COM 321, Documentary Form in Film, Television, & Interactive Media

Notes from and about Barnouw’s *Documentary: A history of the non-fiction film*

14. Documentarist as . . . part of a Movement??

**Definition(s):**

A “Movement”: This final chapter of the Barnouw book begins by noting the growth in documentary work, and how documentarists “were turning into a movement,” that is, filmmakers “met each other at international film festivals, joined in co-productions, and exchanged ideas through film seminars, journals, and a burgeoning film literature. Satellite, computer, and video speeded the cross-fertilization” (p. 297). However, the rest of the chapter is devoted to revisiting most of the 13 earlier categories of documentarists, and to denoting five so-called “subgenres” of historical chronicle documentaries.

**Key Concepts & Issues:**

“World Symphony” or “Global Symphony” documentaries [Not in Barnouw]—an apparent combination of Explorer, Painter, and Chronicler functions, these films were first popular in the 1980s and 1990s; they have had a strong impact on IMAX and OMNIMAX films—see #2 below
The “Historic Chronicle Documentary”—a growing derivation of the Chronicler documentary—see Type #9 below
The “Documentary Blockbuster”—beginning with Michael Moore’s *Roger and Me* (1989), documentaries might now play at multiplexes
The role of Film Festivals in promoting documentaries, and making them international

→[“Personal Essay” Documentaries…what other scholars also call the “Point-to-view documentary”—presenting a very personal vision, e.g., *Ethnic Notions* (1986) and *Tongues Untied* (1989; may view on Kanopy) by Marlon Riggs…but these are not included in any of Barnouw’s “types.”
The Personal Essay documentary may be thought of as comparable to an “op/ed” piece in journalism.]

“Objectivity”?—Barnouw ultimately concludes that there’s really no such thing in filmmaking; “documentarists make endless choices”; “one can hardly imagine a documentary, or a film, or any kind of communication, that is not propaganda—in the sense of trying to present evidence that may enlarge understanding and change ideas”; “a more potent and persuasive form of propaganda is popular fiction”; and finally, “unlike the fiction artist, they [documentarists] are dedicated to not inventing”.

**Key Documentarists/Documentary Types—Barnouw revisits most of the documentary types explored in previous handouts:**

Type #2. Revisiting the Documentarist-as-Explorer
More work in outer space, undersea, photomicrography, within the human body
e.g., BBC’s *Everyday Miracle: Birth* (1981)
→ e.g., BBC’s *Life on Earth* (1979)—established (Sir) David Attenborough as documentarist and host
e.g., BBC’s *Planet Earth* (2007) and *Planet Earth II* (2016)
e.g., “World Symphony” or “Global Symphony” films [Not in Barnouw]—Godfrey Reggio’s Koyaanisqatsi: Life Out of Balance (1982); Powaqatsi: Life in Transformation (1988); Ron Fricke’s Baraka (1992); These films clearly also have strong elements of Painter (like the City Symphonies) and Chronicler

Type #3. Revisiting the Documentarist-as-Reporter
Barnouw chooses to focus on documentary examinations of Latin America during the 1970s and 1980s, with a “cold war” interpretation of how information was restricted; Barnouw chooses not to provide a focus on the growing presence and audience dependence on cable networks such as CNN, C-SPAN, the History Channel, etc., nor does he anticipate the online presence of these media outlets and others

Type #4. Revisiting the Documentarist-as-Painter
e.g., Hilary Harris’ Organism (1975), shot over 15 years; use of time-lapse photography
e.g., Nam June Paik’s Kennedy/Olympic (1981)—Paik is the “founder of video art”

Type #5. Revisiting the Documentarist-as-Advocate
Here, Barnouw focuses on films about atomic power and atomic weaponry, and the early relationship between the two applications
e.g., the U.S. Atomic Energy Commission’s Go Fission (1969)
e.g., Columbia University’s Hiroshima-Nagasaki, August 1945 (1970; P: Erik Barnouw)
e.g., John Else of KTEH-TV, San Jose’s The Day After Trinity: Robert J. Oppenheimer and the Atomic Bomb (1980)

Type #7. Revisiting the Documentarist-as-Prosecutor
Here, Barnouw also provides a focus on nuclear fission!
e.g., Robert Stone’s Radio Bikini (1988)
Barnouw adds Satire to the mix—e.g., the Archives Project’s The Atomic Cafe (1982), which like Frank Capra’s Why We Fight series, uses existing footage in which the sources’ own words backfire; Co-directed by Kevin Rafferty, who taught Michael Moore how to shoot film (Roger & Me, 1989) and is the nephew of the late Barbara Bush

Type #9. Revisiting the Documentarist-as-Chronicler
Barnouw identifies an expansion into the:

→ “Historic Chronicle Documentary,” with five “subgenres”:

1. The omnipresent exposition, characterized by instant mobility of a host
e.g., BBC’s series Civilisation (1970), featuring art historian Kenneth Clark
e.g., U.S.-British co-production of the series Cosmos (1980), featuring Carl Sagan

2. The archival compilation film or series
   With the failure of theatrical newsreel companies, footage collections came up for sale, lease, and free use; unlike earlier compilation films, the new wave
tended to combine historic footage with testimony by surviving participants (multiple witnesses)  
e.g., American TV series *Eyes on the Prize* (1980)  
e.g., U.S./British/French collaboration *Vietnam: A Television History* (1983)

3. The biography  
This had been a popular genre in literature for centuries, yet didn’t become common in documentaries until quite late (c. 1960s)  
→ e.g., Michael Apted’s long-term series of documentaries for Britain’s Granada Television, chronicling fourteen 7-year-olds every seven years—*7 Up* (1964), *14 Up* (1970), etc., through *56 Up* (2012; trailer)

4. The really long compilation of witness narrations (The “Shoah” documentary)  
Barnouw doesn’t give this type a real name, so we might call it after its principal exemplar—  
e.g., *Shoah* (1986) by Israeli filmmaker Claude Lanzmann, is an oral history collection lasting more than 9 hours; now there is a documentary about the 12-year process of the making of the documentary—*Claude Lanzmann: Spectres of the Shoah* (2015; trailer). In 2017, 91-year-old Lanzmann premiered *Napalm*, which he shot in North Korea without permission, at Cannes.

→ 5. The Ken Burns documentary  
This actually seems to be what Barnouw is calling it! Most are television series:  
e.g., *The Civil War* (Burns discusses it, 2:41) (9 episodes, 1990); *Baseball* (9 episodes, 1994); *Jazz* (10 episodes, 2001); *The War* (7 episodes, 2007); *The National Parks* (6 episodes, 2009); *Prohibition* (with Lynn Novick, 3 episodes, 2011); *The Dust Bowl* (4 episodes, 2012); *The Roosevelts: An Intimate History* (7 episodes, 2014); *The Vietnam War* (10 episodes, 2017)  
The Ken Burns documentary is characterized by:  
a. Photo animation—still photos are panned and zoomed into, etc., to give a sense of motion (note that even “static” shots of these photos have a little “handheld” type motion!)  
b. Authentic testimony is acted by professional voices, often celebrities (e.g., Morgan Freeman in *The Civil War*, Tom Hanks in *The War*)  
For *The Roosevelts*:  
  Paul Giamatti - Theodore Roosevelt (voice)  
  Edward Herrmann - Franklin D. Roosevelt (voice)  
  Meryl Streep - Eleanor Roosevelt (voice)  
  John Lithgow - James Roosevelt (voice)  
  Patricia Clarkson - Margaret "Daisy" Suckley (voice)  
  Other voices: Adam Arkin, Keith Carradine, Kevin Conway, Ed Harris, Josh Lucas, Carl Lumbly, Amy Madigan, Carolyn McCormick, Pamela Reed, Billy Bob Thornton, and Eli Wallach.  
c. Contemporary footage of historic locations (e.g., battlefields) is shot in color, and in the proper time of year
d. Linkage is provided by a quiet, sparse voiceover (e.g., David McCullough for *The Civil War*; Peter Coyote for *The National Parks*)
e. Linkage is also provided by authentic music and a “mosaic” of appropriate sounds

Type #10. Revisiting the Documentarist-as-Promoter
Now Barnouw seems to categorize commercials as documentaries!

Type #11. Revisiting the Documentarist-as-Observer (Direct Cinema)
→ e.g., Les Blank, e.g., *Garlic is as Good as Ten Mothers* (1980); *Werner Herzog Eats His Shoe* (1980); *In Heaven There is No Beer* (1984); *Gap-Toothed Women* (1987)
→ e.g., Barbara Kopple--Combining Direct Cinema style with Advocate sensibilities—*Harlan County USA* (1976; trailer) and *American Dream* (1990)
e.g., Ross McElwee--Combining Direct Cinema sequences with first person narrative (the Personal Essay film)—*Sherman’s March* (1986)

Type #13. Revisiting the Documentarist-as-Guerrilla
Barnouw notes the importance of home video as a method of bypassing traditional media gatekeepers (Barnouw writes in a pre-Internet, pre-Vlog, pre-YouTube world!)
→ e.g., Michael Moore--Combining Guerrilla intent with the Personal Essay documentary type and with Cinema Verite (type #12, Catalyst) techniques—*Roger and Me* (1989) and his other films to follow

→ [Also: The “Shockumentary,” perhaps beginning with the classic: *Mondo Cane* (A Dog’s World, 1962, D: Gualtiero Jacopetti, Paolo Cavara, & Franco Prosperi). A series of travelogue vignettes, a “kaleidoscopic display of shocking content,” the film has one of most famous scores for a documentary, by Riz Ortolani and Nino Oliviero. One theme was adapted as a popular song, “*More.*"