
UNIT 2 DIFFERENT MODES OF FILMMAKING*

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2.0 OBJECTIVES

After going through this Unit, you will be able to understand

- Different modes of filmmaking
- Poetic documentary
- Expository documentary
- Observational documentary
- Participatory documentary
- Reflexive documentary
- Performative mode

2.1 INTRODUCTION

In this Unit, we will discuss the different modes of film making which will provide an indepth understanding of film making. These Various modes includes poetic documentry expository documentary, observational documentary, participatory documentary, reflexive documentry and performative mode. These different modes are widely used in filmmaking.

2.2 DIFFERENT MODES OF FILMMAKING

There are different styles of filmmaking. According to Bill Nichols we can identify six different modes of film making. These modes of filmmaking give us a loose framework to understand how films are made. Each filmmaker has a distinct style of film making. Each of the different types of films that will be discussed in

the following sections are actually discussed in a chronological manner. They are discussed in the context of their emergence. Each mode has grown out of the other mode and has emerged as a result of dissatisfaction of the filmmakers with the earlier modes.

The modes are not discussed in an evolutionary manner nor are they indicative of one mode being superior to another. The modes of filmmaking do however give us a sense of history of the emergence of different styles of film making. It's not necessary that a film maker adheres to only one mode of film making. The emergence of these modes of filmmaking are also associated with the emergence of technology. They can use a combination of several modes of filmmaking. Nor is it necessary that recent films have to necessarily follow a mode of filmmaking that is more recent. A filmmaker today could decide to use a mode of filmmaking that may not be the most recent.

Bill Nichols identifies six modes of filmmaking. These are in order of their emergence and progress as follows:

- i) Poetic documentary
- ii) Expository documentary
- iii) Observational documentary
- iv) Participatory documentary
- v) Reflexive documentary
- vi) Performative mode

Each of these modes does not exist as mutually exclusive categories. A poetic mode could include the performative mode. The reflexive mode could have participatory and observational footage. Observational mode was limited to the present. The emergence of the participatory and reflexive mode arose with the realisation by the filmmaker that there is no need to mask the close relationship with those being filmed.

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Complete the sentence
 - a) There are _____ modes of filmmaking.
 - b) These modes of filmmaking have been given by_____.
- 2) What is the significance of the different modes of filmmaking?

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2.3 POETIC DOCUMENTARY

The poetic mode was introduced in the 1920s. Such a mode is not a linear mode of filming. The filming style moves away from the simple factual telling of a story. The actors are not cast as full bodied characters. The poetic mode gives us alternative forms of reality. For example, if you have to show an actor crying then in the poetic mode the filmmaker could just show rainfall. If you have to show a person running then again you could just show the beauty of a horse

racing. In order to highlight the importance of a game for the nation one could just show the game with patriotic music playing in the background. It gives us an alternative form of reality instead of just telling us about the reality in a straightforward manner.

They are abstract and loose in genre just like a poem. Imagine a film with water flowing or falling and just focus on the way the film is shot. For instance watch this video on you tube. T, He of the vedioes <https://youtu.be/dEBN8zly5N4>. Bill Haanstra's 1958 documentary *Glas* is another such poetic mode documentary available on <https://youtu.be/aLS7—ZLCoI>. It focuses on the glass blowers and the beauty of their work.

The film could be on a city and it may just give us a sense of the city by showing famous landmarks like India Gate, Lotus Temple, Qutub Minar, Connaught Place, Metro and a huge statue of the God Hanuman. The moment one sees these landmarks perhaps interspersed with shots of pigeons flying, traffic jams and corn sellers with just music in the background you get a sense of Delhi the capital of India and the filmmaker may also show shots of these places from the past marking the passage of time. Francis Thompson's *N.Y., N.Y. (1957)*

The poetic mode may also use historical footage, freeze frames, slow motion, tinted images, and occasional titles to identify places, some narratives and also music to build the mood.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) What are the characteristics of the poetic mode of filmmaking?
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- 2) After watching the film *Glas* do an analysis of the film in the context of the poetic mode.
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2.4 EXPOSITORY DOCUMENTARY

Arose in the 1920s and is still very popular. It is used in television news and reality television shows. Nature and science documentaries too use this mode extensively. Biographies too are largely shot in this mode. This mode is also often referred to as the *Voice of God* commentary mode in which the speaker is heard but not seen for example think of several films in which there is a voiceover. Examples include *Happy* by Morgan Lewis, available at https://youtu.be/5RFuzk_-qqc; *The Origins of Man* narrated by Morgan Freeman available at

https://youtu.be/bJ_utURBEdY; *Penguin- a Love Story* dubbed in Hindi by Amitabh Bachchan available at <https://youtu.be/pnPyRHG05e8>.

As we can see from the examples of the voice of God commentaries given above that the expository mode was dominated by professionally trained male voices. These commentaries could also be voice overs by less professional voices like Ernest Hemmingway's commentary for one version of *The Spanish Earth* (1937) is in a matter of fact voice. The other two versions with the same footage have different voices – Jean Renoir for the French version and Orson Welles and Ernest Hemmingway for the English version. Hemmingway's commentary was more convincing and in a more matter of fact voice.

Expository mode relies heavily on logic and the voice dominates. The images are subordinate and are edited in a way so as to maintain a continuity with the narration. The voice over appears as the dominant mode and as the voice of authority. It speaks in a voice and tone of logic and authority. Think of any of the short documentaries by the government of India watch the documentary on family planning at the URL <https://youtu.be/mrsrz-izfxI>.

Expository documentaries facilitate generalization and large scale dissemination of information. For instance the film on family planning mentioned above relies on common sense and supports a common sense understanding of family planning from different parts of India in a logical and coherent manner. As sociologists we understand that common sense is limited by time and place thus the common sense which the expository mode relies on is also limited by time and place. It loses its relevance once the context in terms of time changes.

Check Your Progress 3

- 1) What are the features of the expository mode?

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- 2) What is meant by the *voice of God*?

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2.5 OBSERVATIONAL DOCUMENTARY

This mode arose from the availability of 16 mm cameras and magnetic tape recorders in 1960s. The observational mode found the poetic mode too abstract and the expository mode too moralizing. The observational mode relies on facts and often has no voiceovers and music. The actors behave as if no film maker was there. The development of the 16 mm camera and light weight sound recorders such as the Nagra aided the development of the observational mode since it also meant that the filmmaker could move around freely without being intrusive. The people were observed as it is in their natural surroundings behaving spontaneously. David MacDougall's *New Boys* a part of the Doon School Chronicles shot in 1997 is an example, Other examples include *Hospital* (1970), http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2_jZRLh5QTc.

The film maker adopts a fly on the wall approach assuming that his presence because of the lightweight camera and synchronous sounds is almost non-intrusive. But it raises the ethical question of indirect intrusion. The mere presence of a film maker may have an effect on the behaviour of the participants. The observational documentary also faces the issue of seeking the consent of the people being filmed. The question is also of whether the consent is written or verbal. The consent also varies from situation to situation.

Observational films give the sense of real time. The filmmaker shoots in a manner in which the experience is lived. For example David MacDougall's film *New Boys* shows the silences, the pauses and the empty spaces almost as if we were living the experience. The filmmaker needs to have disciplined detachment it allowed filmmaker to record unobtrusively what folks did when not explicitly addressing the camera. It stresses the non-intervention of filmmaker. The control is with the participants. Editing doesn't construct time frame or rhythm, but enhances impression of lived or real time. This mode limit filmmaker to present moment and require disciplined detachment from events themselves. It uses indirect address, speech overheard, synchronous sound, relatively long takes.

Its sense of observation comes from

- The ability of filmmaker to include representative revealing moments ;
- Sounds and images recorded at moment of observational filming in contrast to voice-over of expository mode
- Illustrations do not serve generalizations but a specific slice of reality
- The presence of camera on scene
- Use of synchronous sound
- Long takes

Some of the film makers associated with this style are Michel Brault, Robert Drew, Robert Flaherty, Richard Leacock, Jean Rouch and Dziga Vertov. Some films using this style of film making are *After Life* (1999), *Bad Boys* (1961) and *Children of Hiroshima* (1952).

Check Your Progress 4

- 1) What are the characteristics of the observational mode of filmmaking?

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- 2) How is it different from the Expository mode?

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2.6 PARTICIPATORY DOCUMENTARY

Anthropology and Sociology have advocated the use of participant observation for observing the lives of people. Participant observation involves the filmmaker being in the field for long periods of time and becoming one with the subjects being observed. The researcher is also expected to be able to maintain a sense of objectivity and distance from those being observed. In the observational mode we saw that the presence of the filmmaker is almost discounted and the assumption is that the filmmaker does not in any way impact or influence the interaction amongst people. In the Participatory mode the filmmaker is there in the front of the camera and becomes one with the people being observed. The filmmaker is in no way masked as he is in the poetic mode by abstractions; as he is in the expository mode by voice overs and as he is in the observational mode by adopting a fly on the wall approach. This mode became popular in the 1960s when synchronous sound recording became possible. This mode is often seen in the cases where the filmmaker is interviewing the subjects. It gives a sense to the audience about what it means to be involved with the process of filmmaking. The film *Photographic Memory*, 2011 by Ross McElwee is an example of this kind of film. The director is shown interacting with his son and the film shows the trails and tribulations of a child growing up into an argumentative teenager. The trailer of the film is available at the URL <https://youtu.be/HcAjO5G3kTc>.

Other examples include *Chronicles of Summer* by Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin; *Portrait of Jason*. Dziga Vertov's *The Man with a Movie Camera*.

The cinema and the cinéma-vérité movements or truthful cinema adopted this style of film making. This style of filmmaking is attributed to Jean Rouch and inspired by Dziga Vertov and Robert Flaherty. The filmmaker can be present in front of the camera and can even provoke the subject in terms of a stylised interaction. The role of the camera is always acknowledged. The audience gets a

sense of what it means to negotiate the relationship between the filmmaker and the subject. We get a sense of who controls.

The filmmakers may also engineer a scene. In *Chronicles of A Summer*, 1961 for example Rouch narrates an incident where a Jewish deportee from France who has spent time in a German Concentration camp during world war II narrates her experiences using a lightweight portable sound recorder. The camera follows her at a distance and Rouch comments that it is almost as if the camera is absent.

The other styles of filming could be one in which the filmmaker's voice could give the main perspective for example as seen in the film *Sorrow and Pity*, 1970. The filmmaker could also be like an investigative reporter or he could even be in a reflective and responsive mode. The filmmaker in a reflective mode could also move towards a diary and apersonal testimonial mode. The participatory mode could also involve interviews. The filmmaker could use several interviews and put them together in the form of a single story. Examples include *Eyes on The Prize*, on the history of civil rights movement; Hina Khwaja's interviews of those who left India for Pakistan during Partition available at the URL <https://youtu.be/yY40sosTtzk>.

In the participatory mode thus we are able to cover a diverse range of topics that could vary from giving us a sense of history or perhaps the interviewer own attempt to give us a sense of history or as sense of their encounters with their surrounding world.

Check Your Progress 5

- 1) What are the characteristics of the Participatory mode of film making?

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- 2) Watch any of the two films listed in the above section and compare them.

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2.7 REFLEXIVE DOCUMENTARY

This style of filmmaking calls attention to the process of filmmaking. It draws the viewers' attention to how a particular representation gets constructed. In the participatory mode we saw process of negotiation between the filmmaker and the subject. In the reflexive mode the focus is on the negotiation between the

filmmaker and the audience. The filmmaker asks the audience to view the film as a construct, as a version that has been constructed by the filmmaker. It draws our attention to the audience's assumptions and expectations from the documentary films. For instance the audience assumes that in a documentary make up and costume are not important. But that is not really the case. They are of importance in the process of filmmaking. We, as an audience, are forced to think about how we view the world around us, what our expectations are from the world around us. The Reflexive style jars us out of complacency as an audience and forces us to think about the films as a construct. It forces us to question the 'truth' as we see it. Dziga Vertov's films *The Man with the Movie Camera* conveys the impression of how a film is constructed by showing us the camera man and how he is filming a particular scene. Vertov also shows us how in the process of editing the filmmaker constructs a story. The film may also rely on trained actors to tell us a story which is 'true'.

The feminist documentaries of the 1970s are examples of the reflexive mode of filmmaking where the audience becomes conscious of the various forms of discrimination against women. They challenge our perception of the world around us by questioning the dominant ideas of masculinity and femininity.

Check Your Progress 6

- 1) What is the reflexive mode of film making?

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- 2) Write an essay comparing it to any of the earlier modes of film making.

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2.8 PERFORMATIVE MODE

This mode of filmmaking raises the question of what knowledge is and how it gets constructed. Performative mode stresses on how our understanding of the world around us stems from our personal experiences. The way that we view the world stems from our subjectivity. The meaning that is attached to the process of knowledge construction clearly stems from the experience and memory of an individual. The performative mode helps us understand how the world around us is constructed through our emotions and affections. The emotional complexity of experience influences the filmmaker's perspective. An autobiographical note

may also enter these kinds of documentaries. The filmmaker himself is the subject of the film he is making. He is not invisible. Nick Broomfield's style of filmmaking is an example of this kind of filmmaking. Broomfield in his films also includes with Aileen Wuornos in Aileen Wuornos: The Selling of a Serial Killer, Broomfield's films are as much about the making of a documentary as they are the main story, offering an onscreen reality that is small-scale and seemingly honest, but always entertaining. It could be argued that on-screen Broomfield portrays a naivety and innocence that often diverts the interview subject from his true intentions. He plays a part, acting for the sake for the audience, drawing a side from his subjects that might not be entirely natural.

Check Your Progress 7

1) What is the participatory mode of film making?

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2) How does it compare to the earlier modes?

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2.9 LET US SUM UP

In this section, you have learnt about the different modes of film making.

These different modes are:

- Poetic documentary
- Expository documentary
- Observational documentary
- Participatory documentary
- Reflexive documentary
- Performative mode

2.10 KEY WORDS

Expository documentary: Based on the ‘Voice of God’ phenomenon

Observational documentary: It allowed filmmaker to record unobtrusively what folks did when not explicitly addressing the camera. It stresses the non-intervention of filmmaker.

Participatory documentary: In the Participatory mode the filmmaker is there in the front of the camera and becomes one with the people being observed.

Performative mode: Endorses definition of knowledge that emphasizes personal experience (in tradition of poetry, literature)

Poetic documentary: Explores associations and patterns that involve temporal rhythms and spatial juxtapositions

Reflexive documentary: It is the most self-aware mode - its reflexivity makes audience aware of how other modes claim to construct “truth” through documentary practice.

2.11 FURTHER READING

MacDougall, ‘Whose Story is it?’ In *Visual Anthropology Review*, Volume 7, Issue 2, Pp. 2-10, September 1991

Nichols, Bill. ‘What types of Documentary are there?’ In *Introduction to Documentary*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001. Pp- 99 137

Watch *The Six Modes of Documentary* at <https://youtu.be/I7MhOghI4u8>

Watch *6 Types of Documentary* at <https://youtu.be/3Pp4ldOgKNI>

Watch *The Evolution of Documentary and Its Modes* at https://youtu.be/BmKU9_V0SXg

2.12 REFERENCES

Nichols, Bill. ‘What types of Documentary are there?’ In *Introduction to Documentary*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001. Pp. 99- 137

2.13 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

- 1)
 - a) There are six modes of filmmaking.
 - b) These modes of filmmaking have been given by Bill Nichols.
- 2) The modes of filmmaking do however give us a sense of history of the emergence of different styles of film making. It’s not necessary that a film maker adheres to only one mode of film making. The emergence of these modes of filmmaking are also associated with the emergence of technology. They can use a combination of several modes of filmmaking. Nor is it necessary that recent films have to necessarily follow a mode of filmmaking

that is more recent. A filmmaker today could decide to use a mode of filmmaking that may not be the most recent.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1)
 - i) Does not use continuity editing, sacrifices sense of the very specific location and place that continuity creates.
 - ii) Explores associations and patterns that involve temporal rhythms and spatial juxtapositions.
 - iii) Social Actors rarely become fully-fledged characters.
 - iv) Opens up possibility of alternative forms of knowledge to straightforward transfer of knowledge.
- 2) The movie *Glass* uses music of different kinds to show the making of glass. There are no words used. The camera too rarely focuses on the actors. It is more focused on the hands and the process of glass making. When shots from the factory where glass is made by machines is used we find that the music is different and the position of the camera also changes.

Check Your Progress 3

- 1)
 - i) Arose from dissatisfaction with distracting entertainment qualities of the fiction film.
 - ii) 'Voice of god' commentary, poetic perspectives sought to disclose information about historical world & see that world afresh, even if ideas seem romantic or didactic.
 - iii) Addresses viewer directly, without titles or voices.
 - iv) Advances argument about historical world.
 - v) It takes shape around commentary directed toward the viewer; images illustrate the verbal commentary builds sense of dramatic involvement around need for solution to a problem.
 - vi) Nonsynchronous sound prevails (historical circumstances).
 - vii) Editing generally establishes/maintains rhetorical continuity more than spatial/temporal.
- 2) 'Voice of God' commentary mode in which the speaker is heard but not seen for example *Happy* by Morgan Lewis,; *The Origins of Man* narrated by Morgan Freeman and *Penguin: a Love Story* dubbed in Hindi by Amitabh Bachchan. As we can see from the examples of the 'Voice of God' commentaries given above that the expository mode was dominated by professionally trained male voices. These commentaries could also be voice overs by less professional voices like Ernest Hemmingway's commentary for one version of *The Spanish Earth* (1937) is in a matter of fact voice.

Check Your Progress 4

- 1)
 - i) It is characterised by Paradigm: depiction of everyday life.
 - ii) Often described as either direct cinema or cinema verite.

- iii) Arose from available lightweight portable synchronous recording equipment & dissatisfaction with moralizing quality of expository documentary.
- iv) It allowed filmmaker to record unobtrusively what folks did when not explicitly addressing the camera.
- v) It stresses the non-intervention of filmmaker.
- vi) Filmmaker cedes control of events more than any other mode.
- vii) Editing doesn't construct time frame or rhythm, but enhances impression of lived or real time.
- viii) This mode limited filmmaker to present moment and required disciplined detachment from events themselves.
- ix) It uses indirect address, speech overheard, synchronous sound, relatively long takes.
- x) Its sense of observation comes from
 - a) Ability of filmmaker to include representative & revealing moments
 - b) Sounds and images recorded at moment of observational filming in contrast to voice-over of expository mode
 - c) Illustrations do not serve generalizations but a specific slice of reality.
 - d) Presence of camera on scene

- 2) Refer to Check Your Progress 3 Question 1 and Check Your Progress 4 Question 1.

Check Your Progress 5

- 1) In the Participatory mode the filmmaker is there in the front of the camera and becomes one with the people being observed. The filmmaker is in no way masked as he is in the poetic mode by abstractions; as he is in the expository mode by voice overs and as he is in the observational mode by adopting a fly on the wall approach. This mode became popular in the 1960s when synchronous sound recording became possible. This mode is often seen in the cases where the filmmaker is interviewing the subjects. It gives a sense to the audience about what it means to be involved with the process of filmmaking.

The filmmaker can be present in front of the camera and can even provoke the subject in terms of a stylised interaction. The role of the camera is always acknowledged. The audience gets a sense of what it means to negotiate the relationship between the filmmaker and the subject. We get a sense of who controls. The filmmakers may also engineer a scene. The participatory mode could also involve interviews. The filmmaker could use several interviews and put them together in the form of a single story.

- 2) The student should watch the films listed and compare them using the features of the various modes of documentaries.

Check Your Progress 6

- 3)
 - i) Reflexive mode of filmmaking arose from a desire to make the conventions of representation themselves more apparent & to challenge the impression of reality which other three modes normally conveyed unproblematically.
 - ii) It is the most self-aware mode - its reflexivity makes audience aware of how other modes claim to construct "truth" through documentary practice.
 - iii) It uses many of devices of other modes but sets them on edge so viewer attends to device as well as the effect.
 - iv) It tears away veil of filmmakers illusory absence
 - v) Becomes technologically viable with emergence of portable synchronous sound equipment which makes interaction more feasible
- 4) For comparison with other modes refer to the earlier sections.

Check Your Progress 7

- 1)
 - i) Like Reflexive Documentary, it raises questions about knowledge.
 - ii) Endorses definition of knowledge that emphasizes personal experience (in tradition of poetry, literature).
 - iii) Tries to demonstrate how understanding such personal knowledge can help us understand more general processes of society.
 - iv) May "mix" elements of various documentary modes to achieve link between subjective knowledge/understanding of the world, and more general understandings, i.e. historical ones.
- 2) For comparison with other modes refer to the earlier sections.