

## **The Six Types of Documentary Filmmaking**

### **1. The Expository Mode**

The expository mode is the most familiar. Expository docs are heavily researched and are sometimes referred to as essay films because they aim to educate and explain things — events, issues, ways of life, worlds and exotic settings we know little about. Typical production elements include interviews, illustrative visuals, some actuality, perhaps some graphics and photos and a ‘voice of God’ narration track. Scripted narration connects the story elements and often unpacks a thesis or an argument.

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The “Why We Fight” (1942-43) series of propaganda films commissioned by the government to explain U.S. involvement in World War II were made in classic expository style. Other examples include current affairs docs made for “60 Minutes,” History Channel programs, and nature films such as “The Blue Planet.” The sweeping historical documentaries of Ken Burns (“Mark Twain,” 2001; “The Dust Bowl,” 2012) fall into the expository category.

Suggested Viewing: “The Plow That Broke the Plains” Pare Lorentz 1936; “City of Gold” NFB 1949; “The Civil War” Ken Burns 1990;

### **2. The Observational Mode**

Observational documentary is probably the most analyzed mode of them all. The form is also referred to as cinema vérité, direct cinema or fly-on-the-wall documentary.

Observational docs strive for cinematic realism. The gritty realism produced by actuality filmmakers of the 1960s and 70s was achieved through technological advances made ten years earlier: faster lenses for shooting in low light conditions and smaller cameras that could now be handheld and were no longer tethered to a sound recorder with an audio sync cable. An unobtrusive crew of two could shoot almost anywhere with available light and follow actuality as it unfolded. Up until then, bulky film production gear required finicky technical setups and careful staging of the action.

Boston director Frederick Wiseman, considered to be the master of observational cinema, is known for his groundbreaking studies of institutions and big social issues (“High School,” 1968; “Public Housing,” 1997). Wiseman resists categorization of his work: “Cinema vérité is just a pompous French word.”

In Wiseman’s films, carefully edited and arranged actuality scenes speak for themselves. There is no intervention by the filmmaker, no interview questions, no commentary to camera, no narration. On location, Wiseman records the sound and handles the microphone. Freed from looking through the viewfinder, the director is able to pay better attention to what’s going on around him and anticipate the action. Wiseman communicates with his cameraperson through pre-arranged hand signals and directs by pointing his microphone at what he wants filmed.

“Fly-on-the-wall is the most demeaning [term],” Wiseman tells POV magazine. “None of the flies I know are conscious.” Although not fond of fancy film terms, the curmudgeonly octogenarian is considered to be the most authentic maker of observational documentaries.

Suggested Viewing: “Primary Drew Associates” 1960; “Don’t Look Back” D.A. Pennebaker, 1967; “Salesmen” Albert and David Maysles, 1969

### **3. The Participatory Mode**

In “Introduction to Documentary,” Bill Nichols describes participatory documentary as “[when] the encounter between filmmaker and subject is recorded and the filmmaker actively engages with the situation they are documenting.”

The participatory mode aims for immediacy and often presents the filmmaker’s point of view.

Michael Moore’s documentaries are primarily vehicles for his social commentary. A dynamic shooting style that captures ‘man in the street’ interviews as well as ambush grillings of the powerful, staged sequences featuring the director and mostly one-sided narration are trademarks of Moore’s point of view docs, including “Sicko” – slamming the health care system — and “Bowling for Columbine” — lobbying for gun control.

The investigative work of filmmaker Nick Bloomfield also falls into the participatory mode (“Kurt and Courtney,” 1998; “Tales of the Grim Sleeper,” 2014). Bloomfield shoots with a skeletal crew handling audio mixer and boom mic himself. He often rolls camera on the way to the next location and gives anticipatory commentary to camera when he’s not conducting gun and run interviews.

Suggested Viewing: “Chronicle of a Summer” Jean Rouché 1960; “Sherman’s March” Ross McElwee 1986; “Supersize Me” Morgan Spurlock 2004; “Approaching the Elephant” Amanda Wilder 2014

### **4. The Reflexive Mode**

Documentaries made in reflexive mode provoke audiences to “question the authenticity of documentary in general,” writes Bill Nichols. Reflexive docs challenge assumptions and expectations about the form itself.

Dziga Vertov, the Russian film pioneer makes it clear in “The Man With A Movie Camera” that what the audience is watching is not reality but rather a construction of reality. The film is silent and contains no interstitial titles. Ostensibly a ‘city documentary’ that chronicles a day in the life of a metropolis, the 1929 avant-garde classic includes scenes of the film’s cameraman and how he went about getting his shots. Also intercut with scenes of factories, trains and crowded streets are short sequences of a diligent film editor working with individual frames from the film. By clever juxtaposition of scenes and images, Vertov gives us a sense that the film we are watching is being assembled right before our eyes.

Rob Reiner’s “This is Spinal Tap,” a ‘mockumentary’ about a fictional heavy metal band in decline, also falls into the reflexive mode. Fake interviews, fake concert clips, improvised dialogue and a ‘shaky cam’ shooting style are Reiner’s devices for taking satirical pokes both at heavy metal culture and at rock documentary conventions. In Reiner’s well-observed 1985 cult classic audiences recognize the trademarks of the

'rockumentary' genre — intra-band conflict, decline in popularity, the band clawing their way back to the top and the final concert.

Suggested Viewing: "Exit Through the Gift Shop" Banksy 2010; "The Spaghetti Story" BBC 1957

## 5. The Poetic Mode

Webster defines poetry as "literary work in which special intensity is given to the expression of feelings and ideas by the use of distinctive style and rhythm."

You can apply this definition almost perfectly to many documentaries created in the poetic mode — the aim is to create an impression or a mood rather than argue a point. The poetic form also referred to as abstract or avant-garde can be traced back to the popular City Symphony film movement of the 1920s out of which came such classics as Walter Ruttmann's "Berlin: Symphony of a Metropolis" (1927).

Filmmakers operating in the poetic mode typically emphasize cinematic values over content to create visual poetry. Shot design, composition and rhythm achieved in editing are hallmarks of the genre. The narrative, if there is one, is expressed visually rather than rhetorically. Dutch filmmaker Joris Iven's City Symphony classic "Rain" (1929) is a shining example of the poetic style that shows how a rainstorm transforms the Dutch metropolis Amsterdam.

Suggested Viewing: "Play of Light: Black, White, Grey" Laslo Moholy-Nagy 1930; "N.Y.,N.Y." Francis Thomson 1957; "Sans Soleil" (Sunless) Chris Marker 1983; "Koyaanisqatsi" Godfrey Reggio 1982

## 6. The Performative Mode

The performative mode of documentary is the direct opposite of the observational where unobtrusive observation of the subject is the director's aim.

Performative documentary emphasizes the filmmaker's own involvement with the subject. The filmmaker shows a larger political or historical reality through the window of her own experience. Rather than rely on the expository approach, the rhetoric of persuasion, the performative filmmaker becomes a personal guide who shows it and tells it like it is with raw emotion.

In performative mode the filmmaker gives a strong "what's it like to be there" perspective on a world, a culture or an event in history that the audience would otherwise never know. In "Tongues Untied" (1989) the late African-American filmmaker Marlon Riggs combines actuality, re-enactments and his personal account to shine a light on black gay American identity.

Also in the performative category are the works of so-called 'found footage' filmmakers like Hungarian Péter Forgács ("Danube Exodus," 1999). His films are created from home movies and recovered personal records to tell the story of ordinary people whose lives are about to be overtaken by catastrophic, historic events.

Suggested Viewing: "Night And Fog" Alain Resnais 1955; "Paris Is Burning" Jenny Livingston 1991; "Forest of Bliss" Robert Gardner 1986