

Participatory Mode

Communication 133: Documentary Film

CSUS – Spring 2022

- It first appeared around the 1960s
- It was the result of the new ability to record sync sound on location
- In this mode the filmmaker interacts with their subjects, rather than unobtrusively observe them
- Questions grow into interviews or conversations
- Involvement grows into a pattern of collaboration or confrontation
- What happens in front of the camera becomes an index of the nature between filmmaker and subject

- This mode has antecedents in other media and several disciplines
- Radio has long featured interactions between talk show hosts and guests
- This format then moved to television with its invention
- Social sciences such as sociology and anthropology have long promoted the study of social groups by means of direct interaction and investigation
- Observational documentary deemphasizes persuasion to give us a sense of what its like to be in a given situation, but without a sense of what its like for the filmmaker to be there too.

- Participatory documentary gives us a sense of what its like for the filmmaker to be in a given situation and how that situation alters as a result
- When we view participatory documentaries, we expect to witness the historical world as represented by someone who actively engages with others rather than unobtrusively observing, poetically reconfiguring, or argumentatively assembling what others say and do
- The filmmaker steps out from behind the camera and thus can have a degree of potential power and control over events
- As viewers, we have the sense that we are witness to a form of dialogue between filmmaker and subject

- In some cases the film can move away from an investigative stance to take a more responsive and reflective relationship to unfolding events that involve the filmmaker
- This choice moves us toward the diary and personal testimony type of film
- A filmmaker working in this area is Ross McElwee with films such as *Sherman's March*, *Charleen*, *Bright Leaves*, *Photographic Memory*
- Three major filmmakers working in the participatory mode are: Michael Moore, Errol Morris, and Werner Herzog (*Lessons in Darkness*, *Little Dieter Needs to Fly*, and *Grizzly Man*.)