

# Documentary

## Final Exam

### Part III: (15 points)

An essay that responds to the following prompt:

What are the potentials and limitations of teaching history through documentaries?

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# Definition

“Documentary film speaks about situations and events [that actually happened] involving real people (social actors [not performers adopting a non-fictional or fictional role]) who present themselves to us as themselves in stories that convey a plausible [not imaginative] proposal about, or perspective on, the lives, situations, and events portrayed. The distinct point of view of the filmmaker shapes this story into a way of seeing the historical world directly rather than into a fictional allegory [not a reproduction, but a representation].”

~Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 14

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# Cinematic Style

- “voice-of-God” commentary
- Interviews of participants or experts, voice overs
- Location sound recording
- Non-diegetic sound/sound track to shape mood
- “sharp or recognizable edits”; cutaways piecing together images to support the narrative
- Camera angles
- Focus/zoom, sweep over images
- Locating images on subject or that serve as metaphor
- Matching images to spoken word
- Use of CGI (Computer Generated Images)
- Re-enactment
- Written captions
- Animation
- Use of objects (real or as metaphor)
- Location, sets

Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 21, 23, 25; Bruce R. Fehn and James E. Schul, “Teaching and Learning Competent Historical Documentary Making: Lessons from National History Day Winners,” *The History Teacher* 45, 1 (November 2011): 31-33; Patricia Aufderheide, *Documentary Film: A Very Short Introduction*, 26.

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### Historical Documentary

- Judicial (accuse, defend, justify, criticize)
- Commemorative (praise or blame)
- Narrative (story telling)
- Expository (promote a perspective or argument)

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### Characteristics of Expository

- Spoken word dominates (expert interviews, voice-of-God, voice-of-authority, voice-overs, perform dialogue)
- Image plays supporting role as evidence to corroborate spoken word or written captions
- “evidentiary editing ... may sacrifice spatial and temporal continuity to rope in images from far-flung places if they help advance the argument or support a proposal.”

~Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 167-170

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### Five-act structure

1. Catchy opening
2. Elaboration of issue (facts known, questions unanswered)
3. Pros for the argument
4. Anticipate counter arguments
5. Summarize

~Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 86

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### Viewer Expectations

- Cinematic sounds + images = evidence of what really happened
- Higher expectation that a documentary can make a difference in how we think, believe, feel, to be persuaded
- "Documentaries stimulate epistophilia (a desire to know) ..."
- Creates an expectation "for making a truthful representation of reality"

Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 34-41; Patricia Aufderheide, *Documentary Film: A Very Short Introduction*, 4, 10.

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### Limits to the power of image:

1. Cannot tell everything
2. Can be altered
3. Cannot "guarantee the validity of larger claims made about what the image represents or means."
4. No image available replace it with a figurative or metaphorical image (a.k.a. metonymy)

~Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 44

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### Decisions for Documentarians:

1. "When to cut, or edit, and what to juxtapose
2. How to frame or compose a shot (close-up or long shot, low or high angle, artificial or natural lighting, color or black and white, whether to pan, zoom in or out, track or remain stationary, and so on)
3. Whether to record synchronous sound at the time of shooting, and whether to add additional sound, such as voice-over translations, dubbed dialogue, music, sound effects, or commentary, at a later point
4. Whether to adhere to an accurate chronology or rearrange events to support a point or mood
5. Whether to use archival or other people's footage and photographs or only those images shot by the filmmaker on the spot
6. Which mode of documentary representation to rely on to organize the film (expository, poetic, observational, participatory, reflexive, or performative)."

~Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 72

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Questions to Consider While  
Watching Documentaries:

1. Note the title, year of release, and other relevant information (e.g. historical consultants, etc).
2. What is the historical problem being posed (elaboration of issues)?
3. Make note of the best evidence used to support interpretation.
4. What evidence raises questions, perhaps less persuasive?
5. Make note of cinematic techniques and its impact on you as a viewer. Were some more persuasive than others?
6. If you had suggestions on how to improve the film, what would they be?
7. Did the film change your mind, expand or undermine your understanding?
8. What are the potentials and limitations of teaching history through documentaries?

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## Historical

Aufderheide, Patricia. *Documentary Film: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.

“History is not self-executing,” wrote historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr. “You do not put a coin in the slot and have history come out.” All history is written for people in the present, searching out for them what historians call a “useable past”—a story that is used in the construction of our understanding of ourselves. History is also written on top of an earlier narrative—sometimes disagreeing, sometimes reinforcing, sometimes asserting a presence where previously there was only an absence.

Documentarians who tell history with film encounter all the challenges facing their filmmaking peers. They face historians’ problems with getting data. Often they represent events for which there is no film, and as often they represent events using material never intended as a historical record. They turn to photographs, paintings, representative objects, images of key documents, reenactments, and, famously, on-camera experts to substitute for images. They record music that evokes an era, they find singers to sing songs of the time, they build in sound effects to enhance a viewer’s sense that what is shown is a genuine moment from the past. They struggle with the question of how much reenactment is appropriate and how it should be achieved.

They also face problems of expertise. Documentary filmmakers typically reach many more people with their work than academic

historians do, but filmmakers rarely have the training of historians. Indeed, filmmakers often avoid consulting a range of experts. Too often for filmmakers' liking, historians may be sticklers for precise historical sequences, discussion of multiple interpretations, and the need to insert minor characters or precise accuracies, all of which frustrate the clarity of filmed storytelling for broad audiences. Public service television often requires professional advisory boards, but commercial television productions rarely make such requirements.

Finally, unlike print historians who can digress, comment, and footnote, documentarians work in a form where images and sounds create an imitation of reality that is itself an implicit assertion of truth. This makes it harder for them to introduce alternative interpretations of events or even the notion that we do in fact interpret events.

Documentary filmmakers have often chosen to ignore the implications of their choices: they may accept an uncritical notion that they are merely reporting the facts of the past, or they may adopt uncritically a partisan view of the past. Their works, however, are often the first door through which people walk to understand the past. p. 92

history as a sole source of information.

## Memory and history

With the growth of home film and video archives and ever-simpler video cameras, the memoir or personal film has made important contributions to historical documentary. In such works, the private and personal are exposed and sometimes contrasted with the official or public record. Individual memory is juxtaposed with and often challenges public history. New stories surface, and individual experience enriches public understanding of the past.

Filmmakers use a variety of techniques to represent memory. One common trope, according to filmmaker David MacDougall, is putting “signs of absence”—images of loss, of objects abandoned, of a photo to be explained—at the center of the film and of the problem to be solved with memory. For instance, the makers of *Into the Arms of Strangers* (2004), about the *Kindertransporte* that whisked Jewish children out of Nazi Germany, sought out and used as symbols the actual objects children had brought with them, rather than merely displaying a similar object. Many times, personal filmmakers also use an ironic or reflexive approach to

familiar objects or images, forcing a reanalysis of them: collages, blank images, text that startles or asks questions, and repetition—all of which forces viewers to reflect upon or reinterpret the meaning of a sound or image.

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