



The Documentary Genre

Origins & Style

Origins

John Grierson, a key figure in the British documentary school, is thought to have been the first to use the term to describe a film by Robert Flaherty in 1926, which he described as having “documentary value.”

The film was [Moana](#) and what Grierson regarded as “documentary value” was its recreation of the daily life of a Polynesian boy

The Definition

In 1948, the *World Union of Documentary* established the following definition of a documentary:

“Documentaries are all methods of recording on celluloid any aspect of reality interpreted either by sincere and justifiable reconstruction, so as to appeal either to reason or emotion, for the purpose of stimulating the desire for, and the widening of human knowledge and understanding, and of truthfully posing problems and their solutions in the spheres of economics, culture, and human relations.”

Viewpoints

John Grierson

The documentary is the branch of film production which goes to the actual and photographs it and edits it and shapes it. It attempts to give form and pattern to the complex of direct observation.

Viewpoints

Erik Barnouw

Documentary cannot be considered “the truth” but rather the evidence or the testimony of a fact or situation, within the complex historical process.

Viewpoints

Michael Renov

Sees the documentary as “the more or less artful reshaping of the historical world”

It records,
reveals or preserves;
persuades or promotes;
analyzes or interrogates;
and expresses.

Viewpoints

Bill Nichols

Documentary is a fluctuating institution, consisting of a **corpus of texts**, a **set of viewers** and a **community of practitioners and conventional practices** that are subject to historical changes.

Nichols: three criteria for the definition of the documentary

The first definition, focuses on the director's point of view: documentary filmmakers exercise less control over their subject than their fictional counterparts.

The second definition refers to the text: the structure of the documentary text has parallels with other texts. These parallels occur at various levels: they may belong to a movement, period, style or form.

The third definition concerns the relationship between the documentary and the viewer: viewers develop skills based on an understanding and interpretation of the process that enables them to understand the film.

Historical Documentary

A film about the past which involves
***“creative treatment that asserts a
belief that the given objects, states of
affairs or events occurred or existed
in the actual world portrayed”***

David Ludvigson



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Modes of Documentaries

the Expository

the Observational

the Participatory

the Reflexive

the Poetic

the Performative

Modes of Documentaries

The **expository** mode.

This is associated with the classic documentary, and based on illustrating an argument using images.

It is a rhetorical rather than an aesthetic mode, aimed directly at the viewer, using text titles or phrases to guide the image and to emphasize the idea of objectivity and logical argument.

[Victory at Sea](#)

[Shock of the New](#)

Modes of Documentaries

The **observational** mode.

This mode allowed the director to record reality without becoming involved in what people were doing when they were not explicitly looking into the camera.

Enabled a different approach to the subject matter and the directors prioritized a spontaneous and direct observation of reality.

[Gimme Shelter](#)

[Triumph of the Will](#)

Modes of Documentaries

The **participatory** mode

This mode presents the relationship between the filmmaker and the filmed subject. Makes the director's perspective clear by involving them in the discourse.

The director becomes an investigator and enters unknown territory, participates in the lives of others, and gains direct and in-depth experience and reflection from the film.

[Shoah](#)

[Man with a Movie Camera](#)

Modes of Documentaries

The **reflexive** mode.

This mode raises the audience's awareness of the means of representation itself and the devices that have given it authority.

The film is not considered a window on the world, but is instead considered a construct or representation of it.

[Waiting for Fidel](#)

[Far from Poland](#)

Modes of Documentaries

The **poetic** mode.

It aims to create a specific mood and tone rather than to provide the viewer with information.

Its origin is linked to the emergence of artistic avant-gardes in cinema; uses many of the devices typical of other arts (fragmentation, subjective impressions, etc.).

[Rain](#)

[NY, NY.](#)

Modes of Documentaries

The **performance** mode.

Focuses interest on expressiveness, poetry and rhetoric, rather than on the desire for realistic representation.

The emphasis is shifted to the evocative qualities of the text, rather than its representational capacity.

[Tongues Untied](#)

[Turksib](#)

Documentary Modes: Characteristics and Deficiencies

the Expository

Directly address issues in the historical world

*overly didactic

the Observational

Observes things as they happen

*lack of history, context

the Participatory

Interview or Interact with subjects

*excessive faith in witnesses naive history too intrusive

Documentary Modes: Characteristics and Deficiencies

the Reflexive

Questions documentary form, defamiliarize the other modes

*too abstract, loses sight of actual issues

the Poetic

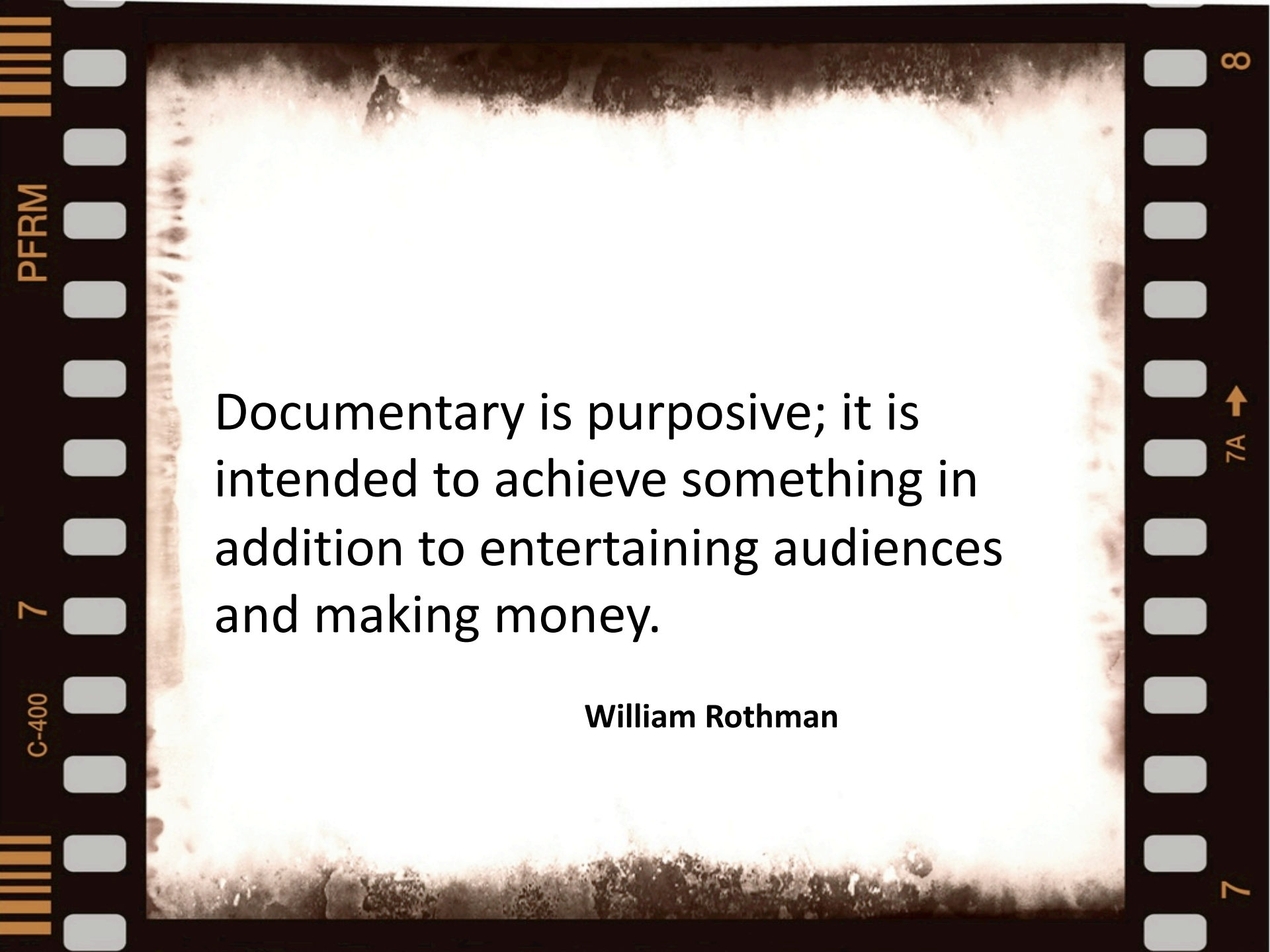
Reassembles fragments of the world poetically

*lack of specificity, too abstract

the Performative

Stresses subjective aspects

*loss of emphasis on objectivity; excessive use of style.



Documentary is purposive; it is
intended to achieve something in
addition to entertaining audiences
and making money.

William Rothman