

Title of the Course:

Film Studies

Week 02

Module 04

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Documentary Film

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### **Introduction:**

Documentary Film is a major sub-genre of the larger category of the cultural produce, called Cinema. Actually, we can say for sure that, the “proper” Cinema began with Documentary Films which, in the early history cinema, were called ‘actualities’. A Documentary Film is also known as ‘non-fiction film’, or ‘actuality film’, or ‘interest film’, or ‘educational film’. It is believed that, the word ‘documentary’, in the context of cinema studies, was coined by the Scottish documentary filmmaker John Grierson, in 1926, to refer to the Canadian filmmaker Robert Flaherty’s film *Moana*, which was released in the same year. *Moana* is an actuality film about the traditional life Polynesians living in Samoa, in Savaii island, situated in the South Pacific Ocean.

John Grierson is one of the pioneering figures who made and theorized the documentary mode of cinema. Both the British and the Canadian documentary film traditions were fathered by John Grierson. He says that the French first used the word ‘documentary’, to mean ‘travelogue’. Grierson elaborates, “So far as we have regarded all films made from natural material as coming within the category. The use of natural material has been regarded as the vital distinction [of the documentary film]. Where the camera shot on the spot .... in that fact was documentary” (19). In the opinion of Erik Barnouw, from 1874 to 1895, ‘embryo documentaries’, with the duration of three to four seconds were shot by inventors like Pierre Janssen, Eadweard Muybridge, Jules

Marey, Thomas Alva Edison, and so on (3-6). In 1874 Pierre Jules Janssen, a French astronomer, recorded a series of individual shots of the passing of the Venus across the Sun using photographic plates, loaded in an improvised photographic camera which was later called revolver photographique. This is the first step in the beginning of motion picture or movie. In 1895, with the invention of the Lumiere Cinematographe device, the proper cinema began, that too in a documentary mode.

### **Learning Objectives of this module are:**

To enable the learner to:

- a) understand and describe Documentary Film
- b) comprehend various types of Documentary Films
- c) differentiate a Documentary Film and a Fiction Film
- d) understand the various approaches to Documentary Film making, and
- e) critically analyze and appreciate master documentary filmmakers and their documentary films

Documentary or non-fiction films are defined in various ways by different theoreticians. John Grierson defined documentary films as, “the creative treatment of actuality”. This definition foregrounds the argument that just by shooting a real event or real person will not make the film a documentary film. In addition to shooting a real event or real people, mostly in an unaware situation, the filmmaker has to give a creative touch to the actual shots in the form of presentation, or editing or rearranging the actual shot footages. It is this creative or artistic treatment given to the actual shots makes it a documentary film, which is a work of art.

Patricia Aufderheide says that, “... documentaries are *about* real life; they are not real life. They are not even windows onto real life. They are portraits of real life, using real life as their raw material, constructed by artists and technicians who make myriad decisions about what stories to tell to whom, and for what purpose” (2).

Problematizing the ever-fluid, non-fixed and ever expanding nature of the cinematic sub-genre, documentary film, Dave Saunders says that, “It should be noted that documentary, in the intellectually contested ‘canon’ and at the less discussed margins, comprises a vast, diverse, and non-linear matrix of films not easily given to precise genealogical or evolutionary explication” (3).

We can call Pierre Janssen’s revolver photographique record of the Venus crossing the Sun, Edward Muybridge’s photographic series of the galloping horse, Jules Marey’s capturing of a falling cat with the gun-photography, etc. as proto-documentary films. With the invention of the Cinematographe, which was a camera-cum-projector device, by the French brothers, Louis

Lumiere and Auguste Lumiere, in 1895, the proper documentary films began to be produced. The first ten films of Lumiere Brothers, screened in the first ever ticketed public screening of films held on 28<sup>th</sup> December 1895, at the Grand Café hotel in Paris, can be called the first actuality films or first generation documentary films. Here is the list of Louis Lumiere's first ten silent French 'actualities' or silent 'documentary films,' with their corresponding English titles:

- i. *La Sortie de l'Usine Lumiere a Lyon* (Workers Leaving the Lumiere Factory)
- ii. *Le Jardinier* (The Gardener)
- iii. *Le Débarquement du Congrès de Photographie à Lyon* (The Disembarkment of The Congress of Photographers in Lyon)
- iv. *La Voltige* (Horse Trick Riders)
- v. *La Pêche aux poissons rouges* (Fishing for Goldfish)
- vi. *Les Forgerons* (Blacksmiths)
- vii. *Repas de bébé* (Baby's Breakfast)
- viii. *Le Saut à la couverture* (Jumping onto the Blanket)
- ix. *La Places des Cordeliers à Lyon* (Cordeliers Square in Lyon), and
- x. *Baignade en mer* (Bathing in the Sea)

Let's now watch three early 'actualities' made by the Lumiere Brothers.

One of the many methods to understand a Documentary Film is to juxtapose it with its imaginary counterpart, the Fiction Film. A fiction film is an imagined narrative with an artistically concocted story of invented characters, acted out by professional impersonators, in a set-location and with a predesigned ending. A fiction-film can be called a celluloid novel. However, we can say that documentary films are like literary essays with some factual materials to discuss. What are the major differences between a fiction film and a documentary film?

1. A fiction film features imagined characters through 'actors'; a documentary film features 'non-actors' or real, living or lived experiencers or subjects.
2. A fiction film is often shot in the backdrop of a created setting; a documentary film is often shot on real locations where the events unfold unmediated.
3. A fiction film primarily follows a pre-fixed written script and a storyboard; a documentary film normally does not follow a pre-fixed script.
4. The plot of a fiction film is fixed before the shooting schedule; in a case of a documentary film the plot often evolves during editing, after the shooting of the real event or person.
5. A fiction film often makes use of dubbed sound tracks, created in the sound recording studio; a documentary film normally makes use of sound tracks captured during the shooting itself.

6. A fiction film is made primarily for entertainment; whereas, a documentary film is made primarily to address the social or political issues.
7. A fiction film is made for profit; a documentary film is made as a part of conscientization effort.
8. A fiction film caters to the general audience; a documentary film often serves a niche audience.
9. A fiction film often gets released in commercial theatres; a documentary film often serves a target audience.
10. A fiction film is generally made with a big budget; most often documentary films are made with a small budget.

What are the various sub-genres in Documentary Film?

Patricia Aufderheide classifies Documentary Films into six sub-categories or types or sub-genres. These categories are:

1. Public Affairs
2. Government Propaganda
3. Advocacy
4. Historical
5. Ethnographic
6. Nature

Primarily depending on Patricia Aufderheide's classification, let me now provide a brief description of these different types of documentary films.

### **Public Affair Documentary Film**

Public affair documentary films express public concerns and address public issues. The methodology of investigative journalism is generally followed in such documentaries. Governmental corruption, corporate exploitation, failure of public welfare programmes, breakdown of basic amenities etc. are the staple themes of public affair documentaries. The presence of an authoritative public intellectual as the anchor, a very sober voice-over, expert commentaries providing deeper insights into the issue, are the general conventions followed in Public Affairs or Public Affair Documentary Films. Patricia cites, *Banks and the Poor* (1970), directed by Morton Silverstein, as an example of public affair documentary film. Alex Gibney's *Enron: The Smartest Guys in the Room* (2005) is also an example of Public Affair documentary film.

### **Government Propaganda Documentary Film**

Government Propaganda documentary films are produced to convince the citizens of a country about various developmental programmes of the government. Such documentaries invariably

express the point-of view of the political establishment or the State. Influencing public opinion is the basic purpose of any propaganda film. In India the News Reels produced by Films Division of India are examples of government propaganda films. *Triumph des Willens* or *Triumph of the Will* (1935), directed by Leni Riefenstahl, occupies the top slot among the government propaganda films produced ever. This film was made on the direction of Hitler. Let's watch an extract from *Triumph of the Will*.

### **Advocacy Documentary Film**

To create a political debate in the public sphere about a topically relevant issue is the chief aim of advocacy documentary films. Advocacy documentaries are produced to promote a particular point of view of a civil society organization. Often such documentaries act as a counter-propaganda to government sponsored public relation films. Such documentaries try to engage the citizens in a public debate often against the anti-people governmental policies and governmental deeds. The film *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004) by Michael Moore is an advocacy documentary film. It's a cinematic critique of the foreign policy of United States of America during the George W. Bush presidency. Vidhu Vincent's, Malayalam documentary film, *Vrithiyude Jathi* (Caste of Cleanliness, 2014) is an Indian advocacy documentary film about manual scavenging which is still practiced in many parts of India.

### **Historical Documentary Film**

Historical documentary films are made with the definite purpose of retelling historical narratives in the audio visual language. Historical documentaries make use of archival footages, museum exhibits, excavation sites, antique objects, photographs, paintings, remains of ancient architectural structures etc. Expert commentary and explication is a norm in historical documentaries. Providing an alternative narrative to the already existing historical interpretation of a particular historical era or event could be one of the aims of historical documentary films. Patricia cites *The Fall of the Romanov Dynasty* (1927) by the Russian female filmmaker Esfir Shub as a specimen of an ideal historical documentary. Patricia puts Biographic Documentary Films also under the umbrella category of Historical documentary films.

### **Ethnographic Documentary Film**

Canadian filmmaker Robert Flaherty's cinematic classic *Nanook of the North* (1922) is often cited as a classic example for Ethnographic Documentary Film. Unfamiliar culture, different rituals, remote human inhabitations, human races which are not often seen in the mainstream cultural discourses are the staple subjects of Ethnographic documentary films. Of course, in such films there is an anthropological gaze exerted by the people of dominant culture on marginalized communities and their unique life styles. Often such films are accused of epistemological violence against the less vocal cultures and communities. Most of the early ethnographic films are cultural byproducts of European colonialism.

## Nature Documentary Film

Most of The National Geographic TV channel documentaries are perfect examples of Nature documentary films. In the contemporary context of global warming and discourses on sustainable life habits, nature documentary films play an important role in providing informal public education on protecting the environment. Nature documentary films are also labeled as environmental documentary films or conservationist documentary films. Animals, remote locations in the planet like the Antarctic region, the space, forests, rivers, oceans etc. are featured often in nature documentary films. *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006), directed by Davis Guggenheim provides a fresh experience of nature documentary films.

Noted documentary historian and theoretician, Erik Barnouw classifies documentary filmmakers on the basis of their general approaches to their subjects during the production of their documentary films. Of course, these approaches are later discovered by documentary theorists. Depending on the approaches, Erik Barnouw classifies documentary filmmakers into fourteen types as follows:

1. Prophet
2. Explorer
3. Reporter
4. Painter
5. Advocate
6. Bugler
7. Prosecutor
8. Poet
9. Chronicler
10. Promoter
11. Observer
12. Catalyst
13. Guerrilla
14. Discoverer

To these previously mentioned categories of documentary filmmakers based on their approaches to their subjects, Dave Saunders adds another category, the Performer.

India has got a rich tradition of documentary filmmakers starting with The Wrestler. We will conclude this module by mentioning a few documentary filmmakers from India like Anand Patwardhan, Paromita Vohra, Rakesh Sharma, Nakul Swahney, Raja Shabir Khan, Vidhu Vincent, Joshy Joseph and so on.

Theorists like John Corner argue that, in the contemporary context of telereality shows that we enter into a post-documentary culture. Postdocumentary culture is “a culture in which many conventional elements of documentary will continue to develop, but in a radically changed

setting—economic and cultural—for all audiovisual documentation” (1). Like all cultural produces, the documentary film form has always been evolving to accommodate new forms and practices which are necessary to address new issues in an ever-changing globalized socio-political climate.

### **References:**

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### **Web links:**

<<https://www.britannica.com/art/documentary-film>>

<<https://www.filmsite.org/docfilms.html>>

<<https://www.nyfa.edu/student-resources/documentary-filmmaking/>>