the real world."
--Steve Blandford, Barry Keith Grant, and Jim Hillier, *The Film Studies Dictionary*, 73.

"**A nonfiction film.** Documentaries are usually shot on location, use actual persons rather than actors, and focus thematically on historical, scientific, social, or environmental subjects. Their principle purpose is to enlighten, inform, educate, persuade, and provide insight into the world in which we live."
--Frank Beaver, *Dictionary of Film Terms*, 119.

"**A nonfiction film** about real events and people, often avoiding traditional narrative structures."
--Timothy Corrigan, *A Short Guide to Writing About Film*, 4th ed., 206.

"**Film of actual events;** the events are documented with the real people involved, not with actors."
--Ralph S. Singleton and James A. Conrad, *Filmmaker's Dictionary*, 2nd ed., 94.

"**A documentary film** purports to present factual information about the world outside the film."
--David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, *Film Art: An Introduction*, 5th ed., 42.

"**A film or video presentation** of actual events using the real people involved and not actors."
--John W. Cones, *Film Finance and Distribution*, 154.

"**A type of film** marked by its interpretative handling of realistic subjects and backgrounds. Sometimes the term is applied widely to include films that appear more realistic than conventional commercial pictures; at other times, so narrowly that only films with a narration track and a background of real life are so categorized."
--Edmund F. Penney, *Facts on File Film and Broadcast Terms*, 73.

"**A term** with a wide latitude of meaning, basically used to refer to any film or program not wholly fictional in nature."

--James Monaco, *The Dictionary of New Media*, 94.

"**A film that deals** directly with fact and not fiction, that tries to convey reality as it is instead of some fictional version of reality. These films are concerned with actual people, places, events, or activities."
--Ira Konigsberg, *The Complete Film Dictionary*, 2nd ed., 103.

"**Unlike most fiction films,** documentaries deal with facts--real people, places, and events rather than invented ones. Documentarists believe that they're not creating a world so much as reporting on the one that already exists."
--Louis Giannetti, *Understanding Movies*, 7th ed., 339.

"**A nonfiction film** that organizes and presents factual materials to make a point."
--Gerald Mast and Bruce F. Kawin, *A Short History of the Movies*, 7th ed., 646.

"**A non-fiction text** using 'actuality' footage, which may include the live recording of events and relevant research material (i.e. interviews, statistics, etc.). This kind of text is usually informed by a particular point of view, and seeks to address a particular social issue which is related to and potentially affects the audience."
--Jill Nelmes, ed., *An Introduction to Film Studies*, 2nd ed., 488.

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Key Ideas

Several ideas about what a documentary is recur in its various definitions. Here is brief summary of some key ones. Keep in mind that not all of these ideas are applicable to all documentaries.

Nonfiction

Most definitions delineate documentary as a nonfiction work. Instead of filmmakers conceiving the film's subject in their imaginations, they find the basis of their works in real life and real events.

Nonnarrative

Narrative is an organizational tool for a variety of cultural texts, and it is found predominantly in fiction films. While a documentary may incorporate narrative elements, it generally uses other methods (such as rhetorical argument) for its primary organizational system.

Purpose

A documentary strives to be more than escapist entertainment, though this is not to say that documentaries cannot and do not entertain. Instead of providing an outlet from the everyday world, documentary seeks to address our world and to educate us about it.

Subject

Documentary subjects come from life, not from the imagination. The subjects chosen tend to possess some kind of cultural relevance, be it historical, social, or scientific.

On-location Shooting

Most documentary filmmakers shoot events where they actually occur.

Real People

A documentary film depicts real people, not actors portraying other people.

For some definitions from film textbooks and guides, see [definitions](#).

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How Does a Documentary Get Defined?

Documentary theorist Bill Nichols suggests a multi-part answer to the question, how does a documentary get defined?

These parts, in his words, include the following:

- "An institutional framework"
- "A community of practitioners"
- "A corpus of texts"
- "A constituency of viewers"

An Institutional Framework

Institutional frameworks refer to anyone involved in the distribution and support of documentary. They can be divided into two sub-groups.

1. The first group includes those organizations that fund documentary productions such as the International Documentary Association and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. It also includes organizations that promote the sharing of ideas and resources among its members.

2. The second group includes those involved in a documentary's distribution. These can be larger companies that also distribute fiction films such as Warner (which distributed *Roger & Me*), or smaller groups such as Woman Make Movies.

As a whole these groups make and label a film as documentary. According to Nichols, "What an institutional definition does is begin to hint at the importance ... of a shared sense of common purpose" (*Representing Reality* 15).

A Community of Practitioners

A community of practitioners includes anyone involved in the actual making of the films, including directors, producers, and editors. People in this group may work within the institution, such as Ken Burns at PBS, or they may work alone, without funding or other support. Either way, members of this group share the same "sense of common purpose" (*Representing Reality* 15).

A Corpus of Texts

Another way a documentary gets defined is through representative texts. This type of definition is similar to genre studies, wherein a group of works is linked by its common features, or conventions.

One of Nichols's key features of a documentary is evidence of an argument. Everything about the film -- its structure, editing, images, and sound -- must support and further that argument (*Representing Reality* 18-23, *Introduction* 26-32).

Some other of these conventions might include the following:

- Voiceover narration
- Interviews (talking heads)
- Social actors (real people)
- On-location sound recording (*Introduction* 26).

Not all documentaries exhibit these characteristics, however. When one uses a technique or avoids a typical feature altogether, the work becomes a site in which to explore, test, and maybe expand the documentary definition.

A Constituency of Viewers

Audiences have certain expectations when they watch a documentary, and these help determine a documentary's definition as such. These expectations are based on previous experience, both with life and with other films (*Representing Reality* 24).

The primary assumption is that what we see and hear is grounded, in some way, in the real world. The events represented possess a historical basis, something we can point to as actually happening or having had happened down the street, in Ohio, or around the world (*Representing Reality* 25, *Introduction* 35).

A second assumption centers on the notion of objectivity. Similar to reporters' goals for being impartial, this notion of fairness in representation also colors an audience's judgment of a documentary (*Representing Reality* 30). The more fidelity of the image to the perceived sense of reality, the more value it retains (*Introduction* 35).

A third assumption is more general -- that the audience wants to learn something (*Representing Reality* 30). Enough truth in this statement exists for it to be mocked: just think of Ben Stein as the science teacher in *The Wonder Years*.

Of course, all of this is up for debate. Anywhere a tension occurs -- in institutions, in texts, and in audiences -- is a site of inquiry into documentary and its definition.