

## Documentary

One of most abused & misunderstood terms in film & television

Applied to everything from newsreels to instructional films to travelogues & TV specials

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## John Grierson

Term 1st applied to Moana, (1926) a film by Robert Flaherty

Grierson later defined documentary as “ a creative treatment of reality”

But noted it was a “clumsy” term

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## Pare Lorentz

“A factual film which is dramatic”

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## Basil Wright

“A method of approach to public information”

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## Richard Dyer McCann

“Not the authenticity of the materials but the authenticity of the result”

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## Dictionary Definition

### Documentary

1. Consisting or derived from documents.
2. A film or program portraying an actual event, life of a real person, period of history, or the like, in a factual way, esp. one containing sections photographed of actual incidents as they occurred.

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## Confusion

- Does that mean Roots is a documentary? Is a TV movie based on the life of a wife murderer in Fresno a “documentary”?
- In a sense all films are documents of something, some place, or some time (i.e. films as cultural documents)
- What defines the documentary category in contest?

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## Academy Definition (A.M.P.A.S.)

Films dealing with historical, social, scientific, or economic subjects, either photographed in actual occurrence or re-enacted, & where the emphasis is more on factual content than entertainment. The purely instructional film will not be considered.

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## More Questions than Answers

- Factual & boring rather than “entertaining”?
- Re-enacted?
- “Purely instructional?”

Is this something like pornography?  
“I’ll know it when I see it?”

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## Richard M. Barsam

- Proposes term “Non-Fiction”
- All documentaries are non-fiction films, but not all non-fiction films are documentaries

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## 5 Types of Non-Fiction Films

1. Documentary - distinguished by its sociopolitical purpose, a non-fiction film with a message. Basically wants to persuade, influence, or change. Emphasis on filmmaker's point of view

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## 5 Types of Non-Fiction Films

2. Factual Film -- lacks a specific message  
Diff. between factual film & documentary diff. between newspaper report and an editorial  
Documentary: facts + opinion  
Factual Film: facts

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### 5 Types of Non-Fiction Films

- 3. Travel Films or Travelogues
- 4. Educational, Training, Classroom films -- purpose to teach & train
- 5. Newsreels, TV news reports

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### Keys to Barsam's Def.

All documentaries are non-fiction, but not all non-fiction films are documentaries

Newspaper story about Iraq vs. an editorial about Iraq--- to Barsam, documentary implies opinion

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### Continuum?

Non-Fiction

Docudrama

Documentary

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## Your Text - Barnouw

- Never really provides a single, all-purpose definition
- Instead .... groups by historical periods and approaches:  
Explorer, Painter, Reporter, Advocate, Bugler, etc.

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## Bill Nichols

Totally avoids a single definition but notes **6 modes** of documentary production:

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|------------------|------------------|
| 1. Poetic        | 2. Expository    |
| 3. Participatory | 4. Observational |
| 5. Reflexive     | 6. Performatic   |

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## Examples

- Fungi
- Crutemobile
- Whose Going to Care For These Children?
- Mirror, Mirror
- Real World (MTV)
- Cops (or any other “reality” show)

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