COM 321, Documentary Form in Film & Television

Defining and Characterizing Documentaries
2/3/10

Sample Definitions:

Erik Barnouw (*Documentary: A History of the Non-fiction Film*): roughly, moving images that document some real phenomenon or action

Bohn & Stromgren (*Light and Shadows: A History of Motion Pictures*): “‘Documentary’ has come to mean different things to different people”

Bill Nichols (*Introduction to Documentary*): “Documentary film practice is the site of contestation and change.”

John Grierson (“father” of British and Canadian documentary film): “The creative treatment of actuality” (NOTE: Grierson coined the term “documentary” in 1926 in a review of Flaherty’s *Moana*)

Gomery & Allen (*Film History: Theory & Practice*): a film in which there is “less control over the subject”

Bordwell & Thompson (*Film Art: An Introduction*): a film that is defined as documentary “on the basis of production”

Ephraim Katz (*The Film Encyclopedia*): “a factual film depicting actual events and real people”; also, “a form of artistic journalism”; and, “communicates social ideas and values. . . aims to better social and economic conditions”

Hans Richter (avant-garde filmmaker): “Meaning does not exist a priori. . . it is created in the camera and the cutting room. The documentary is an original art form. . . it covers the rational side of our lives.”

Documentary as Genre:

Genre—a “contract” between filmmaker and audience members, who are satisfied if expectations are met

For the documentary, what does the audience expect?