

Modes of Documentary – Bill Nichols

Bill Nichols in Introduction to Documentary notes **six types of modes** of documentary Expository , Poetic, Observational , Participatory, Performative , Reflexive

Nichols 2001 looked at history of documentary and identified **6 distinct modes** From Expository to Performative (see below). In a linear progression. With distinct styles. Nichol's modes is not the only theory of documentary and is not definitive, see Bruzzi below and also look at Grierson's theories as well as Bazin's views on realism.

Criticism of Nichols

Stella Bruzzi 2000 Criticised Nichols for suggesting that Doc. makers have aimed for the '**perfect representation of the real**' and would fail in this impossible aim, thus undermining the documentary form.

Quotes She said that '*all types of documentary have existed at different times*' And have *often, mixed styles*. '*What is the point of worrying about authenticity*' She sees documentary as contributing to meaning about real world events.

THE EXPOSITORY MODE (voice of god)

This mode is what we most identify with the documentary - it "emphasizes verbal commentary and argumentative logic" often using a narrator.

Assumes a logical argument and a "right" and "proper" answer using direct address + offering preferred meaning.

Most associated with Television News programming.

Key Examples of Expository tradition in documentary include:

Work of **John Grierson** Many **nature Documentaries**

THE POETIC MODE – subjective, artistic expression

The poetic mode of documentary moves away from the "objective" reality of a given situation or people to grasp at **an inner "truth"** that can only be grasped by **poetical manipulation**

Codes emphasizes visual associations, tonal or rhythmic qualities, descriptive passages, and formal organization favours mood, tone and texture.

Key Examples of Poetic tradition in documentary include:

Robert Flaherty's **Man of Aran (1934)** - dramatic framing of material presents mythic image of man in harmony with nature

Leni Riefenstahl's Olympia (1938) presents a glorified view of (Aryan) athletes during the 1936 Olympic Games - celebrating power and beauty of the (Aryan) human form + Triumph of the Will (1935) + Baraka (1981) also Powaqqatsi (2003)

THE OBSERVATIONAL MODE – window on the world

Observational (objective) mode is best exemplified by the Cinema Verite or Direct Cinema movement which emerged in the late 1950s/early 1960s - it attempted to capture (as accurately as possibly) **objective reality** with filmmaker as neutral observer. **See Fly on the Wall.**

Codes/conventions

The filmmaker remains hidden behind the camera, ignored by the surrounding environment he/she neither changes nor influences the actions/events being captured.

Since nothing is staged for the camera, the camera rushes about to keep up with the action resulting in rough, shaky, often amateur-looking footage.

Key Examples of the Cinema Verite/Direct cinema Movement: .

Frederick Wiseman, **Hospital (1970)** – fly on the wall, American hospital

Richard Pennebacker's **Don't Look Back (1967)** - records Bob Dylan's 1965 tour of Britain

Also Soho Stories (1996), Geri (1999)

THE PARTICIPATORY MODE

Unlike the observational mode, the participatory mode welcomes direct engagement **between filmmaker and subject(s)** - the filmmaker becomes part of the events being recorded

The filmmakers impact on the events being recorded is acknowledged, indeed, it is often celebrated.

Key Examples of the Participatory Mode include:

The films of **Michael Moore** - here the filmmaker directly engages with the material being address, he becomes a character in the documentary - an essential part of the subject

Nick Broomfield's work, such as Kurt and Courtney (1998)

Living with Michael Jackson (2004) Bashir

THE REFLEXIVE MODE – awareness of the process

The Reflexive Mode acknowledges the **constructed nature of documentary** and flaunts it - conveying to people that this is not necessarily "truth" but a reconstruction of it - "a" truth, not "the" truth

Codes/conventions

The artifice of the documentary is exposed - the audience are made aware of the editing, sound recording, etc.

Key Examples of the Reflexive Mode include:

Dziga Vertov's **Man with a Movie Camera (1929)** - documents the mechanization of Soviet life in late twenties - the mechanical camera and cameraman become part of the subject

The art of making pictures is part of this "new" mechanical work and it is part of the film - we literally at points in the film see the film being constructed

THE PERFORMATIVE MODE – filmmaker as participant

This mode of documentary emphasizes **the subjective nature of the documentarian** as well as acknowledging the subjective reading of the audience - notions of objectivity are replaced by "evocation and affect"

Codes /conventions

This mode emphasizes the emotional and social impact on the audience

Key Examples of the Performative Mode include:

Supersize me Morgan Spurlock 2004

Arguably, films by **Michael Moore**