

# InterDisciplines

## Journal of History and Sociology

### Call for Articles: Documentary film styles – history and theory of a genre

Deadline for proposals: 29. Feb 2012

The documentary film is a non-fiction film genre that has tried to distance itself from its counterpart, the narrative movie, since the beginning of the history of film. Discussions about what they have in common and what distinguishes them touch on important issues of audiovisual communication in pluralized media cultures. It seems as if the “redemption of physical reality” (Kracauer) is at stake. The discussion on the status of the documentary film is still ongoing. On one hand there is the question of how and in which mode the documentary film can be understood as the historical recording of a physical reality. On the other hand, the documentary film is interpreted as a documentation of what is happening in front of the camera at a certain moment.

Fiction and non-fiction films both emerged around 1900 and are closely related to one another. The history of film distinguishes between the early studio works of Georges Méliès (“A Trip to the Moon”, 1902) and the “Actualités” of the Lumière brothers. Méliès worked narratively with fictional content in an artificial studio, whereas the Lumière brothers produced images from social reality (“Workers leaving the factory” and “Arrival of a train in La Ciotat”, 1895). During the 20th century, the documentary film changed concurrent with technological developments and historical contexts.

During the First World War documentary films were shown as newsreels (Wochenschauen) for propaganda purposes and were censored strictly. Documentary sub-genres first developed in the 1920s: cultural and industrial films, advertising, nature documentaries, and educational films as well as avant-garde documentary. Early highlights were created by Russian filmmakers Sergei Eisenstein, Dziga Vertov, and Vsevolod Pudovkin, and by the German director Walter Ruttmann. Referring to the ethnographical documentary “Moana” (1926) by Robert Flaherty, the British documentary filmmaker John Grierson used the term “documentary (value)” for the first time.

During the Second World War, the documentary film was again adopted for propaganda purposes. Against the background of the economic crisis and the danger of war, British documentary filmmaker John Grierson supported the maintenance and stabilization of Western democracy. He realized that documentary film was a medium for the masses and he used it for democratic propaganda. In “Triumph des Willens” (Triumph of the Will, 1935) Leni Riefenstahl used documentary aesthetics to create an ideological glorified self-image of the Nazi party. “Der ewige Jude” (“The Eternal Jew”, 1940) by Fritz Hippler is an illustration of how the format documentary film was used for the purpose of propaganda. This led to the crisis of the documentary film after 1945.

The extensive spread of the new leading media, television, in the 1950s gave rise to the new popularity of documentary films. New documentary styles developed in the following years as a means of transferring information and knowledge. These styles were also influenced by new technologies such as 16mm hand-held cameras and the possibility of synchronic sound recording. This led to the documentary style “Direct Cinema” in Germany and the USA in the 1960s and to Cinéma Vérité in France. Using these new modes, the authentic “redemption of physical reality” seemed possible, at least approximately.

Due to the privatization of TV in Germany since the middle of the 1980s, documentary film is no longer limited to an educational function, but also aims at entertaining viewers. The result has been a new change in documentary styles. A growing hybridization of documentary styles is evident, with an increasing blurring of the boundaries between fact and fiction: reality-TV, docusoaps, docufiction,

docudrama, historytainment, pseudo-docus, live-TV, etc. Generic names are a sign of the new, differentiated, hybrid forms of the documentary film. References outside the film are increasingly considered problematic.

The extent to which these developments in the history of film can be regarded as genealogical formations of different styles of documentary film is a controversial question. Perhaps fiction, like fact, has always been inscribed in all films' history. The following topics therefore come into question for the special issue in planning:

- To what extent is the history of documentary film influenced by the historical context, the zeitgeist, and by technological developments? How do these influencing factors mutually reinforce each other or appear to be at conflict with one another?

- How can documentary styles be positioned between fact and fictions?
- What is the point of differentiation in genre history from today's perspective?
- How can this be determined with respect to new documentary film styles?
- What were the historical receptions of documentary film in their respective temporal contexts?
- What are the communicative functions of documentary styles, compared historically?
- What kind of images about the past do we get from documentary films?
- What is the historical epistemological value of documentary films?
- What is the sociological epistemological value of documentary films?

The papers will be published as a special issue of InterDisciplines. Journal of History and Sociology ([www.inter-disciplines.de](http://www.inter-disciplines.de)). As an e-journal, its format also allows to integrate and analyse film sequences. Please send your proposal to Carsten Heinze ([carsten.heinze@wiso.uni-hamburg.de](mailto:carsten.heinze@wiso.uni-hamburg.de)) by 29 February 2012. The deadline for articles (in English) will be 30 August 2012. The special issue will be published at the beginning of 2013.