

INTRODUCTION TO DOCUMENTARY BILL NICHOLS, 2001

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Bill Nichols is a frequently read and important author when it comes to the subject of documentary filmmaking and the problems of documentary (Nichols 1991, 1994). The book *Introduction to Documentary* examines the subject of documentary film in a way that is engaging to students who are in need of an introductory text with the appliance of a somewhat loose formal grouping of categories to aid in thinking about the subject.

The introduction sets up some of the problems in the definitions of documentary as a film genre and makes transparent the fact that the films chosen for discussion in the text are not intended to be considered essential films for the understanding of documentary. Bill Nichols is careful to note: "I have tried to avoid constructing a canon. Such an approach carries implications about how history works (great artists, great works lead the way)" (p. xv).

Each chapter heading is phrased as a question. Chapter one, "Why are ethical issues central to documentary filmmaking?" (p. 1-19) begins the book with one of the elemental questions of documentary production. That question is "What are the filmmaker's responsibilities?" Following this discussion of the social role of documentary film (and obligations of the filmmaker), the discussion turns to the problems of definition. Chapter two is titled "How do documentaries differ from other types of film?" (p. 20-41). This chapter is followed by a discussion of how the documentary film definition has led to a unique format for documentaries to present their subject. It can be the result of the institution which funds the documentary (p. 22-25) or it can be a response to the needs of viewers (p. 35-40).

Chapter three (p. 42-60) deals with the differences of “voice” in documentary, particularly how the subject is articulated by the filmmaker and the film subject’s own statements. This chapter also discusses the role of narration and how narration through memory provides framing of events. This is followed nicely by a chapter which presents the communicative aspects of documentary through abstraction (p. 65-68), persuasion (p. 68-73) and presentation of metaphor (p. 73-81).

Chapter five (p. 82-98) presents a short history of documentary filmmaking, quickly followed by a chapter which presents a grouping of formal categories: poetic (p. 102-105), expository (p. 105-109), observational (p. 109-115), participatory (p. 115-124), reflexive (p. 124-130), and performative (p. 130-137). The author is quick to note that this frame work is loose and a work is likely to overlap more than one category (p. 99-100).

Chapter seven (p. 139-167) discusses the cultural and social issues that documentaries must engage and the different approaches to reportage and advocacy. A consideration of issue oriented documentaries is whether the people presented in the film are considered victims or if they are agents of the situation. Nichols also divides this use of documentary film into categories of social issues and personal portraits based on there presentational aspects found in the construction of the film, the films tone and the way in which social actors are framed within the film.

The final chapter (p.168-177) provides some ideas about how students should write about documentary film. The author gives some insight into how a student might approach writing about a particular film, with some examples of essays based on the viewing of a film. This section was a good inclusion since writing about film can easily stray into personal responses to the film (or its subject matter) and film synopses of any information presented in the film. The deeper questions about presentation, filmic reality, narrative construction and other elements of the documentary form are not so readily accessible to the student. Having some instruction on how to approach the documentary subject both critically and interpretively is a good inclusion and appropriate conclusion to the book.

I found this book to be very insightful and useful as an introductory text on the subject. The development of a loose category of documentary types is very useful in providing a conceptual framework to allow discussion and comparison of documentaries. Nichols has a self-conscious recognition of the fluidity of his categories, and the films which we attribute to these categories, is commendable. The chapter dealing with the history of documentary film could have been longer, but a more appropriate treatment of the history of documentary film

is presented in books like Jack C. Ellis and Betsy A. McLane's *A New History of Documentary Film* (2005).

The book features copious references to documentary film examples. There are so many films mentioned that you cannot expect a student to have seen all of them, but the high number of examples insures that a student has hopefully seen a few of the films mentioned and gives the instructor a representative pool to select class screenings from. Books about film often have the difficult task of choosing examples from among a group of films where availability from a distributor can be unsure. A good portion of the films Nichols writes about are not going to be too difficult to find.

Introduction to Documentary is an indispensable book for understanding documentary film. It does not provide great detail about production techniques or great depth about film history. As stated earlier, this is better served by other texts. As a painless introduction into how a student can think critically about documentaries it is exceptional. While the author's qualitative attributions are admittedly reductionist in some senses, they provide a generalist framework that is not possible otherwise.

Bibliography

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