

The codes and conventions of documentary film-making essay sample

[Entertainment](#), [Movie](#)



Documentary film-making has a history as long as that of fiction film-making and began in the late 1800s. From the first developments of film cameras many people found the need to ‘document’ the life they saw around them. Film gave rise to a new and very powerful way of looking at the things.

Each decade brought with it lighter and easier to use camera equipment, as well as film stock which could be used in a wider variety of lighting conditions. This made films easier to make, and the subjects of documentary widened.

In the 1950s television and video technology made documentaries even cheaper to make, and they became an important part of television scheduling.

‘Documentary’ has come to mean a single film or programme (sometimes part of a series) which concentrates on a single subject, and is presented in a factual way. Documentaries tell us something important about our world – and in the best examples, make us think about the world in a new way.

Documentaries cover a huge range of topics including historical events, science, current affairs, the arts, social and political issues, and nature or wildlife.

Authenticity is the key to successful documentary film-making. The information must be presented as ‘real’, and must convince the audience that what they are seeing is genuine. Documentary film-makers use various techniques to achieve this.

VOICE-OVER

Many documentaries use one or more voice overs. Often during an interview, the film will cutaway to show what the interviewee is talking about whilst the voice carries on as a Voice-over.

Another common type of voice-over is ‘ the narrator’, whose voice continues throughout the whole film telling the audience ‘ the story’. The narrator often remains invisible, and is omniscient (all knowing), almost like the voice of God.

THE INTERVIEW

Interviews are central to all modern documentary films. Interviews can show both the interviewer asking questions and the interviewee responding, or more commonly just show the interviewee talking almost directly to camera. In this form, the interviewer's questions are edited out, leaving the interviewee seemingly to talk more freely and openly: the camera framing also creates a sense of intimacy between the person talking and the audience. Again this reinforces its authenticity.

PRESENTER

A presenter is the link between the subject and the audience. They are often presented as knowledgeable people in search of ‘ truth’. The presenter adds authenticity to the documentary because of their status (and therefore our willingness to believe them), and because ‘ we can actually see them there’, and so “ it must be true”.

EXPERTS

Experts are people in documentaries who 'know the facts'. They are lit, framed and positioned in a particular way to emphasise their importance. They often use scientific or technical language to reinforce their status as people who 'know the truth'.

ARCHIVE OR LIBRARY FOOT AGE

Archive footage is film which has been used originally somewhere else and has been bought from a film library. It is often quite old, black and white, and has scratches and 'sparkle' (little white dots). It is usually used where it would have been impossible for the filmmaker to film the shots themselves, especially in the case of unique events which only happened once, and would be impossible to re-film. It often seems 'more real' than reconstructions, as if its age made it more genuine.

GRAPHICS

The presentation of statistics and facts and figures is usually more effective when done visually rather than on the soundtrack. A well placed graphic lends an emphasis that can be lost on an audience if they hear it rather than see it. It is customary to give the name and position of an expert as a subtitle.

STILLS

When archive footage is not available, still photographs are sometimes be used. Often stills are filmed on a rostrum camera that can zoom in or out and pan across the photograph to give it movement.

RECONSTRUCTIONS

Events are often reconstructed when archive footage is not available to the filmmaker. Reconstructions can be quite dramatic, and therefore seem more like fiction than fact. However, in a reconstruction the film-maker has the power to shoot exactly what they want, to get shots that would have been impossible at the real event. It therefore can be a very persuasive tool where the truth can be twisted to the advantage of the film-maker, and can use the dramatic conventions of fiction films to convince the audience.

Reconstructions can also have a symbolic and metaphorical value, where shots can be used to symbolise meanings to the audience.