

University of Theatre and Film Arts Doctoral School

**Chronicler or Storyteller? Document and/or Film?**  
*The Tools of Storytelling in Documentary Film*

Theses of the Doctoral Dissertation

Zsuzsanna Gellér-Varga

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Supervisors:

Tamás Almási, D.L.A. habil. professor

Lóránt Stóhr, Ph.D. docent

*Chronicler or storyteller? Document and/or film?* This is the question posed by the title of my dissertation. In following the dissertation's theoretical systematization, typologies, proposed definitions and concrete examples, we will see that these concepts are not mutually exclusive. Rather, they are all parts of a single chronological process. In my view, the "chronicler" records and documents reality; the "storyteller", based on the recorded and documented pieces of reality, then creates a comprehensive story. My dissertation reviews the phases and the tools of this creative process.

What is it that can take a narration, based on pieces of reality recorded on film, and turn it into a watchable, enjoyable, amusing, thought-provoking and cathartic work of art? What differentiates a documentary film from a film document? What allows the work to cross the line from documentation to work of art? Which storytelling (dramaturgical) tools are available to help the work to cross this line? How do those storytelling devices affect the documentary film's representation of reality? And how does the documentary filmmaker undergo the transformation from chronicler into storyteller?

Naturally, narrative documentary films can make use of the storytelling tools of feature films, and they have increasingly done so in recent years. However, one of my essential premises is that in order to analyze how a documentary film works, we must differentiate it from a non-documentary film – because a documentary film has a special relationship to reality. From the standpoint of the filmmaker, this relationship means that he or she works with events that actually happened, with things and persons who actually exist – not with fiction. Documentary filmmakers do not *invent* the turns of the story or the personality of the characters; they must *find* these in the raw material of real life. Their stories require not „*creative invention*”, but rather „*creative arrangement*.”<sup>1</sup> Eric Barnouw, a key documentary theorist, too, emphasizes the importance of selecting and arranging<sup>2</sup>; in his view, these are the means by which the documentary filmmaker expresses his/her message. Carl Plantinga takes this further, differentiating four separate creative processes as the four creative elements of documentary film discourse: selection, order, emphasis, and voice.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Sheila Curran Bernard: *Documentary Storytelling For Video And Filmmakers*. Focal Press 2004. p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> Erik Barnouw: *Documentary: A History of the Non-Fiction Film* Oxford University Press, USA; 2<sup>nd</sup> revised edition, 1993. p. 348

<sup>3</sup> Carl L. Plantinga: *Rhetoric and Representation in Nonfiction Film*. Cambridge University Press, 1997. p. 86.

Reviewing the analytic and conceptual frameworks of documentary film, I have identified an additional definition, based on Plantinga and Grierson's definitions, which I believe more precisely captures the narrative and storytelling aspects I have focused on. According to Plantinga, the documentary film is „*asserted veridical representation*”, while Grierson calls it „*creative treatment of actuality*”.<sup>4</sup> These two definitions, taken together, describe the kind of documentary film I am addressing. In this dissertation, then, I define documentary film as „*a creative, asserted, and veridical representation of reality*.”

At the outset, we must accept the premise that a documentary film views the world from a different starting point than a non-documentary film. If we accept a documentary film as a „*contract*”<sup>5</sup> (Rabiger) or as a „*social construction*”<sup>6</sup> (Plantinga), then the conditions of this contract or construction must be clarified and understood by the filmmaker and the film viewer alike. If the director's premise and the extent and means of her intervention into the subject are not spelled out, then the conditions of her „contract” with the viewer remain ambiguous, which raises ethical issues as well as questions about the film's genre. I believe that in order to call a film a documentary, its „director” must unambiguously define her role and explicitly take it on; she must clarify how, why and to what extent she has intervened into the course of the depicted events. A director's intervention undertaken for artistic effect is acceptable only if the viewer possesses this information. Otherwise, the film ceases to be a documentary; it gradually and imperceptibly blurs into fiction; and this process sooner or later causes the viewer to lose faith in the very idea of documentary. The documentary filmmaker must not breach the terms of the „contract”, not even in the service of „a good story well told”<sup>7</sup>. The commitment to remain faithful to the true story must supersede the desire for dramatic effect.

As reality has become „show”, and as fictional elements have increasingly intruded into documentaries, a film's entertainment value has come to trump all other values. With the advance of digital video, just about anyone can make a film, and competition is greater than ever. As financial

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<sup>4</sup> Carl L. Plantinga: *What a Documentary Is, After All*. In: *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* Vol. 63, No. 2 (Spring, 2005), pp. 105-117

<sup>5</sup> Michael Rabiger: *Directing the Documentary* 3rd ed. 1998 Focal Press p. 201.

<sup>6</sup> Carl L. Plantinga: *Documentary*. In: Livingstone, Paisley – Plantinga, Carl (eds.): *The Routledge Companion to Philosophy and Film*. London – New York: Routledge, 2009. pp. 494-504.

<sup>7</sup> Robert McKee: *Story. Substance, Structure, Style, and the Principles of Screenwriting*. Harper Collins 1997. p. 21.

backing becomes more elusive, television's commissioning editors focus increasingly and primarily on a program's salability. Stories that are sensational, aggressive, and easy to process thus have a better chance at being noticed. Some believe that accessibility and entertainment value must be the primary measure of any film, whether documentary or feature. I believe, however, that this attitude leads to a blurring of the definition of documentary film and a blurring of ethical boundaries, and in the long term, to a large-scale deconstruction and depreciation of the documentary as genre. This entails not just the hollowing out of the documentary as genre; it is part and parcel of a larger trend in which fake news (fiction) is mixed in with the facts (documents), making it impossible for a viewer to become informed or to develop fact-based opinions. The main mission of documentaries ought to be the preservation of credibility and factual reporting; to be a reliable source for viewers to "get what they paid for".

If they remain faithful to the requirements of their genre, then documentary filmmakers will always be in an unfavorable position compared to their colleagues who make feature films – at least insofar as the "story" is concerned. Narrative documentaries which take place in the present, whose outcome is not known ahead of time, do not always fit neatly into the mold of a classic Hollywood narration. The same is true even of more loosely constructed, abstract works of art-cinema narration (Bordwell<sup>8</sup>). In the absence of this kind of "story", the documentary film will not always meet the demands of the market or commissioning editors.

But time is on the side of documentary films. The timeless nature of storytelling provides a way out of the time-frame limits in which the chronicler is confined. Narrative and storytelling techniques and tools can be learned and used; tried and true methods can be applied. But in order to make a film which is not merely good, which is outstanding and artistically enjoyable, requires something more: a passion for the facts which we have recorded in our role of chronicler, which must be discovered and presented; and a passion for the story which we must tell, using available dramaturgical devices, in our role of storyteller.

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<sup>8</sup> David Bordwell: *Narration in the Fictional Film*. The University of Wisconsin Press, 1985. p. 205.

## **Methodology**

My dissertation begins with theoretical foundations and then moves on to actual examples. The two endpoints of this span are, at one end, strictly theoretical definition of documentary film, based on a broad, multifaceted examination of the genre; and at the other end, a discussion of very practical storytelling lessons gleaned from my own latest film.

In the first chapter, I provide a definition of the documentary film as genre, based on the international professional literature. I distinguish the types of documentary films from the standpoints of the filmmaker, the film as artefact, and the viewer/recipient. The second chapter provides an overview – based in theory, but supported by detailed practical examples - of the influence of storytelling devices from feature films on documentary film storytelling. The third chapter examines the impact that results from the filmmaker's/storyteller's handling of reality, focusing on a number of particular directorial attitudes.

In the second and third chapters, the film examples used to demonstrate and explain the phenomena are chosen arbitrarily; I sought to use the best examples available from the documentary films I am familiar with. Some of my examples are based on direct information from filmmakers and other colleagues. The background to these data have been personal conversations, background interviews conducted for earlier articles I wrote, and Q-and-A sessions at film festivals (some of which I moderated in recent years at the Budapest International Documentary Film Festival). I examine films using the close reading methodology, focusing primarily on their storytelling devices. Sections of the third chapter examine situations and dilemmas which I have confronted personally, as filmmaker/storyteller. This chapter focuses on the issues that most interest me as creator and critic, citing examples which have emerged in recent years and garnered interest at major international festivals.

The fourth and last chapter analyzes the dramaturgical lessons of my own latest film (currently being completed), considered against the theoretical bases presented in earlier chapters. Examining my own work both from the inside and the outside was quite a challenge: as a working filmmaker with a longstanding interest in the theoretical issues of documentaries, I could not have imagined a more engaging assignment.