

Documentary is a clumsy description but let it stand

What is documentary? We can trace the origins of the word itself from a single page to the current plethora of forms it now encompasses, but what exactly is meant when we label something as documentary, what is different about these works that separate them from the others that are not classified as documentary? Don Harwood in his book *Video as a Second Language*, a short book more aimed at discussing how to make amateur documentary films, defines a documentary as “Pertaining to, consisting of or based upon documents” (10). This may seem a little simple and broad, but he also defines a video documentary as a video tape “made by average people, composed of various documents and documentary data, which serves to relate a factual story by comparison of events, time, places or viewpoints” (11). Looking elsewhere we find the definition proffered by John Grierson, arguably the father of the documentary film movement, that documentary is the “creative treatment of actuality” (Winston 6). Or perhaps we should go the ultimate source for most definitions, the dictionary. According to Webster’s New Explorer Dictionary and Thesaurus a documentary is “giving a factual presentation in artistic form” (def. 2). Are any of these definitions right? Documentary is such a diverse field that while most definitions speak toward what documentary is, no single definition is capable of encompassing all that documentary is.

Don Harwood’s *Video as a Second Language* is meant to teach amateurs how to make their own documentary, but as with any good instructor he starts off his lesson by defining what it is exactly he is trying to teach. His initial definition, “Pertaining to, consisting of or based upon documents,” at first seems a good definition that sticks with

the original intent of the meaning (10). This breaks down, however, as the subject is explored with more than just cursory depth. Documentary films are usually based, at least in part, off of documents and use visual and auditory mechanisms to get their message across, but this is not absolutely necessary. A documentary about a small town in rural America could, instead of relying on historical documents, rely on the testimony and stories of the families, friends and neighbors that make up the town. Wouldn't either be equally valid as documentaries? The second, though, is excluded by Harwood's initial definition. A child's report on the countries of the world, normally not a good candidate for the designation of documentary, would, on the basis of itself being a document, be included as a documentary by Harwood.

Perhaps even he himself realized this and so offers his second definition, this time only of video documentary. While more specific and definitive than his first initial definition, this one also suffers when probed. Defining that a documentary must be made by average people seems to eliminate most of the human race, because who among us is really an average individual? Again he relies on documents much more so than oral information, but the 'comparison,' is it really as important as he seems to claim in his book? True a dry recitation of facts and figures would inspire no one and would hardly be good documentary but must there be a debate within the documentary? Surely documentarists of wolf mating habits needn't debate this topic, especially when they are in possession of film of the act. What Don Harwood may be trying to get at and is what is really needed in any documentary is an interpretation of the facts and figures, how much interpretation there should be is, perhaps, what this entire debate is about.

While Harwood is just trying to teach amateurs methods of documentary, John Grierson virtually started the genre and so it would seem better to know what the father of documentary thought his child was. When asked to describe what the relatively new film genre documentary was he described it as the “creative treatment of actuality” (Winston 6). While ingenious in its descriptive qualities of what the term ‘documentary’ encompasses, this definition is still quite murky and it doesn’t give a clear picture of what documentary is. A key question arising from studying this definition is just how much actuality is left after the creative treatment. Grierson himself never answered the question, but most audiences today assume that when they see a documentary film, visit a gallery of documentary photographs, or read a documentary essay that what is contained within those media are indeed the truth, or at least as close an approximation of the truth as anyone can ever really achieve. While this may not have bothered Grierson at the dawn of the documentary movement, this ‘truth clause’ seems a necessary addition considering modern expectations.

What is meant by his term ‘creative treatment’ is another question without a ready answer. Must an individual use sophisticated filming techniques or does panning the camera and fading between scenes qualify it? This also leaves barren the area for the documentary essay, though perhaps not exactly Grierson was talking about, the documentary essay, such as a written history of the Harlem Renaissance by those who lived it, is as valid a form of documentary today as motion or still film is, and yet this particular definition does nothing to address it, leaving out some of the best documentaries simply based on their written, as opposed to visual, presentation style.

The two previous authors of definitions may not have it as their profession to create definitions, but the writers and editors of the dictionary do. Will these fellows with their years of experience be able to capture in a short sentence all that is meant by the term documentary? Their entrant given is “giving a factual presentation in artistic form” (Webster’s def.2) While this definition easily understood and clear, at least at first, even it still falls short of being able to convey all the power, emotion and meaning of documentary. Included within the definition is the ‘truth clause,’ the need for any documentary to be truthful in its information. As Vivienne Mylne said “Belief in fiction cannot be a matter of degree. We either accept the incidents of a story as if they were true, ore we are aware of them as fiction. There can be no halfway house, no keeping an open mind, no suspending our judgement until further evidence is available” (Foley 25). This definition also does not seem to exclude and particular presentation form, unlike Harwood. But once again the definition falls down. Two questions that immediately spring to mind are meant by artistic, and how artistic does the presentation have to be in order to qualify as an artistic presentation? Webster’s gives no clue, but common sense will argue that there must be a lower cut off point meant by the clause, or else why include it? This definition while good, doesn’t leave us with all question answered in our quest for a complete definition of what documentary is.

Are any of these definitions really what is meant by the word documentary, are they all? Can we really define the medium that is all media, can give rise to and fell governments and national movements, and provide us with both sweet hope and bitter despair? It seems that all this meaning could be packed into a single word. Perhaps

Grierson had it right in the end when he said “documentary is a clumsy description but let it stand” (Winston 12).

## Works Cited

"Documentary." Def. 2. Webster's New Explorer Dictionary and Thesaurus. 1999.

Foley, Barbara. Telling the Truth: The Theory and Practice of Documentary Fiction. New York: Cornell UP, 1986.

Harwood, Don. Video as a Second Language. New York: VTR Company, 1975.

Winston, Brian. Claiming the Real: The Documentary Film Revisited. London: British Film Institute, 1995.