

Lecture 4

Non-fiction narratives

Types of documentary technique

- Reportage
 - French word meaning “to bring back”.
 - Writer brings back information that gives an account of an event.
 - Reportage involves telling the story as they find it, it contradicts to the write down shots that have been planned or thing that are planned to see.

- Writing is primarily going to take place in postproduction in the form of documentary.
- Plan story line but when recording they get better footages

E.g. documentaries about native people on Discovery.

- Observation

- Camera can be used as an observing eye from within the environment in order to introduce the audience to an unfamiliar world.
- The technique is to introduce the camera and wait until people are used to it and forget about it.
- E.g. reality shows.

- Interviews
 - Interviews are based on questions and answers to those questions might be recorded on camera and off.
 - Types of questions
 - i. Open questions allow interviewee to volunteer information, to express opinions and to get warmed up.
 - • Questions that ask where, what, when, why, or how typically lead to open questions.

- ii. Closed questions generally have a limited choice of answers
 - The answers can only be yes or no.
- iii. Double-barrelled questions ask two or more questions in combination
 - The subject will tend to answer the questions he wants to answer and ignore those that might be awkward or revealing.
 - Experienced interviewers avoid overloading the subject with multiple questions.

- iv. Leading questions imply intent and can involve logical entrapment.
 - E.g. when did you stop beating your wife?
 - The answer involves an implicit confession.
 - The interviewer prefaces the question with information based on research.
 - These questions lead the interviewee to reveal more information and motivation.

- v. Hypothetical questions ask someone to imagine a situation or choice that has not yet occurred or may never occur and to describe how they would respond.
 - The answer reveals the character and mentality of the subject.
 - The interviewer describes a situation to the subject and then asks what he or she would do.

vi. Self-assessment questions ask people to offer judgements or evaluation of themselves and their conduct.

- Difficult questions hand the interviewee an opportunity that can be exploited.
- They may bring disadvantage to someone who is shy and inarticulate.

Structure of interview

- Funnel approach
 - Start with general question.
 - Narrow down questioning to finish with close questioning of a focused nature.
- Inverted funnel
 - Start with a specific closed question or detailed question.
 - End with broader questions
- Tunnel approach
 - Avoid narrowing and broadening strategy but combine both and simply pursues a logical, consistent line of questions.

Investigative documentary

- Uses the medium of film or television to record an inquiry into the truth or falsehood of a certain question.
- Depends on in-depth research.
- It is important to marshal all the facts and separate them from rumour, popular opinion and corporate propaganda.

- Always face a problem of balance. It is easy to create a bias by omitting, as well as including certain evidence.
- A successful investigative documentary should point to a conclusion, should make clear an editorial view set beside the arguments and the evidence.

Narrative documentary

- One of the most appealing forms of non-fiction is biography.
- Documenting a life in pictures through the recollection of friends and relatives, through the evidence of public record, or through private papers can get closer to the truth.
- A human life has a natural narrative structure - a beginning, a middle and an end.

- Putting the facts in order, balancing the differing views or debunking a myth is absolutely a documentary endeavour.
- The story of a life may also be a window into the historical period which the person lived.
- Narrative documentary can tell us the history of a town, a work of art, a war, a political movement, a revolution, etc.

Dramatised documentary

- A very popular form on television.
- Recreate or re-enact a factual story with actors in costume.
- In practice, dramatised and narrative documentary can be combined.

Expository documentary

- To describe the kind of documentary that explains something.
- It is typical of science documentaries that explain a hypothesis or a theory and the way the experimented evidence supports it.
- These are often constructed as narratives that unfold in a kind of suspense story.
- Exposition is a non-dramatic function of film and video. It shows us a place, or an artist's work, or how a life form grows or how a product is manufactured.

Propaganda

- Politically or socially targeted messages that are dictated by a government, political party or commercial organisation.
- It can be argued that advertising is a form of commercial propaganda which is hardly concerned with truth but with persuasion.
- Propaganda, whether social, political or commercial, usually masquerades as documentary.

Other documentary applications

- Expedition documentary
 - Archaeological, mountain climbing and other types of expeditions often include a documentary film project, which is a record of the voyage and a possible source of revenue through television and video sales.
 - Writing becomes a post-production exercise, especially voice-over documentary.

- Travel documentary
 - This kind of documentary has a marketing or promotional function and is often sponsored rather than motivated by an investigation.
 - Trends of television programmes with a host appearing on camera location taking viewers on tour.

- Documentary about the making of feature films
 - Becoming increasingly important for DVD releases, which are interactive and offer the viewer a menu of out-takes and background on the film's story, actors, and the shooting itself.
 - Have to be shot on the basis of an outline and are largely written in postproduction.
 - Have to include shots of the movie's final cut, intercut with interviews of the actors and production personnel.

- **Wildlife documentary**
 - Wildlife programmes have endless appeal to a very wide audience.
 - Because wildlife shooting is unpredictable, the programme is constructed in the editing phase when the writer becomes an important contributor in constructing the commentary.

- Current affairs features
 - Documentary works best when there is a topic of investigation.
 - Too many current affairs features are weak, because they simply collect sensational material, putting together conflicting points of view and end with a question or a kind of shoulder shrug leaving the viewer to weigh the evidence.

Writing commentaries

- Narrative voice-over and postproduction
 - The most noticeable writing in documentary form is writing the commentary.
 - This requires a special kind of writing that must function in conjunction with images on screen.

- All voice-over narratives or commentary are finalised in postproduction based on the running order and running time of the sequence.
- The problem with this approach is that if the picture and commentary do not match either in length or emphasis, producers have to pay for recording process all over again.

- **Wall-to-wall commentary**
 - Some documentaries and corporate video have wall-to-wall commentary.
- **The voice-over starts at the beginning and continues with scarcely a break until the end.**
 - The result is monotonous and exhausting.
 - Commentary should support the picture when it augments the visuals or supplies indispensable information about the image.

- Commentary counter-point and commentary anchors
 - Setting up topic sentences of commentary that are then completed by the visual sequences that follow.
 - The commentary can give a clue to the deeper meaning of images.

- Dual commentators
 - It offers the advantage of having both a male and a female voice.
 - Two voices could break monotony of one voice in a long programme.

Commentary cliché

- The most obvious abuse in writing commentary is the predictable and obvious linking of image and commentary.
- Some commentaries either follow literally what is showing on the screen or telegraphs exactly what we are going to see before we see it.

Technique of fitting commentary

- Script has to be written carefully for the spoken voice in short phrases that flow naturally and fit visual sequences.
- A commentary script is written in post production against a rough cut of the programme.
- It has to be timed to fit the running time not only commentary that runs beyond the visual sequence.

- 2 ways of fitting commentary to film and video:
 - Record a roughly timed commentary and then lay it over the picture as a separate audio track.
 - Record commentary to playback. Loop sections in the final cut and cue the voice artist to deliver commentary while watching the sequence.

Conclusion

- Although documentary is probably a writer/director's medium more than a writer's medium, background research and the writing of a treatment are a crucial contribution to the form.
- In postproduction, writing good voice-over can make or break a documentary.
- Stories about people, historical figures and historical events make for compelling non-fiction narratives.