

# The Power of Documentaries Comes from the Fact that They are Grounded in Fact, Not Fiction

Zengyue Yang\*

Queen's University Belfast, Belfast, Northern Ireland, UK

\* 380671402@qq.com

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**Abstract:** This paper examines the distinctive power of documentaries compared to fiction films, emphasizing their authenticity. Documentaries are often perceived as more credible due to their use of real images and sounds, which leads audiences to trust the content presented. However, the author draws on multiple scholarly perspectives to argue that the truthfulness of documentaries can be subjective, much like that of fiction films. The paper also analyzes the educational and transformative roles of documentaries in society, highlighting key differences between documentaries and fiction films in terms of information dissemination, visual representation, and audience interaction. Through this analysis, the paper concludes that the strength of documentaries stems from their portrayal of the real world, setting them apart from the imaginative nature of fiction films.

**Keywords:** Documentary; Fiction Film; Authenticity; Social Change; Visual Representation.

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## 1. Introduction

Documentaries are artistic ideological constructions similar to any film that contains more influence than fiction since their images and sounds are generalized to be authentic. John Ellis argues that the art of documentaries thrives since they are presented in a manner that creates in people's mind a belief of truth what the audience watches on screens is always trusted. This unique power that elicit trust from its audience, has clearly distinguished documentaries from fictions that is often termed as mere "fabrications" (Slugan and Terrone, 2021). Contrary to fiction, documentaries only represents life it does not stage, create or fabricate it. Documentaries are thus termed as antithesis of falsification and fabrication of fictions while fictions are antithesis of documentaries. Basing on the content from complementary films, this essay argues that these perceived conditions of association and difference of truth documentary films might be less truthful as compared to fictions. What singles out documentaries as a fact and not fiction is the way it is perceived.

Documentary films serves as an informative and in-depth resources that forms the most suitable platform for creating dialogue. Documentaries acts as strong tools that presents vital matters in a way that sparks both discussions and even social movements. Documentaries are often presented in a manner that reveals their character drive, feature length, and their focus on the stories of real people that coats human faces on global issues that are often unrelatable/distant (Plantinga, 2018). Documentary filmmakers are dedicated to ensure the audience sees and hears these real life experiences that enable them be empathetic to other people who might be suffering, and are in great need of other people's compassion and engagement. For example, the filming team of *Grey Gardens* (1975) spent seven months intimately documenting the real lives of a mother and daughter.

## 2. Documentary Versus Fiction

To begin with, the intellectual and moral superiority of documentary over fiction film has often been based on its

purported separation from fiction conventions and denial of approval. Documentaries have historically stood out from the fiction films. Fiction films focuses on illusions and fantasy thus ignoring the world's realities. It is termed as merely distracting and deceiving. Distinct from fiction, the art of documentary directs the people's belief and influence because of its disconnection with illusion by embracing reality. Philip Rosen argues that documentary is a meaningful area that focuses on the power of reality. This means that documentary's status and authority is mainly as a result of incorporating real images. This often gives it the concept of believability, authenticity through the symbolism of the real. As much as the concept of objective reality beside human experiences is often opposed, Bruzzi claims that it is vital to keep sensitizing documentary writers that these documentary films are real even in absence of presentations (Toba, 2019). This is well captured in *Pieces of My Country* where the idea of real images are experimented. In order to come out as a documentary, the film employs typical documentary images in addressing issues affecting people in the society such as crime, xenophobia, poverty, and politics. In a addition, *Paris is Burning* (1990) tells the story of a group of black and Hispanic drag queens in Manhattan, New York in the late 1980s, tracing their participation in various amateur dance performances and their unknown mental journey. This documentary truly shows the identity, material desires and dreams of homosexuals and transgender people. It is full of appeal and has become an important material for studying American race, gender/sexual orientation and class.

Reconstruction, dramatization and re-enactments never tampers with credibility and legitimacy of documentary films. This was supported by Grierson's argument that dramatization only adds flavor in documentaries. He further categorized *lecture films* and *newsreels* as poor documentaries because of absence of creativity by omitting dramatization. Besides, Philip Rosen perceives documentary films as enactment of reality similar to Spottiswoode who perceive it as comical presentation of human life (Wynants, Reijnen and Brinkman, 2020). This therefore proves that acting is simply a section in documentaries that presents real

life issues. For instance, *Pieces of My Country* employs interactive and creative filmic techniques to capture South African social realities. This film is acted out playfully by involving several characters without eliminating any social reality. It is thus not categorized as mock/fake documentaries or fiction documentaries that only sound and look like documentaries.

A real documentary has no association to the three degrees common in mock or fake documentaries. According to Craig Hight and Jane Roscoe, there are three degrees of fake or mock documentaries as per the film makers' intentions, creation of role for the film characters, and how appropriate the text use in documentary codes are. Parody is the first degree in mock documentaries. This comprises of the consistency, text functionalities, rightfulness of documentary codes, and agreement in production of fiction milieu. Again referring on *Pieces of My Country*, milieu captured in this film has no attributes of a fiction, the film utilizes characters to highlight facts and not just manipulation of facts (Ellis, 2021). The second mock documentary degree is 'critique' then the third degree is that of deconstruction. Roscoe and Hight advocates that film viewers should be aware that the above degrees only exist in mockumentaries'. Actors in *Pieces of My Country* acts real factual issues to address the authors' personal interpretation and not for milieu fiction creation. In addition, majority of characters in documentary films often represents themselves unlike in fictions. Both documentary and fictions employs visual imagery world. Contrary to fiction, documentaries captures illusion only for sharing ideas or researched details that happens in real world. Based on this, documentaries are thus defined by presentation of facts, information, and ideas in (fictional ways) and never defined by footage or imagery of actual people. A perfect example of non-fiction films that presents phenomenal world and an real life events by use of image symbols instead of imagery fictions. Referring to *Pieces of My Country*, the film begins with a young kid (cartoon image) climbing up a hill. The photo is then followed by a fairly kid's tale narration.

Based on epistophilia concept Nicholas suggests that most people use documentaries as a source information that quench their thirst for learning. On the other hand, Godmilow claims documentaries carries ideas and opposes claims that describes them as projects that carries reality or facts. Perceiving documentaries as purely on the angle of offering ideas and information appears to ignore the fact that fictions contains facts and information as well. These ideas were further opposed by Noel who argued that we often learn from watching fictions similar to how we learn from watching documentary films. Fiction films like *Lumumba* (2000), *The Last King of Scotland* (1992), and *Lorenzo's Oil* (1992), are a perfect prove that fictions share in the documentary endeavor of displaying factual information from the real world. The opposers further revealed that a number of fiction work uses real people in their plays. For instance, *City of God* (2002) film, most characters are not specialized actors but they are just residents of where the film was set. Therefore, it is wrong to differentiate documentaries from fictions basing on their ides/information capability.

According to John Corner's study, he highlights three classical role of documentaries. First, is the role "publicity project for modern civic". He further explained it as nationwide project that advocates for citizenship and protects rights of its citizen in the society. The second documentary role as a "an exposition and concern for journalists", he

explained it as a reporting tool via camera presentation, and interviews (Terrone, 2020). Then, documentaries as an alternative perspective and radicle interrogation critiques and offers remedy to issues in circulation. This employs formal experimentation rarely used by many broadcast media. Then lastly, documentary as a "diversion" is explained according to John Corner as a popular factual amusement. The audience get humor via anecdotal knowledge, the gossipy, and the film's pact with the popular. He further associate it with the Reality TV Programme that copy the format of traditional game shows.

Studies further reveals that the difference between documentary mode and fiction mode is that fiction speculates a given state of affair and calls audience to digest them while documentary takes a step of confidence towards the state of affair. This means documentary confirm that the event actually happened while fiction doesn't. This is backed up by Renov's argument that all documentary films poses a factual claim that is related to history which is incomparable to the analogical state of fictions. This was further supported by Noel's explanation that claims fiction films are perceived to project and create merely imagined/ illusion of the world. This illusion refers to the psychological state of mind arrived at while watching fiction films. We often feel anxious by the turn of events in fiction films although the anticipation surrounding the events displayed in this films it's not triggered by its reality but by the persuasion of the displayed film illusions.

### 3. Theoretical Approach

World Union of Documentary in 1948 established that, "Documentaries are mechanism used to record on celluloid any aspect of reality which can be interpreted as justifiable and sincere construction to appeal for emotion, or reason for mainly to stimulate desire to widen human knowledge and understanding of problems and their solutions in spheres of culture, economics and human relations (Moyano, 2011)." The documentary entails observing reality and organize material extracted from it. The guiding principles for the documentary were set out by Grlerson in 1966 where he argued that documentary films are new and vital form of art which can photograph living story and living scenes (Cooper, 2018). Basing on these analogy it is imperative for characters in documentary to be factual for future references rather than being fiction. Most scenes and characters in documentary are taken from reality to provide an ideal opportunities for interpretation of the modern world. The material take from world shows a reflection of reality where it captures spontaneous gestures and movement performed. There is no doubt that documentary is creation of reality where sequences of events are edited. Realistic documentaries with cities, streets, markets, and factories provides an overview of issues and features that happened in past thus serve memory on valid issues that happened.

Several scholars have argued that documentary are useful because they can educate, develop course of sobriety and honest on issues of conflict of interest. According to Paul Rotha in 1970, British producer and director, observed that documentary is like a film of specific interest on cultural, scientific and sociological subjects (Wang, 2006). The documentary emphasize use of film media in interpretation of creative art in people's life as it exist. The critical analysis of most documentary leads to stimulations of discussions about the subject. Besides, documentary films raises array of legal,

historiographic, ethical, philosophic, aesthetic and political issues debates thus makes people to think on issues (Boissat, Thomas and Verissimo, 2021). Numerous criteria have been set up to distinguish documentary from fiction thus helps to differentiate films formed based on documentary and fiction. First, is director point of view where fiction films are controlled by filmmaker unlike documentary where is minimal control over the subject. In the Fiction Movies, there are manipulation of scenes, character and events to suit filmmakers intended purpose. Unlike in documentary where filmmaker exercise less control over content of the subject. Therefore is quite easy to distinguish fiction film from documentary based on degree of control exercised in making. All factors in fiction films are controlled down to fine small details while documentary small control is on editing and filming alone.

Second issues to understand the difference between fiction and documentary is based on text. When you develop a film you need to establish norms or organizing pattern for instance documentaries focus on informing on a logic. It makes it stand out on issues it articulates to the people. Documentary require to have full information and fact on a particular socio-economic issues in the market for consideration.

Brian Winston and Michael Renov adopted deconstructive approach to documentary. Renov's perspective assumes that documentary focuses on figurative characters. Essence of documentary according to Michael Renov are to record, reveal and preserve. Documentary genre provides an overview of diaries and events happened in past which one need to consider for instance ethnographic or anthropological and personal diaries in future. It is a carried to analyze or interrogate rational issues in world which an individual need to consider when examining certain things. The analysis of the information provide an insight on vital aspect which one need to consider to enhance efficiency in understanding documentary and differentiate it with fictions. The power of documentaries is based on truth and fact which one can check and ascertain their usefulness in legal process. It is quite difficult to analyze and understand issues of fiction since they are created out of imaginary and for entertaining purposes.

#### 4. Conclusion

Documentary are quite different from fiction thus provide information on reality which can be used in future references. There numerous examples illustrating differences between fiction and documentary films. Based on the information one can distinguish differences noted in watching documentary films and fictions. For instance in the documentary the filmmaker exercise less control on content and subject presented unlike in fiction where there is full control of scenes, character and subject filmed. The power of documentary is that it provide factual information on social, political and economic issues. These poses debate and discussion on reality

issues affecting many people in society unlike fiction which do not show any reality. Scientific research are relies on documentary to provide insight on reality and facts as they were initial thus helps in diagnoses and invention of appropriate strategies to guide on mechanism to enhance efficiency. Documentaries dates decade in preserve a particular culture and social issues by indigenous groups. The information illustrates aspect of factual details most issues on economic, social and political perspective. Fiction does not provide an expressive overview of issues affecting most individuals in society. The analysis of the information provide insight on strategies which filmmaker need to consider to draw attention of people interested in a particular information. Documentary provide rhetorical issues which can enhance efficiency. Therefore, there is a distinction between on documentary and fiction films as noted from various argument from several scholars such as Nicholas, Michael Renov and Paul Rhoda. The comparison between two genre; documentary and fiction it helps to understand how each is directed.

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