

Documentary is the  
creative treatment of  
actuality essay



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It completely contrasts every single other film genre. " Documentary is the creative treatment of actuality"- (John Grierson, Cinema quarterly). Its aim is to document the events of the outside world and present the truth even if it's right in front of our eyes or obscured from view and covered up. Each documentary presents reality to the audience with real people, places and events that exist in the audiences' world. Each film however presents its subjects in varied creative ways.

It is this " creative treatment" that we analyze, study and contrast. To understand this we must understand the traditional conventions of documentary. It is these conventions that give documentaries their uniqueness. Some of the main conventions are archival footage, of film and photography, and talking heads (including specialists) that are interviewed in order to comment on the documentary subject and add extra viewpoints and information. Jiggly camera and the voice over narrative have both become almost synonymous to the documentary genre; the jiggly camera is a convention developed as on-location filming and more portable cameras were needed.

In some documentaries re-enactments are also used to show past events to give the audience an idea of the aspects of the subject the documentary is presenting. Most documentaries about modern events and people also use real people in it. *Supersize me* is a documentary by Morgan Spurlock, about the effects and influence of fast food on the people of the USA. It has an excessive usage of specialists and uses other common conventions such as jiggly cameras, archival footage and real people.

All of these are formed from codes; audio, visual, written, technical and symbolic. Visual is an important code in this film. Spurlock uses graphs, maps, pictograms and visual archive footage of legal papers to show information in a way that can be easily and quickly interpreted by the audience. It helps get his points across effectively and makes the information seem more reliable and professional to the audience.

To me it adds good authenticity and makes his presentation of information more cutting edge and up-to-date. I think that it is essential for keeping his argument together. *Supersize me* also uses Audio codes by voice over narration “ Everything is bigger in America, we have the biggest cars, the biggest houses and the biggest people”. It is used to address the audience and comment on visual codes such as charts and archival footage.

While doing so it also gives us the main points and arguments of the documentary; explaining his aims and actions. It gives focus to his arguments; he tells us what we are looking at and directs our focus rather than only giving us unaccompanied visual images. It helps the audience feel more involved and gives us a better understanding as he speaks directly towards us and keeps us informed and I think that it is probably the most important code. His specialist interviews with doctors and dieticians also add more authenticity and make his evidence seem more reliable to the audience so that the information and argument he presents seems more valid. These interviews are some of the things that separate *Supersize me* from *Biggie and Tupac* that use family members as talking heads instead of specialists to back up arguments.

Supersize me also uses Symbolic codes in the sinister artwork that heralds each chapter. The McDonalds clown is the main image presented, though usually as a small child. Despite the customary feelings of fun associated with clowns, these represent something more sinister. One image is of a sad child in a clown suit in a wheelchair like tricycle, reflecting the effects that fast food (particularly McDonalds) has on the youth generation.

The satirical images are used by Spurlock to show us the darker side of McDonalds and prompt negative feelings in the audience. The less obvious conventions used are technical, in which he uses the jiggly camera and also written codes on screen. Of these the most prominent is jiggly camera; an important convention as it makes the audience feel more involved in some kind of unplanned, unadulterated adventure alongside Spurlock at an almost personal level. The written codes are used mainly to add atmosphere and set the tone of the documentary.

“ Look after the customers and the business will take care of itself. (Ray Kroc - McDonalds' founder. ) This quote sets the tone of the documentary and the project by Spurlock which questions this statement because McDonalds do not look after their customers in the way of health. It gives the audience an idea of what the documentary is really about. There are also unusual conventions in this documentary including his “ Mcdiet”. He conducts an experiment on himself to see the effects of eating only McDonalds for all of his meals for 30 days.

He does this so that the audience can see the effects of a McDonald's diet. During this project he gives tells us the effects upon his personal and sex life

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and his dramatic weight gain and drop in fitness. He uses scenes like when he is in the car and vomits out a Supersize meal, to shock the audience. It helps to prompt the audience to oppose McDonalds and their bad diets; reinforcing his claims with images of the food and stating that even the water and salads contain salt. This is his main weapon to turn the audience against McDonalds Unlike many other documenters, he uses humour to engage the audience and adds to his casual relaxed manner as a way of keeping his relationship between the audience more informal and unperturbed.

It has the effect of making him seem more likeable to the audience and so aids in the development of a good relationship between him and the audience so it is easier to get his points across. Spurlocks way of documenting is also different from people such as Tim Broomfield. Spurlock has all of his information already presented out in front of him and instead of investigating an issue, he sets out to prove something and sway the audience toward his way of thinking. He is addressing a current ongoing issue rather than a past event such as with Broomfield's investigation. Also, as a result of it being about an ongoing issue in people's lives, people feel that they must involve themselves in the documentary and keep watching; holding their attention. Broomfield's film is Biggie and Tupac and is about the deaths of Biggie Smalls and Tupac Shakur.

Broomfield is trying to find out why they were killed and is investigating a hunch that the murders were related to the feud between the east and west coasts; Death Row and Bad Boy records. These films use different styles with both similarities and differences (they use the same codes except symbolic  
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which Broomfield doesn't use). Biggie and Tupac doesn't rely much on visual effects such as CGI graphs and charts like Spurlock does; He relies on more archive footage in the form of videos and photographs that may have even been taken by amateur cameramen and photographers. This adds more realism to the documentary as it isn't something they have just made up like a graph or pictogram and makes the audience feel more engaged and keeps them interested especially as these films are not professionally done by actors and so anything could happen in it without being affected by the film makers. I think that it is a good way of presenting information and often better than using graphs and pictures created by the film makers.

Broomfield also uses more audio codes. He not just uses his voice over narrations to tell the story and comment on his actions throughout the play aswell as certain pieces of evidence which are used in his informing of the audience. He also uses a lot of music in the background so that the audience can relate what they are seeing in the pictures and videos of Tupac and Biggie to what they have seen or heard of Tupac in real life. It makes the audience feel as if they are more attached and informed about the subject as they could relate to what they are seeing; a way of engaging the audience which I think is very effective in holding on to the audience's attention.

Technical codes are more evident including his Jiggly camera; he only has a film crew of 1 or 2 people with him that use portable cameras to add manoeuvrability ; accentuating the Jiggly cameras affects. His understaffed crew also means that Broomfield often carries some of the equipment such as the microphone and even has to do two things at once such as making a phone call and driving a car at the same time which is illegal.

These add to the sense of adventure and danger that Broomfield carries around in his investigations especially since he carries very little security and unprofessional filming (he even says that at one point the amateur cameraman was afraid) and so makes the audience feel a lot more involved than in *Supersize me*. Another difference is that Broomfield rather than using experts and specialists, he uses people related to Biggie and Tupac such as friends and family who are as a result less reliable. Though they are not as professional and give less authenticity, they add more variation as they are biased and have different opinions, making for a more interesting argument over all. It is more suited for an exciting investigation style documentary than a mission to prove something as in *Spurlocks* style.

He uses interesting characters with different things to say such as Biggie and Tupac's mums, Shug knight and Russell Poole who was in the original investigation but after witnessing corruption from within the police left/ was taken off the case. For instance, Biggies mum would be biased for Biggie "loving, generous, sincere to his friends" and Russell Poole biased against the police from his past experiences and he also thinks that Shug Knight killed Biggie and Tupac "it was made to look like a retaliation, Shug Knight wanted it that way" while Shug himself would deny that he killed Biggie and Tupac. These different conventions all add to his distinctive and unusual style which is more similar to a criminal investigation about an event in the past that hasn't happened instead of an ongoing, than *Spurlocks* film. Broomfield's documentary is seemingly less structured and unprofessional with talking heads and footage that are less likely to provoke a certain answer than in *Spurlocks* film as reliable specialists are not used. Therefore, it has an almost

uncertain outcome His documentary is consequently a lot less biased than Spurlocks' who is trying to prove a point and get us to take in his ideas; He didn't even care that McDonalds didn't answer 17 of his calls: this probably wouldn't have even mattered (though it made them look very stupid to the audience, who would turn against them as a result.

as what could they say that wouldn't cause to look guilty? They can't lie about serving unhealthy food that could potentially affect someone's health very seriously in the way of heart disease or diabetes etc. Spurlock phoned only to prove a point rather than get an answer which Broomfield would have phoned for. Broomfield is hence more of a medium between us and the real world investigation of Biggie and Tupac, interviewing everyone involved and not being to eager to come up with a conclusion like Spurlock who wants us to stop eating fast food. The audience would thus feel that Spurlock's film is more biased and that he is trying to force opinions on us than find the truth to an unsolved mystery; however he achieves more than this and is able to influence people and eventually getting the McDonalds Supersize meal banned.

Though Broomfield gets a lot of evidence, he cannot properly conclude the case and the events that Broomfield seems to have uncovered could still be viewed as mere speculation (despite his convincing evidence of a real criminal investigation) thanks to his unsuccessful interview with Shug Knight. Broomfield's film however, is more exciting and is almost like a " whodunit" crime thriller that grabs the audience's attention despite being non-fiction. Both documentaries are very similar in the traditional codes and conventions



used but these are used in different ways. Spurlock uses humour to engage the audience while Broomfield uses music.

Broomfield relies on archival film footage while Spurlock uses pictures and charts designed by a group of people who helped make the film. Broomfield doesn't use Specialists but Spurlock does. It goes on but despite these, both films use technical, audio, visual and at least some written codes (though Broomfield uses no symbolic codes). They use the same conventions; voice-overs, archival footage, talking heads, jiggly camera etc but the differing styles affect the way that these are used with Broomfield's crime investigation style offering a less biased argument but more bias from the opinions of the people he interviews and less visual affects like bars and graphs to relay information about a serious issue/event.

Spurlocks style offered more specialist talking heads, CGI visual effects and a biased argument to try and invoke us to turn against fast food. Both styles used their conventions well and were good in their own ways; Spurlock provided a good argument (like a prosecution case in court) and used his visual codes, specialists and unusual Mcdiet to back it up with good evidence. Broomfield on the other hand provided a quicker paced "whodunit" investigation and used his talking heads, music and archival footage aswell as technical codes to great effect. Both documentaries show 2 very different but very effective ways of documenting .