

Documentaries as a Persuasive Form of Art

Maninderjit Kaur

Assistant Professor at Khalsa College
Amritsar, Punjab

Abstract: Documentaries are often taken as an art form that projects reality. The considered objectivity of the art never fails to fetch glances towards it but it has its other side as well. The choice of placing camera and the selection of scenes are always subjective. They definitely have their concern with the director's interest. Apart from the aforementioned ways, there are features of voice over commentary, editing, music, etc. which directly bring the viewer to the director's point of interest and make it believe in the 'reality' at display. With the help of different documentaries, the paper tries to prove that this genre while enjoying its status subtly carries the power of interjecting the opinion of a director or an organisation into its audience.

Keywords: voice over commentary, silent documentaries, biocolour process, editing, and narrative

Every word goes through the process of delineation. The act of providing a definition to a word not only defines it but also naturalises the concept permanently. Like John Grierson at the time of providing a definition to documentary: "the creative representation of actuality" (24) has attributed a property of presenting reality to it. Since then, it is taken as an art which projects actuality. Therefore, the audience approach them with a single thought in their mind that they are going to face the representation of real scenario. The assumption tends to maintain the capacity to inherent Sidney's idea of willing suspension of disbelief. But, sometimes documentaries do change their track and celebrates fiction. In order to attain its central aim, the documentarists attain different roles of explorer, reporter, and sometimes a role of legislators. Interestingly, the third role is the one which most of the time attracts the attention of filmmakers as it controls the psyche of the audience. It imbibes a challenge for a documentarist to present the story in such a way that it becomes successful in wringing the hearts of masses. Therefore, a documentarist deploys a whole range of creative skills to fashion the fragments of reality into artefacts that has a specific social impact.

The very question of 'how to present a story' gives rise to a narrative. Though narrative as a mechanism for story telling seems quite different from documentary as a mechanism for addressing non imaginary, real life issues, the basic organisation of documentaries depends on narrative structure. It is the exposition which incorporates large elements of narrative, like in historical writing and in cinema verite which demonstrates by taking shape around the crisis, first it provides a beginning from which an unstable state of affairs emerges, a middle in which a problem gains its force and complexity, and an ending in

which some form of resolution occurs. Moreover, a typical scene in narrative fiction establishes time and place; presents characters advancing in their attempts to address the conflict, lack, or disequilibrium and terminates with suggestions of further actions or response required in another time and place. In documentary, a typical scene establishes time and place as well as a logical tie between the scenes through the evidential editing. Even Mitry's words which have been quoted by Gaston Roberge explain the same: "... a film is a world that organises itself into a narrative" (69).

It is a truth universally acknowledged that visuals always leave indelible imprints on minds. Henceforth, many times they are used for percolating certain ideas, for example: the role of visual media in the development of the concept of nationalism. It is nothing more than the fabrication and dissemination of myths of nationhood by a secular intelligentsia. Whether it is with sound (voice over commentary) or without sound (as in silent cinema), a narrative is always there to not only justify the intention of a nation's leaders but also to indicate the signs of its drawbacks. As Mette Hjort and Scott Mackenzie in their introduction to their edited work *Cinema and Nation* have written, "films, ..., do not simply represent or express the stable features of a national culture, but are themselves one of the loci of debates about a nation's governing principles, goals, heritage, and history" (4). Such disagreement is always deep rooted which is comprehensible to a very few number of people, basically to those who inhabit the art of critically analysing the films. They are the ones who can visualise such niceties, as said by Philip Schlesinger:

Consciously or unconsciously, social communication thought is an expression of the cultural geography of the nation-state in a world of sovereign states. This is the bedrock on which film studies has been based when it invokes a largely derivative sociological argument about nationalism and national identity as a necessary starting point The main task has been to define and depict the relations between nations and film cultures. The inevitable cross-border flow of moving images has been firmly at the forefront of concern because the film studies discourse is always wrestling with the consequences of cultural dependency. (29)

The layman will always get swayed by the narrative and will seize the same idea which a director portrays. In order to exhibit how documentaries turn into a literate art, this paper first of all takes up the silent documentaries and then moves towards the documentaries with the prevailing feature of "voice of authority" (Schlesinger 47). As in the case of *London after Dark*, a silent documentary film showing the 1926 street and theatre life of South-East London, the director has used the techniques of showing some written lines in a poetic form so that he could bring sense to the collected pictures. Such connection of one picture with another ultimately leads to the formation of narrative. The prime idea of this documentary is to familiarise the audience with the natives' habit of spending their nights in 1920s. Some visit theatres to seek solace from the hustle bustle of their quotidian life and some just like to rest in peace. The director has clearly mentioned the disparity between the haves and have nots. First of all, the director shows the pictures of "big hearted working classes" pleasure seeking activity and then he brings forth "the forgotten members of humanity" but the point which he has not presented directly is the troublesome situation of the natives' of London after the First World War. It has made such a drastic impact on their lives that in order to cleanse its imprints people need its enactment. Besides, the poetic mode of the documentary

also adds an ambiguity as the caption that is used for setting the background: “for even darkness calls some to sleep- so to others there beckons the glittering lights of pleasure” persuades one to ponder over its veiled meaning. On the one hand the darkness of the world war has brought many lives to an eternal sleep but on the other it has become a source of wealth and pleasure to many industrialists. Anthony Smith in an essay “Images of the Nation: Cinema, Art and National Identity” has also provided an account of the relationship between cinema, painting, and national identity with an aim to outline an ethno-symbolic approach to the visual representation of national identity. It is accurately applicable to painters’ and filmmakers’ tendency to meet on certain moral and symbolic themes and increasingly to favour nationalistic aesthetic styles.

Another documentary film *The Open Road* is a Claude Friese- Greene’s film. It is about his 1920s road trip. It was filmed using the biocolour process with an effort to literally add colours in the life of Londoners. This one can be placed in the category of expository documentaries as its intention is to persuade people towards the beauty of London. Furthermore for adding flavour to this documentary, the director has used the then ‘new’ technique of mobile (moving) camera. He wants to capture the active life of London. Along with it, he adds sounds to show the same. In the 1958 documentary *Glas*, Bert Haanstra has demonstrated men enjoying their work in a glass factory. The merriment concerned with their work is presented with the help of pleasant sound which ultimately overshadows the monotonous element in their work. It fulfils the documentarist’s aim of highlighting the hard work of British workers. So, the inclusion of the specific sound which is also called aesthetics depicts the filmmakers’ response to the situations. Further, regarding the moving image and sound effect Anthony Smith has written:

The nation possesses a unique power, pathos and epic grandeur, qualities which film, perhaps even more than painting or sculpture, can vividly convey. In this respect moving image is more a kin to music, which also unfolds its character and identity over a finite sequence of time; and in which the meaning of composition becomes apparent only at the conclusion.... In part, this is the result of technical advances in the field of visual representation such as photography; but it also springs from a desire to engage a wider range and greater depth of emotions by evoking and representing the panorama of nationhood in all its historical and geographical variety in as naturalistic manner as possible (50-51).

Indubitably, the sequence of events provides the essential framework for the detached and ‘truthful’ account. It even convinces the spectator about the epic grandeur of something which a director wants to eulogise. This is not something new as even Shakespeare in his historical plays based on the chronicles of Holinshed and others has painstakingly lauds his own nation. At times, it becomes important as well. *London after Dark* and *The Open Road* belong to the time when two massive works of English literature *The Wasteland* and *Ulysses* unmask and laments the fragmented lives and worthlessness of civilizations. So, in order to eliminate the effect of disorder some artists try to preserve the positive side of their countries. Even though documentaries do not belong to overt national propaganda, they aim to provide a ‘historical map’ of the national past in order to bind the spectator more firmly to the present national identity.

With the proliferation of technology many wonderful changes have arrived in the form of cameras which have reduced them from cumbersome ones to go-anywhere-cameras. This new capacity added firmness to the documentary's special claim to provide an objective window on the world. According to Murray Smith, documentary films fall in the category of non-fictional narratives as they narrate the stories about actual places, people, and events. Apart from this, a narrative is constituted by a set of agents and events linked in a cause and effect manner. With the help of voice over commentary an 'indexical bond' is established which allows the viewers to make a clear connection between on-screen representations and events in the historical world. As per Bill Nicholas, the voice over commentary speaks with all the means available to its maker. These means can be summarised as per the selection and arrangement of sound and image which work as an organising logic for the film. The most explicit voice is, no doubt, the one conveyed by spoken or written words which are called "voice-of-god" (47) or "voice-of-authority" commentary. The inclusion of this type of commentary binds the audience to what they are viewing. This form of commentary can make a case or present an argument as well as convey a point of view. Here, the motive of persuasion is achieved by the strength of the argument or point of view, by the power of the voice and by honouring the three C's of rhetorical discourse: which are credible, convincing, and compelling. As in the documentary *The Age of Stupid*, the protagonist with his emphatic words stirs the chords of the audience. He begins with the situation well acknowledged by the audience and points out the sorry state of humans who very well know how they can save their environment but are helpless to do it. Then, Michael Moore in *Roger and Me* and *Bowling for Columbine* in order to establish credibility and conviction starts from his own experience and extends outward from there. In the first one, he has begun with his association with Flint, Michigan and General Motors and then he discloses how the closing announcement of some industries pushed many workers into despair. Similar happens in the second one too in which he categorically points out the Americans habit of possessing guns is an outcome of their paranoid nature which ultimately end up taking the lives of the fellow natives. Bill Nicholas has aptly cited that the voice over commentary conveys a filmmaker's social point of view and how this point of view gets manifested in the act of making the film. Many times non-fiction films depend extensively on footage of actual events and individuals and use no voice over commentary at all. Then such films will depend upon more indirect representations of the subject, such as reconstructions, or the stock footage of the relevant type of event. Errol Morris's *Thin Blue Line* foregrounds such a practice. With its highly stylised reconstructions, it dramatizes conflicting accounts of the event under investigation. He re-enacts the murder many times for showing the different angles given by the witnesses. First there are only two cars and three people: two cops and a murderer, on the road. Then, gradually as per witnesses' accounts two more cars were shown on that same road. This promotes the audience to think the different ways of doing an investigation. But the documentarist cannot be straight about his own standpoint. So, documentarists always restrain themselves from making grand claims regarding the specific detail they have captured on film. As John Izod and Richard Kilborn have cited Brecht's words in their work "to capture what is going on beneath the surface of empirically observable reality is far more challenging than accurately to record the surface itself" (44). Moreover by restraining the subjective analysis, the documentarists attempt to maintain the 'objectivity' of the genre.

Hence it will not be erroneous to say that the power of documentary and much of its appeal rely heavily on its ability to couple evidence and emotion in the selection and

arrangement of its sounds and images which, further, ultimately point towards the narratives. The effective and persuasive juxtaposition of scenes decides the intensity of the emotional punch. So, in order to prevent one from being manipulated from them, it is essential to bear in mind that documentaries are controlled by the organisations and institutions in power. It is wise to not take any form of film with a blind trust as this art inhabits a greater intensity to sway the spectators along with its tide.

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