

Documentary Film: A Very Short Introduction
By Patricia Aufderheide

Beginning with an overview of the central issues of documentary filmmaking - its definitions and purposes, its forms and founders - Aufderheide focuses on several of its key subgenres, including public affairs films, government propaganda (particularly the works produced during World War II), historical documentaries, and nature films. Her thematic approach allows readers to enter the subject matter through the kinds of films that first attracted them to documentaries, and it permits her to make connections between eras, as well as revealing the ongoing nature of documentary's core controversies involving objectivity, advocacy, and bias.

- How would you define a documentary?
- What kinds of truth-telling can documentary do especially well? What kinds of truth-telling are challenging for the documentary form?
- What is the difference between propaganda and advocacy?
- What are the obligations of a documentarian to provide the viewer with a balanced picture?
- How do you know “what a documentary looks like”? What are those conventions that define a documentary? Are their associations positive or negative for you?
- What formal conventions have filmmakers historically employed that are different from those conventions? Are the “city symphony” films, for instance, really documentary?
- What conventions does documentary share with fiction? Is that a problem?
- Could you imagine an animated documentary?
- Filmmakers employing cinema vérité sometimes argued that it provided unique access to truth. What do you think? What are arguments for and against the advantages of this filmic approach?
- Documentary filmmaking is an art form as well as an informative medium. How much does documentary differ from other informative genres such as journalism or non-fiction books in this regard?
- Documentarians often have extended relationships with their subjects. How has this relationship been defined by ethnographic filmmakers, who work with subjects in very different cultures than their own?
- How have nature documentaries evolved over the decades? How does this reflect our changing understanding of our own relationship with the environment?
- Who funds the documentaries that you like best? Why?
- In many countries, documentary filmmaking has been subsidized with tax money. What has motivated these governments to support filmmakers? What have been the effects of government subsidy on production?
- Can government propaganda ever be a good thing?
- What is the difference between a point-of-view public affairs documentary and an advocacy film?
- What documentaries would you add to the “100 Great Documentaries” list? Why?

Further reading

Barnouw, Erik, *Documentary*, Oxford University Press, 1993

Bernard, Sheila, *Documentary Storytelling for Video and Filmmakers*, Focal Press, 2003

Chanana, Michael, *the Politics of Documentary*, British Film Institute, 2008

Rabiger, Michael, *Directing the Documentary*, Focal Press, 2004