

Lecture #1 Part 2

Coms 133 Documentary Film

Spring 2022

What brings about Changes?

- • 3 – The Lasting Influence of Specific Films.
- A Corpus of Texts: Conventions, Periods, Movements, and Modes.

Conventions

- Genre?
- Genre of Documentaries?
- We expect to engage with films that engage with the world.
- Display a wider array of shots and scenes than fiction films, an array yoked together less by narrative organization around a central character than by a rhetoric organized around a controlling perspective.
- Instead of continuity editing, we might call this form of documentary editing evidentiary. Evidentiary = Presenting evidence.

Periods and Movements

- Soviet Union – 1920s and early 1930s.
- WE: Variations of a Manifesto and Kino Eye.
- A way of seeing the world fresh.
- They drew heavily on avant-garde practices and techniques.
- They declared warfare on scripted and acted films.

Periods - Movements

- British Documentary movement of the 1930s.
- Concentrated on the needs of the State.
- Basil Wright, Paul Rotha, Humphrey Jennings under the leadership of John Grierson.

Periods - Movements

- Britain – Free Cinema – 1950s. (Fictional film).
- Unadorned look at a contemporary British life.
- Free of government propaganda needs, sponsor's support, and genre conventions.
- Lindsay Anderson, Karel Reisz, Tony Richardson.

Observational Filmmaking Movement

- America – 1960s.
- Direct Cinema.
- Cinéma Vérité.
- Introduction of light weight sync-sound film cameras and portable sync-sound audio recorders.
- Rigorous prominence of sync-sound recorded material with little or usually no voice-over narration.
- Maysles brothers, Richard Drew, D.A. Pennebaker, Richard Leacock, and **Frederick Wiseman**.

Frederick Wiseman

- He was born in 1930 (92 years old).
- He holds a BA from Williams College and a Bachelor of Law from Yale Law School.
- Before becoming a filmmaker, he taught courses in criminal law, family law, legal medicine, and psychiatry and the law at Boston and Brandeis Universities.
- Titicut Follies (Bridgewater State Hospital, MA)
- A facility for the criminally insane.



Director (48 credits)	Hide ▲
City Hall (Documentary)	2020
Monrovia, Indiana (Documentary)	2018
Ex Libris: New York Public Library (Documentary)	2017
In Jackson Heights (Documentary)	2015
National Gallery (Documentary)	2014
Independent Lens (TV Series documentary) (2 episodes) - At Berkeley (2014) - The Last Letter/Zyklon Portrait/The Walnut Tree (2005)	2005-2014
At Berkeley (Documentary)	2013
Crazy Horse (Documentary)	2011
Boxing Gym (Documentary)	2010
I Miss Sonia Henie (Short)	2009
La Danse: The Paris Opera Ballet (Documentary)	2009
State Legislature (Documentary)	2007
The Garden (Documentary)	2005
Domestic Violence 2 (Documentary)	2002
The Last Letter	2002
Domestic Violence (Documentary)	2001
Belfast, Maine (Documentary)	1999
Public Housing (Documentary)	1997
La Comédie-Française ou L'amour joué (Documentary)	1996
Ballet (Documentary)	1995
High School II (Documentary)	1994
Zoo (Documentary)	1993
Aspen (Documentary)	1991
Near Death (Documentary)	1989
Central Park (Documentary)	1989

Missile (Documentary)	1988
Blind (Documentary)	1987
Adjustment & Work (Documentary)	1986
Deaf (Documentary)	1986
Multi-Handicapped (Documentary)	1986
Racetrack (Documentary)	1986
The Store (Documentary)	1983
Seraphita's Diary	1982
Model (Documentary)	1981
Manoeuvre (Documentary)	1979
Sinai Field Mission (Documentary)	1978
Canal Zone (Documentary)	1977
Meat (Documentary)	1976
Welfare (Documentary)	1975
Primate (Documentary)	1974
Juvenile Court (Documentary)	1973
Essene (Documentary)	1972
Basic Training (Documentary)	1971
NET Journal (TV Series documentary) (1 episode) - Hospital (1970)	1970
Hospital (TV Movie documentary)	1970
Law and Order (TV Movie documentary)	1969
High School (Documentary)	1968
Titicut Follies (Documentary)	1967

1970s and 1980s

- Frequently a return to the past using archival film material mixed with contemporary interviews.
- Effort to bring new perspectives to the past and fresh perspectives to the present.

Modes of Documentary

- Modes come into prominence at a given time and place, but they persist and become more pervasive than movements.

Poetic Mode

- Emphasizes visual associations, tonal or rhythmic qualities, artistic images and sound.
- This mode bears a close proximity to experimental, personal, and avant-garde filmmaking.
- Example: *Samsara* (to be screen this semester)

Expository Mode

- Emphasizes verbal commentary and an argumentative logic.
- This is the mode that most people associate with documentary in general.
- Sample = *March of the Penguins*.
- ... or all the films by Ken Burns.

Observational Mode

- Emphasizes a direct engagement with the everyday life of subjects as observed by an unobtrusive camera and usually sound crew.
- Sample = *Hospital* (a film we'll screen this semester)

Participatory Mode

- Emphasizes the interaction between filmmaker and subject.
- Filming takes place by means of interviews or other forms, and even direct involvement through conversations and provocations.
- An example: *Bowling for Columbine* (which we will screen this semester).

Reflexive Mode

- Calls attention to the assumptions and conventions that govern documentary filmmaking.
- Increases our awareness of the construction of the film's representation of reality.
- Sample: *Man with a Movie Camera* (today's film).

Performative Mode

- Emphasizes the subjective or expressive aspect of the filmmaker's own involvement with the subject.
- It strives to heighten the audience's responsiveness to this involvement.
- Rejects notions of objectivity in favor of evocation and affect.
- Example: *Persepolis* (to be screened this semester) Filmmaker rejects historical footage and replaces it highly subjective, emotionally powerful animation to convey what it feels like to experience a traumatic event.

What Brings About Changes?

- 4 – Expectations of Audiences
- A Constituency of Viewers: Assumptions, Expectations, Evidence, and the Indexical Quality of the Image.

Commonsense Assumptions

- About reality.
- About real people.
- Tell stories about what really happened.

Indexical Image

- Great fidelity.
- But a documentary is more than evidence.
- It is also a particular way of looking at the world. A way of interpreting the world.
- Evidence can be interpreted in a number of ways.
- This does not mean that all views are equally valid.
- Documentaries marshal evidence and then uses that evidence to construct a perspective and/or a proposal about the world.
- Audience expect this.
- Audiences are usually disappointed if this is not done or it is done poorly.

Sobriety

- Most documentaries have a sobriety about them.
- This does not mean they cannot have wit and imagination.
- They are vehicles of action and intervention, power and knowledge, desire and will, directed toward the world we physically inhabit and share.

- Audiences encounter documentaries with an expectation that their desire to know more about the world will be gratified.
- Documentaries also can stimulate epistophilia,
- ...(a desire to know) in their audiences.
- At their best they can convey an informing logic, a persuasive rhetoric,
and a moving poetics that promises information and knowledge,
insight
and awareness.