

THE DOCUMENTARY FILM ART AND THE TRUTH QUESTION**IBOK EKPENYONG**

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ABSTRACT

Ideologically, the film type called documentary, aspires to be a truthful cinema or cinema *vérité* as the French calls it. It is widely acclaimed as a type of film based on the real world and revolves around real subjects; dealing with real situations and depicting them as they are, or "telling about historical events in a supposedly truthful or objective manner". Interestingly, critics have expressed some scepticism about the truthfulness of some documentary films and the veracity of their contents. This doubt stems partly from the development of digital technology, which makes it possible for documentarists to digitally embellish the aesthetics of their work so as to maximize effect. The doubts also spring from the fact that as a veritable apparatus for propaganda, documentaries have been made to reflect the political, ideological and socio-cultural whims of their sponsors; with the ultimate aim of achieving the specific and often 'subversive' purpose for which they were produced. The focus of this paper therefore is to assess whether truly, documentary films do tell the truth, if they do; to what degrees do they tell the truth. In this assessment, this paper will attempt to analyze the views of some critics and the recognizable reason for their doubts

KEY WORDS- Documentary film, Truth, Art**BACKGROUND**

The word "documentary" was first applied to films of this nature in a review of Robert Flaherty's film *Moana* (1926), published in the *New York Sun* on 8th February 1926 and written by "The Moviegoer" a pen name for documentarist John Grierson.

What we have come to call 'documentary', according to Rotha et al (75), did not appear as a distinctive method of filmmaking at any given moment in cinema history. Rather, documentaries "evolved over a period of time for materialist reasons; partly as a result of amateur efforts, partly through serving propagandist ends and partly through aestheticism. As we have today, documentaries evolved from the narrative film tradition – "movies that told a story" as pioneered by George Méliès' film *A Trip to the Moon* (1902) and Edwin Porter's 1903 12-minute film *The Great Train Robbery* (Baran : 164-165).

However, in the more than one hundred years of the cinematic art, the documentary film – popularized by Robert Flaherty's seminal film, *Nanook of the North* (1922) – has created a distinctive identity for itself. This self-identity is in the documentary film's conceptual ideology as a 'truth-teller'; its operational characteristic that distinguishes it from fictive films, and its functionality as a tool for propaganda and mass persuasion.

Rotha et al state that the First World War began the use of documentary, medium for mass persuasion, which continued right into The Second World War. According to Kemp, "The Second World War gave a huge boost to documentaries when they became effective vehicles for propaganda" (2). During this time too, Kemp says that some Hollywood directors also embraced the use of documentary for war propaganda, like Frank Capra's *Why We Fight* and John Huston's – *Let There Be Light*.

According to Rotha et al "the documentary method as a distinct kind of film, as an interpretation of social feeling and philosophic thought ... has materialized largely as a result of sociological, political and educational requirement" (105). They go on to say that "documentary filmmaking grew originally out of a world in depression, attracting to its ranks people who were conscious of the muddles, the wrongs and the short comings (213) of that era.

As against the fiction films, which primarily grew out of the development of technological craftsmanship - with entertainment and commercial intent, the compelling nature of

the documentary film, which could "show old truths with new faces", aimed to awaken in the people a renewed interest for socio-cultural, economic or political phenomena in their daily life and environment, which they had taken for granted.

DOCUMENTARY FILM – A SOCIOLOGICAL DESCRIPTION

In its elementary form, the *Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary* defines documentary as a "film or radio or television programme giving facts about something" (343). The same source also defines docu-drama its derivative, as a film or movie, usually made for television in which real events are shown in the form of a story.

Technically however, several scholarly descriptions properly situate documentary within its ideological, socio-cultural and political framework. For instance, documentary films can be described as what *The Entertainment Weekly* (Wikipedia) in its appraisal of Adam Curtis' documentary film *The Power of Nightmares*, calls "a fluid cinematic essay, rooted in painstakingly assembled evidence, that heightens and cleanses your perceptions" of social, political, economic, ideological, cultural and environmental phenomenon.

In its ways and means, the documentary film's ultimate aim is to achieve the ends of education through persuasion. Rotha et al, citing Grierson describes documentary as "the creative treatment of actuality" (70). He goes on to explain that it is the use of the film medium to interpret creatively, and in social terms, the life of the people as it exists in reality; or as Bordwell and Thompson would say, "a documentary film purports to present factual information about the world outside the film" (42). For Hausman and Palombo, "The documentary is a reflection of true life where the camera is an observer, often 'watching' rather long segments of ordinary life [and making] a deep probe into an issue where conflict is evident" (257).

For Ekwuazi, citing Hood, documentary is nothing but "a reconstruction, with the help of actors, of a documented and researched situation" (119). Perhaps it is this notion of "reconstruction" using "actors" and other aesthetic elements of the theatrical fiction film that has fuelled the ember of criticisms against the veracity of truth claims by documentary films. However, it is noteworthy that over the years, the documentary film art has developed into such creative and avant-garde categories as "reality, actuality, real situations and typical or reconstructed ones" (Ekwuazi et al: 121).

DOCUMENTARY FILM VERSUS FICTION FILM: THE STYLISTIC CONTRAST

Unarguably, the documentary film emerged out of the fictional narrative type. And, although both tell a visual story of a given subject, it is in the technicality of their means, modes and ways of story telling that their contrast resides. As Juel observes, "a film is not a mere representation, but a willed presentation of something made by someone in a specific way and for someone" (2), for specific goals or purposes. Put differently, Corrigan says that, "the movies are not just about a subject but also about the rendition of that subject for particular reasons and to create certain meanings" (70). And, as he aptly maintains, whether documentaries or fictional narratives,

Films at any point in history might describe a family, a war or the conflict between races, but the ways these subjects are shown, and the reasons they are shown in a particular way can vary greatly [between the two film genres]. (20)

If we understand Corrigan this, amongst many other considerations, is so because whereas the fictive film is commerce driven and theatrically inclined; and so can afford to be flamboyantly embellished; documentaries on the other hand are more often than not development driven, and so cannot afford to steer the audiences attention from the subject matter, by unnecessary extraneous embellishments.

The technical basis of the documentary film, according to Rotha et al, is the departure from the theatrical tradition of fictional narratives;

into the wider field of actuality where the spontaneity of natural behaviour has been recognized as a Cinematic Quality and sound is used creatively rather than reproductively. (79).

As Ekwuazi et al. have observed, documentaries "have more highly elaborated narrative rhetoric, with a more cinematic deployment of point of view" (121) than fictional forms. Again, whereas the fictional film in its tragic or comic form seeks to entertain through catharsis or therapeutically, Hausman and Palombo assert that "documentaries seek to expose and to challenge" (250) their audience to action or objective reasoning.

Again, if we are to apply Wilson's (34) realistic and non-realistic contrasts of theatrical techniques, we will observe that whereas documentaries deal with "events which the audience knows have happened or might happen in everyday life," for instance *The Nigerian Civil War* or the 9/11 Bombing of the World Trade Centre, the fictional narratives treat "events which do not take place in real life but occur only in the imagination of the filmmaker" – like the *Matrix* trilogy or *Blade*. Again, whereas in the documentaries, "action is confined to real places" and time passes normally as it does in everyday life", there is "arbitrary use of time and place" in most of the fictive narratives.

Also, one of the distinctive departures of the documentary film from the fictive form is clearly captured by Aquayo, in her assertions that:

The propositional content of the documentary text is not nestled in a particular arena – such as the image [as in fictive film]. Rather ...documentary films create meaning through the grammar of the moving image, the persuasiveness of the sonic track and the argument of the discursive text. (29 – 30)

This clearly stands the documentary film tradition out as a veritable and cost effective medium for propaganda and conscientization.

GROUPS OF DOCUMENTARY FILM

Broadly speaking, Rotha et al have delineated four distinct groups of documentary film. These, as copiously presented here – are:

A. The Naturalist or Romantic Tradition

The distinctive feature of this group of documentary is that "dramatic crises... arise from the natural characteristics of the surroundings [and not] from the personal inclinations and motives of the fictitious characters" (80) in story-film narratives. The documentarists in this group draw their inspiration from a "feeling for the poetry of natural things which is inborn in the true artist".

B. The Realist or Continental Tradition

As Rotha et al have extensively explained this group of documentaries deal with actually existing material and themes. They are concerned with the dramatization of familiar things in familiar surroundings, with an exciting approach to reality which stirs our senses by its tempos and movements.

C. News-Reel Tradition

The Newsreel job is to present in simple descriptive terms and within the minimum of time the events of the day, in itemized form and without bias or special viewpoint.

D. Propaganda Tradition

The propagandist tradition of documentary arose naturally and successfully from the persuasive potency of the film medium and its suitability as a tool for propaganda. As Rotha et al asserts, "Whereas cinema serving the ends of profit has remained close to the theatrical tradition, cinema pursuing the ends of propaganda and persuasion has been largely responsible for the documentary method [of filmmaking]." (92).

This paper strongly believes that it is within the persuasive characteristics of the propagandist documentary tradition, that the controversies surrounding the veracity or otherwise of some of its presentations emanate. For instance, the propaganda documentary method was effectively employed during the First and Second World Wars by both the Nazi subversives and allied economies alike, to disseminate accounts of their campaigns and conquered territories – with the specific dual aim of driving fear into the enemy and giving hope to the citizenry. And, because those wartime documentaries often laid false claims of their exploits, critics were to regard subsequent documentaries in that light of false 'truth'.

Interestingly, these wartime propaganda documentaries were highly successful at what intent they had set out to achieve. This propaganda tradition of documentary filmmaking is therefore of great concern to this paper, as, within its characteristics, revolves the argument of this essay; and possibly its logical resolution. And so for the benefit of our argument, it is necessary to briefly investigate why these propaganda films or docu-drama as some critics are wont to call them – have been successful.

SUCCESS OF PROPAGANDA DOCUMENTARIES: THE AUDIENCE AFFINITY CONTEXT

According to Cheshire, propaganda consists of recreating events in order to illustrate a thesis, or in the face of certain events, to let one thing go and accentuate another. As Cheshire seminally explains,

Propaganda can take various forms, ranging from overt attempts to influence the public, to covert means of persuasion linked with brainwashing – the subjecting of individuals to intensive political [or socio-cultural] indoctrination.(1)

The propaganda documentary or "political films" as Okome would call them, "Problematises cultural, political and social issues... seeking unorthodox narrative means of unraveling these problems and situating them within a concrete historical and ideological framework" (123), which the target audience can easily recognize and identify with. For instance, Hausman and Palombo, in evaluating Edward Murrow's documentary film - *Harvest of Shame*, conclude that the film "exposes the conditions faced by U.S. migrant workers and brought some very ugly images into the living rooms of the American viewing audience" (250).

These kinds of socio-political expose (a characteristic of most propaganda documentaries) have the mandate of causing a change in institutional attitude, creating awareness and serve as a call to organized action. Practically, it often records a high percentage of success because as Bazin explains, "A member of a film audience tends to identify himself with the film's hero [man, animal, environment or ideology] by a psychological process" (410). And like the reader of a novel, the audience "also feels the same intoxication of an illusory intimacy with the hero" (411).

Commenting on the significance of individual spectators background as it impacts on their emotive empathy with, and transportation by what they have watched, Wilson says that each member of the audience,

has a personal catalogue of childhood memories, emotional scars [socio-economic or political] and private fantasies [ideological or psychological]. Anything we see on stage [or screen], which reminds us of this personal world, will have a strong impact on us. (44)

Therefore, as a tool for agitation, propaganda and re-conscientization, the documentary film becomes quite potent in telling desired stories with emotional depth; either for education, information or social protest purposes. Again, this is inevitable, for as Jaffe citing Balaz explains, when we observe the human face in film, "we see emotions, intentions and thoughts" (57) that are similar to our own aspirations, longings and deprivations. Perhaps the potency of the propaganda documentary films therefore is in the assertions of Ekwuazi et al that in each footage of the presentation, "the celebrated moments last barely a couple of seconds on the screen; but in the eternity of the mind they linger on, because the image has etched deep" (17).

Again this is made more meaningful and impacting by what they describe as the "aesthetic and technical revolution in media drama" (96), which allow greater achievement of visual authenticity and realism, a goal which documentaries strive to achieve. And like every other art work, documentaries

Have significance for certain groups and individuals based on their own objective position, cultural [and socio-political] needs and capacities for analysis or symbolic appropriation [of film cues]. (Johnson, 21)

DOCUMENTARY FILM AND THE TRUTH QUESTION: SOME BASIS OF CRITICISM

Generally, documentary films are purported to be truthful cinema that deals with true situations of the subject - lives, events or natural occurrences - presenting them naturally and factually. However, Grant, baring the concerns of other critics affirms that "ethical questions have surrounded the making of documentaries since the beginning of the genre" (2). Perhaps, this call to question is simply because documentary filmmaking is an art. And, like all mainstream art works, documentary filmmaking is susceptible to the biases in view point which their creators often subscribe to, and the embedded flamboyance or

exaggerations carefully orchestrated to emphasize those view points.

Historically, classical philosophers like Plato and Nietzsche had queried the truth in art. Plato, for instance, insisted that because art thrived on emotionality or existed in the realm of passion, and not in the realm of sound logical reasoning, art could not be trusted in the search for absolute truth.

As a type of film, documentaries present themselves as factually trustworthy. Still, any one documentary may not prove reliable. Throughout film history, many documentaries have been challenged as inaccurate (Bordwell and Thompson, 43). Grant states that though documentaries are [ideologically] factual, [in most cases] they are never objective or ideologically neutral.

Today it is commonly accepted by scholars that documentaries are inevitably biased. As such, contemporary viewers have lost faith in the ability of documentary films to provide unequivocal truths.

For instance, in evaluating Michael Moore's film *Bowling for Columbine*, which won an Oscar Award for best documentary film in (2003), Hardy discountenances it as fake, fiction and not documentary. In his words, Hardy emphasized,

Bowling is fiction. It makes its points by deceiving and by misleading the viewer. Statements are made which are false. Moore leads the viewer to draw inferences, which he must have known were wrong. (2)

Giving documentary a socio-economic reading, Huddleston concludes that the documentary film, like its fictive cousin exists as a consumer product, to be marketed for the consumption of a mass audience. If we understand Huddleston, this means that, as a market product, documentaries must be made marketable by all means - even if it means throwing ethics to the woods. Huddleston thinks "that documentary cannot escape even the smallest bit of reflection by the [discerning] audience. Even if the director is not present, the audience can still ask the simple question - is it true or is it staged?"

Again, in its usage as a tool for propaganda, documentary is a compelling and persuasive art. To achieve its aims, propagandists have injected their work with often-false ingredients meant to drive home their quest. As Aguayo has stated, "using all the available means of persuasion and coercion at their disposal, social movements have collectively developed a diverse set of tactics and strategies to prompt social change" (3).

For instance, in 1928, Stalin attempted to coordinate documentary film content with political goals. The Nazi party had a documentary film unit headed by Leni Riefenstahl, to bring highly [doctored] and aestheticised, images of political practices [that were not true] to the masses (Aguayo, citing Barnouw 99-182).

Perhaps, it is in the process of engineering visual impact, for emotional effects in the propaganda genre and employment of other devices like "staging" - that the criticisms for documentary truthfulness find anchorage. As Bordwell and Thompson posit, "some viewers [critics] tend to suspect that a documentary is unreliable if it manipulates the events that are filmed" (43).

For instance, Cheshire maintains that propaganda documentaries have become associated with ideas, facts and allegations [that are often times] deliberately spread to further a cause or to suppress an opposing cause. Also, the documentary film uses staging as one of the devices in carrying out its purpose of presenting factual information. To intensify the documentary value of a given work or emphasize his meaning, the documentarist may decide to control the images he is showing by using actors to stage certain events for the camera to record.

Agreeably, staging, in some cases may be accepted as valid if it serves the larger purpose of presenting information or exemplifying for educational goals. However, as Ekwaui et al points out; the "risk involved in this kind of situation, at least inherently, is that the audience may be misled into accepting fiction for truth". (121).

Considering that in film art generally, "visual authenticity provides merely the illusion of reality" and not actual reality as some gullible audience would subscribe. Helke has quoted Albert Maysles, one of the leading founders of direct cinema as saying: "I see no point in dramatizing reality so that it is no longer true... in using the shooting methods of fictive film; we have gone away from what is real"(2)

For instance, at 01:00 – 02:00, on 30th July 2007, The National Geographic Channel presented a documentary aptly titled "is it real?" This documentary featured the controversial "Big Foot" saga that has been raging since the 50's, about the existence of an endangered or prehistoric primate, with feet that is about five times that of man. Archaeologists that studied footprints left in the forest have recently discovered that those footprints were pre-casts made to size and worn by a mischievous man to deceive the people.

Again on the same 30th of July 2007, at 22.00 – 22.30 pm, the same National Geographic Channel presented another documentary that treated the lost Ark of the Covenant, an event that occurred 3,000 years ago. Through the advanced use of digital technology, the filmmakers were able to achieve a near perfect and believable documentary with true-to-life effects generation. But, as far as Wilson is concerned, no matter how authentic the re-enactment, we know that it is a replay and not the original event (37).

CONCLUSION

This paper has been concerned with the investigation of whether documentary films do tell the truth or not, and if they do, then to what degree do they tell the truth. As succinctly observed by Huddleston, the purpose of the culture industry is to provide people with fantasy or substitute reality, a function which fictive films greatly thrive on. She has also asked a pertinent question, "if feature films commodify entertainment/escapism, then what role does documentary have with the element [truth] that gives it value"(1).

The question whether documentaries are factual presentations of actualities or a deceitful art is quite engaging. And as far as this paper is concerned, this question, logically elicits a yes and no answer, and the reasons are many.

Firstly, as Gay has observed of the theatre, the documentary film "uses both dramatic and narrative modes of story telling" (9). Because of this, filmmakers have often negotiated the theoretical functions of documentary filmmaking. As such, Gay maintains that often, "the filmic process inevitably interferes with and distorts the profilmic reality from which it then reconstructs a new reality" (9), desired for a specific purpose.

Secondly, it is a fact that through the device of staging and appropriation of such aesthetic elements of fictive film like editing lights, costumes, script and so on, some documentaries have wittingly or unwittingly compromised their theoretical and ideological precept of dealing with truthful actualities. On the one hand, this is so because every documentary has a point of view which it tries to propagate. And, on the other hand, this is because in the fictive film style, the employment of these elements, both material and symbolic and other "multiple mediators which contribute to the work's meaning and sustain the universe of belief" (Johnson: 20), aims to achieve dramatic aesthetics. And, as Rotha et al succinctly observes, this kind of cinematography is "prompted more by an aesthetic approach to the appearance of the scene; than by the significance underlying it" (87). This is not the primary objective of documentary films.

And thirdly, the giant strides recorded in the development of digital technology and the unlimited spectacular

possibilities it offers in near perfect visual effect generation, casts reasonable cloud of doubts on the documentary films' truth claims.

Therefore, to specifically answer whether documentaries do tell the truth, this paper will say yes and no by applying the utilitarian theory of the media. By this we mean that the degrees of truthfulness in documentary films are proportionate to the intended use for which the documentaries are made; whether for socio-political propaganda of protest or for educational development and conservation purposes.

When documentaries are made for socio-political propaganda, their degree of truth claims are not only lower in comparison to educational or conservation ones, but are highly questionable too. Because these documentaries are sponsored by governments, pressure groups and socio-political movements, it should be expected that both the selected choice of visuals, dramatic camera angle and narrative rhetoric of the films are bound to be manipulated to emphasize the biased point of view of their sponsors.

For instance, a documentary on Africa by a racist filmmaker would always depict the continent in bad light by showing the slums, poverty, and sickness and emphasize corrupt political leadership and conflicts. Or, documentary to show what the government has done in four years in office will always emphasize on visuals of a small percentage of developed infrastructures and not the billions squandered or the political opponents victimized.

But when documentaries are made for educational or conservation purposes, the degree of truth claim is often higher and this is arguable - like the various plant and wildlife conservation documentaries sponsored by the National Geographic Society. For instance, just recently, the foremost conservationist and wildlife documentary filmmaker – Steve Irwin – popularly known as the "Crocodile Hunter", was killed by a Stingray, in the course of filming a documentary on the carnivores of the deep sea. This tragic incident alone gives credibility to the fact that all those documentaries we have seen; where Irwin courted the lion in its den, dared the rattle snake and romanced the crocodiles were not one hundred percent fakes.

However, discerning scholars will argue that while these documentaries were not one hundred percent fakes, they were also not one hundred percent true. This argument is founded on the premise that because the sceneries in the films are composed in subjective camera lenses and the footages have been painstakingly edited to suit the accompanying narrations, then it has been embellished and so there is still a speck of doubt to the veracity of the presentations.

Objectively, these skepticisms are not without credence, what with the wonders of special effects technology which has greatly enhanced the achievement of virtual reality in filmmaking by the employment of computer generated images (CGI). As Jones and Jolliffe have asserted, in today's studio filmmaking,

Replacing actors or animals with computer generated image is now common, usually because it is cheaper to do that than try to get an animal to perform or even because the actor dies halfway through filming. (115)

And so the documentary works by Irwin and his contemporaries can easily be compared to such epic features like Titanic, Jurassic park or Jaws where the audience is subjected to false soul wrenching virtual reality in effects and occurrences

Conclusively therefore, this paper upholds that the veracity of truth of the documentary film is highly influenced by the purpose of the documentary, which varies in degree from one documentary to the other.

However, in a bid to sustain and improve the documentary film art, Helke informs us that the Danish film director, Lars Von Trier, has drawn up a dogma for documentary film. Trier hopes that, by following these rules,

"documentaries would become more authentic, more honest, purer and more truthful" (1). One of the rules says that added music should not be used in documentaries, but only sounds from the original situation. Categorically, Helke says that Trier also forbids direction or mis-en-scene, lighting or hidden cameras and the use of archive footages. And, of course Grierson (1) has reminded us that documentary was from the beginning an anti-aesthetic movement. We conclude therefore with Frederick Wiseman's point of note as cited by Helke, that the whole effort in documentary is to capture certain aspects of reality and not to manipulate it.

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