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Ioannis Skopeteas

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Documentary genres. Criteria and dominant theories

Ioannis Skopeteas, Associate Professor (Department of Cultural Technology & Communication, University of the Aegean, Mytilene, Greece, yskopeteas@ct.aegean.gr)

Abstract

The most popular genres in the documentary film theory today are the ones proposed by Bill Nichols (2010) who introduced *six modes of representation*: poetic, expository, participatory, observational, reflexive, and performative. These six modes “establish a loose framework of affiliation within which individuals may work; they set up conventions that a given film may adopt; and they provide specific expectations viewers anticipate having fulfilled”. However, is this division capable to cover all the elements of a documentary film and therefore construct fixed categories that can serve all the needs of theorists, practitioners and audience? This paper will support that the genre classification by Bill Nichols is only based on representation and its relation with the voice of the narrator. However, there are several other issues within the documentary film that may lead to other classifications. To name some of them, the theme and the subject of the documentary, the narrative structure and the actuality depicted. In such a way, a full table of documentary genres will be provided at the end of the paper, which will cover all the aspects of this type of film.

Keywords:

Documentary, Genre, Classification, Narration, Representation

1. Introduction

The most popular genres in the documentary film theory today are the ones proposed by Bill Nichols (2010) who introduced *six modes of representation*: poetic, expository, participatory, observational, reflexive and performative. What are these modes refer to? For example, the poetic mode (31); this mode stresses mode, tone, and pacing much more than displays of knowledge or acts of persuasion while the rhetorical element remains underdeveloped. Similarly, the expository mode. This mode addresses “the viewer directly with titles or voices that propose a perspective, advance an argument or recount history” (31). And so on.

However, a question is raised: is this division capable to cover all the elements of a documentary film and therefore construct fixed categories (genres) that can serve all the needs of theorists, practitioners and audience? If so, what the so-called “creative” documentary (that “express the filmmaker’s vision who makes artistic choices in the use of cinematic means (image, sound and editing) to convey his or her vision on the subject matter and tell the story” IDFA, 2019) asked by all major festivals including this of IDFA in Amsterdam and Hotdocs in Toronto, refer to? Is this a new genre?

And if this is a fact, why is there any such categorization for the documentaries screened by the broadcasters specialized in the documentary films, such as Discovery channel (2019)? A close look at its schedule, as well as at these of channels such as the Greek Vouli channel or

Cosmote History, reveals there are several time slots for the documentaries screened, entitled “science”, “nature”, “social”, “history”, “current affaires”, “arts and culture”. Why does Bill Nichols not mention these genres? Moreover, why are there all these classifications?

The answer can be found in the way a documentary is developed and the stages of work that have to be done in terms of narration and subject. There are three stages of script development that have to be fulfilled in a documentary before shooting:

- Actuality i.e. the actual subject and context selected from the whole range of actual events and subjects
- Narrative structure, i.e. the plot constructed.
- Narrative representation i.e. the style and the patterned audiovisual techniques used.

Each one of these stages leads to a different categorization of genres.

2. Actuality

The selection of the subject in a documentary film means that the first choice the filmmaker has to do when he starts with a film is to select the part of reality he will deal with. Documentary means by definition “the creative treatment of actuality” as John Grierson has said (1933). Therefore selecting the part of the reality, which will be recorded with the camera means selecting the subject which is to be described and the context within which is to be developed. This automatically offers a very clear classification of genres mainly based on the subject of the doc and the reality depicted. In such a way, there are:

- History documentaries
- Political documentaries
- Current affaires documentaries
- Social documentaries
- Travel documentaries
- Arts documentaries
- Culture documentaries
- Science documentaries
- Nature documentaries

These genres can also be classified in two broader categories: portraits and subject based. They both might have an educational character.

3. Narrative structure

The next stage of the documentary development asks for the construction of its narration. This may happen in two main ways: by having a narrative, a story with a beginning, a middle and an end, or by not having a narrative but constructing the narration in another way, i.e. an argument or a more poetic way. In both cases, the point of view of the narrator has to be defined as well.

If there is a narrative, then, there is a narrative plot with a storyline. There are two paths of a story: a story based on a character who participates in events in a row or a plot without a main character but with events in a row as well. However, the narration can be constructed in

another way (Bordwell & Tompson, 2004) that is without a storyline; it may be based on an argument (rhetorical), a categorization of the facts (categorical), a poetic abstract relation (abstract) or an associational link (associational). The following is the list of the documentary categories based on their narrative structure:

- Narratives, character centered
- Narratives, subject based
- Categorical documentaries
- Rhetorical documentaries
- Associational documentaries
- Abstract documentaries

4. Narrative representation

Thirdly, it is the narrative representation; after having decided on the actuality depicted and the mode of narration, it is time to select the mode of representation that is the style the filmmaker is going to use so as to represent this reality within the narrative structure selected before. Here are the modes of representation by Bill Nichols (2010, 173-208):

- Poetic documentaries
- Expository documentaries
- Participatory documentaries
- Observational documentaries
- Reflexive documentaries
- Performative documentaries

These six modes “establish a loose framework of affiliation within which individuals may work; they set up conventions that a given film may adopt; and they provide specific expectations viewers anticipate having fulfilled” (31).

As said in the beginning, the poetic mode stresses mode, tone and pace much more than displays of knowledge or acts of persuasion. The rhetorical element remains underdeveloped. The expository mode “assembles fragments of the historical world into a more rhetorical or argumentative frame than an aesthetic or poetic one”. The expository mode “addresses the viewer directly, with titles or voices that propose a perspective, advance an argument or recount history”. In the observational mode, “all of the forms of control that a poetic or expository filmmaker might exercise over the staging, arrangement, or composition of a scene become sacrificed to observing lived experience spontaneously. Honoring this spirit of observation in post-production editing, as well as during shooting, resulted in films with no voice-over commentary, no supplementary music or sound effects, no intertitles, no historical re-enactments no behavior repeated for the camera, and not even any interviews”. In the participatory mode, the researcher goes into the field “participates in the lives of others gains a corporeal or visceral feel for what life in a given context is like, and then reflects on this experience, using the tools and methods of anthropology or sociology to do so”.

In the reflexive mode, the processes of negotiation between filmmaker and viewer “becomes the focus of attention”. Lastly, the performative mode, which primarily addresses the viewer, emotionally and expressively, rather than pointing us to the factual world we hold

in common. Performative documentary freely “mixes the expressive techniques that give texture and density to fiction (point-of-view shots, musical scores, renderings of subjective states of mind, flashbacks and freeze frames, etc.) with oratorical techniques for addressing the social issues that neither science nor reason can resolve”.

Of course, in terms of representation issues, there are other categories as well. One of these is the “creative” documentaries asked by the festivals, meaning the high lightening of the expressive issues of the documentary (IDFA, 2019). Another category is the broad category of hybrid mode (Landesman 2008), which means practically everything from the mixing of narrative modes to the use of digital technology. Another category is also the very new “interactive” documentary, which has many sub-genres like “the **conversational mode** as a conversation with a computer that is typified through forms of game-play; the **hypertext mode** as means of structuring user experience through a series of branching choices; the **participative mode** as two-way conversation between author and users that actively involves the user in production of material; the **experiential mode** as a way of utilizing space and embodiment to structure the user experience particularly where the experience of the real and the virtual become blurred” (Aston & Gaudenzi, 2012).

5. Conclusion

In short, the full table of categories (genres) is as follows:

| Actuality /subject | Narration/plot | Representation/style |
|---|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • History • Politics • Current affaires • Social • Travel • Arts • Culture • Science • Nature | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Narratives, character centered • Narratives, subject based • Categorical • Rhetorical • Associational • Abstract | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Poetic • Expository • Participatory • observational • reflexive • performative <p>and</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • interactive • creative • hybrid etc. |

Table 1: a proposed classification of the documentary films

To conclude, this paper supports that the popular genre classification by Bill Nichols is only based on issues of representation. However, there are several other issues within the documentary film that may lead to other classifications. To name some of them, the subject/theme of the documentary and the narrative structure. In such a way, a full table of documentary genres is provided, which may cover all the aspects, and all genres of this kind of film.

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