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CONFRONTING REALITY



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Contents

Acknowledgements	vii
Note on the availability of recordings	viii
Introduction	ix
Part I Documentary debates	
1 <i>Mapping out the terrain</i>	
WHAT IS DOCUMENTARY?	3
2 <i>How real can you get?</i>	
REALISM AND DOCUMENTARY	27
Part II The documentary text	
3 <i>Shaping the real</i>	
MODES OF DOCUMENTARY	57
4 <i>Tackling the text</i>	
DOCUMENTARY ANALYSES	88
Part III Fact, fiction and drama	
5 <i>Telling a story</i>	
FACT, FICTION AND DOCUMENTARY	115
6 <i>Making a drama out of a crisis</i>	
THE DRAMA-DOCUMENTARY AND RELATED FORMS	135
Part IV Documentary production and reception	
7 <i>'Just do it our way!'</i>	
INSTITUTIONAL CONTROL AND PRODUCTION ECONOMICS	165
8 <i>How do they do it?</i>	
ASPECTS OF DOCUMENTARY PRODUCTION	190
9 <i>Is there anyone out there?</i>	
AUDIENCES FOR DOCUMENTARY	215
Notes	241
Bibliography	247
Index	253

Mapping out the terrain

WHAT IS DOCUMENTARY?

The nature of documentary

Having committed ourselves to writing a book about documentary, we decided to ask some of our students what they thought documentaries were, what they expected to gain from watching them and in what ways this category of programming differed from other types of television output. Here are some of their responses:

'I watch documentaries to widen my horizons. I feel I'm learning more about the world in which I live.'

'Documentaries are a welcome relief from the endless round of games and quiz shows which seem to dominate the schedules nowadays.'

'What I expect from a documentary is that it will tackle issues in much greater depth than a news or current affairs programme ever could.'

'Some of these programmes are really quite exciting. You can get very involved in the stories they tell.'

'Watching documentaries makes me want to go out and discover more about the issues raised. The programme itself often just scratches the surface.'

'In some of the programmes I feel I'm being led by the nose. To tell you the truth, in one recent documentary I wasn't even sure whether or not it was a spoof.'

'Too many of the documentaries I've watched recently have simply featured talking heads. I expect a little more visual information.'

All these responses pick up on one or more of the main features of documentary today and therefore provide a useful starting-point for an attempt to map out what we see as the principal contours of the documentary terrain. They clearly indicate that viewers approach documentary with different sets of expectations. They also show that audiences apply different frames of reference when assessing the gains or pleasures to be derived from watching documentaries.

Representing the world 'out there'

Whatever else viewers expect from a documentary, they consider that one of its most important tasks is to tell us something about the workings of the socio-historical world – the sights, sounds and events in the external world *before* they are transposed into a representational form. The task of the documentarist is not only to record reality but also to give the recorded material a form that allows the resultant film or programme to speak to its audience in a language that can be readily understood. In other words, the production of a documentary is not simply an act of chronicling; it is just as much an act of transformation. The documentarist collects, frames and edits the material in such a way as to change it from a mere record of actuality into a form which we can refer to as 'documentary discourse'.

But in spite of all the transformative work that has occurred, one should, as a viewer, always be able to discern a clear relationship between the sound and image representations which constitute the documentary and the sights and sounds of the real world 'out there'. Thus, for all the many attempts throughout the history of documentary to fake or reconstruct events, there remains an overriding expectation that the basic components will comprise those 'fragments of actuality' to which Vertov referred and which the film maker captures and moulds into the documentary artefact. It is this expectation which is the cornerstone of what is generally referred to as 'documentary realism' (see Chapter 2). It amounts to the existence of a kind of contractual agreement between film maker and audience whereby the raw material for the documentary will be gathered from the socio-historical world and the resultant product will therefore not emanate primarily from the creative imagination

of an authoring agent (in spite of the claims of certain documentarists that they are just as much '*auteurs*' as some of their illustrious counterparts operating in fiction film). It is necessary to express this consideration, since – as we shall discover – there has always been a lively debate as to the fictional/factual status of documentaries. They are all, by definition, products of a shaping intelligence. Likewise, most, to a greater or lesser degree, make use of structuring devices that were developed in narrative fiction.

Interpreting the real

For some of the reasons outlined above, documentaries can never be any more than a representation or an interpretation of events and issues in the real world. In other words, for all their claims to present the world as it is and their attempts to engage the attention of their audiences by the force of their argument, documentaries can never attain the level of objectivity to which they sometimes aspire. Thus, whilst many viewers may be disposed to believe in the general truthfulness of the account (especially when it has the mark of some institutional authority), they are aware that the account offered is one that is seen from a particular perspective. Documentaries can sometimes be powerfully persuasive; on the other hand, they will hardly ever be the last word on an issue. In the words of one of our students: 'Watching documentaries makes me want to go out and discover more about the issues raised'.

The very fact that documentarists have always, of necessity, employed certain structuring devices in their work has also meant that they have inevitably become involved in acts of interpretation, however much they may sometimes wish to deny it. We shall be examining some of these interpretive strategies later in the book, but for the time being would ask readers to consider the use of one such device. We refer to what is commonly called the 'problem-solution structure'. This involves the organisation of the documentary presentation in such a way that a problem is first identified and its ramifications worked through (usually after a number of witnesses have been called to account) before a solution is finally offered. Although this narrative structure appears to have various 'common-sensical' attractions, one can easily see how the constant application of such

an organising principle will frame the issue under discussion in a particularly powerful way. Audiences may, for instance, become predisposed to accept the solution being offered in the documentary's concluding section and not accept possible alternatives. They may also get used to the value set which suggests that where a problem is identified a solution will also be forthcoming (see Nichols, 1991: 18–19).

The function of documentary

In addition to addressing some aspect of the contemporary or historical world, documentarists are also perceived to be presenting an argument or making a case. Documentary film makers are not simply in the business of recording reality but will often be encouraging us, in some measure, to view these events from a particular perspective. In other words, evidence will tend to be presented in such a way as to increase the likelihood of the audience falling in line with the film maker's argument.¹

In determining the uses to which documentary can properly be put, a great deal will hinge on the institutional or broadcasting context in which the film or programme in question is being produced. Whatever the context, however, there has frequently been some expectation that documentary should operate in some measure as a vehicle of cultural or educational enlightenment. Some documentarists – especially those working in film as opposed to television – have always been at pains to stress the social function of documentary. As one commentator has observed: 'The key function of documentary, as I see it, is to explore the hard, awkward questions more deeply and more critically than other branches of the media do (or can)' (Rosenthal, 1988: 6). The issue of documentary's relationship to the wider society or to public culture is one that continues to be the subject of lively debate. It has its roots in the sense of social and political responsibility that individual documentarists have towards the society in which they are operating. Thus for John Grierson – for many the founding father of the documentary movement – the primary function of documentary was to allow the citizen to become meaningfully involved in the general social process (Grierson, 1966: 141–55). Similarly, Michael Grigsby, one of the leading British

documentarists of this generation, expresses the hope that his films will heighten viewers' social and political awareness:

I feel that, particularly now, society and people are very fragmented, very isolated, and have in many cases no means of being heard or of expressing themselves about their everyday life or their emotional situation... I think it is incumbent on us as broadcasters, film-makers, whatever we are, to be looking at our society and trying to find those resonances, trying to hear those voices, to give people space. (Grigsby, 1995: 8–9)

A serious pursuit?

Another expectation that one of our students had of documentaries was that they should provide a different stimulus from the 'endless round of game and quiz shows'. Documentaries have indeed often been regarded as a form of antidote to the more entertainment-orientated part of the television schedule. They may make greater demands on concentration, but they have traditionally been seen as a type of programming which is on a par with the various forms of broadcast journalism. In the eyes of television viewers, therefore, documentaries are defined as much according to their relationship with other forms of television output as by being measured against the notional template 'documentary'.²

In spite of more recent developments in which film makers have been required to produce work that is more accessible to the television audience, documentary has not entirely cast off its reputation of being a serious, worthy, but ultimately rather boring form of programming. As we shall see in a later chapter, this has led to the more traditional forms of documentary not being given a high priority in today's television schedules.³

We shall be looking in more detail at the formative influence of television on documentary in the course of this book. For the time being, however, suffice it to say that: first, the history of documentary, at least since the late 1940s, is very closely associated with the development of television – and nowhere more so than since the late 1980s; second, some of the most interesting developments in the form of documentaries have been directly attributable to television's constant generation of new types of programming in the relentless

quest to maintain or increase audience share. One of the clearest illustrations of this is a marked tendency to produce hybridised forms, in which generic boundaries have been blurred in the effort to create an attractive new format (see Chapters 3 and 6).

Documentary in different media formats

Dictionary definitions of documentary tend to highlight the idea of any account, presentation or performance that mobilises visual or verbal evidence in chronicling an event or mounting an argument. These presentations can of course utilise different forms of media, including: the written chronicle or report; stage, screen and radio productions; oral history recordings; photographic displays; and CD-ROMs or similar multimedia modes. Although most people nowadays who hear or use the word 'documentary' have televisual or filmic artefacts in mind, it is important to remember that these other forms exist (Paget, 1990: 1–58). It is, moreover, sometimes quite instructive to consider the respective gains and losses which occur when broadly the same subject matter is treated in different media formats.

Consider, for instance, the response of the student who was irritated that the documentaries he had watched contained too many talking-heads. What he might have been criticising here was a failure on the documentarist's part to introduce enough visually arresting or illustrative material. He may also, by implication, have been suggesting that the topic could have been better exploited in a different medium. With the documentary in question, for instance, it might have been the case that a radio documentary could have done better justice to what the documentarist was actually trying to achieve. Radio is a medium that is mercifully free from any requirement to provide visuals (other than those generated in the listener's imagination). It also enables an intimate bond to be established between listener and the speaking voice and permits the former to focus in on what is being said without any visual interference. In other words, for certain documentary projects, radio may well be regarded as the more appropriate vehicle, particularly where individuals are recalling events of which there is no photographic or film record.

A fictional enterprise?

If we agree with the student who thought that you could really get involved in, or even carried away, by the stories which documentaries tell, does not this suggest that they should be approached like any other form of story-telling? The more one reflects on how documentaries are put together, the more one recognises that – time and time again – documentarists have resorted to what appear to be standard fictional techniques, both to give coherence to the story they are telling and to ensure that audiences are able to relate to the events being played out before them. Accordingly, many documentaries bear all the hallmarks of a gripping story or a well-wrought drama. Individual 'characters' assume the conventional roles of hero, villain and victim and are played off one against the other in ways with which we are all familiar from television drama or film. Plot is used as a device for creating interest and suspense. Events are recounted in such a way as to create the impression that all hinges on the resolution of a conflict between opposed forces or warring factions.

In many cases there are legitimate reasons for structuring documentaries in this way. The problems for documentary arise, however, when the narrative impulse becomes such a powerful force in the structuring of the film or programme that it virtually assumes a life of its own. The precise relationship between the world conjured up by the story and the world of historical or contemporary reality becomes blurred. The viewer is borne along on the tide of the narrative and, at the same time, is constantly reminded that what is actually at stake are 'real life' or 'real world' issues which may require a different form of attention from the kind that is usually reserved for the consumption of fictions. We shall be returning to the question of documentarists' use of fictional strategies in Chapter 5 but should like now, as a final point in this introductory section, to broach the issue of viewer response.

Making sense of documentary

One of the questions which critics and documentarists alike have found most difficult to answer is of what interpretative frameworks viewers apply when they watch programmes that bear the 'docu-

mentary' label. To what extent, for instance, can the response of the student who said he watched documentaries to 'widen his horizons' be considered representative of the generality of viewers? And equally important, what credence do audiences put upon documentary accounts? Do they still treat them as if they offered the proverbial 'window on the world' or have they now learned to adopt a more sceptical outlook?

For years the conventional wisdom about documentaries was that they commanded the critical attention of the audience because they were seen to tackle important issues in a serious and responsible way. Audiences also had confidence in the veracity of what was shown. It seemed to be demonstrably the case that evidence from 'real world' sources was being collected and presented in such a way as to preserve elements of its authenticity. In other words, the basic relationship of the material to the real world still shone through. (For more on this see Chapter 2.)

Since the 1960s or 1970s, however, the perception of how viewers relate to cultural artefacts, of whatever kind, has shifted. In an age dominated by what is sometimes referred to as the 'postmodernist condition', many of the old certainties have faded. We have become used to living in an information-rich environment, in which multiple media outlets compete for our attention and where computerised, digital technologies offer us an ever greater choice of what we consume (see Lyotard, 1984). Although opinions differ as to the extent to which the postmodernist condition has caused us to jettison some of the older ways of seeing the world, it is generally thought to have had an effect on how, in particular, we engage with material we choose to view or otherwise consume. This is partly due to the fact that the sheer abundance of available material makes us view it in far more relative terms. It also has to do with the greater knowledge that modern audiences have acquired about how programmes are put together – knowledge which has led to a generally more sceptical attitude amongst viewers. This has meant that audiences nowadays will be more inclined than formerly to engage with programmes in a playful and sometimes detached manner, delighting in the *experience* of watching rather than being too concerned with 'what it all means'.

All this has implications for televised documentary. Postmodernist thinking invites us progressively to abandon the belief that there can be any such thing as 'referential truth'. As one observer has commented, 'Postmodernist analysis delights ... in the emancipation of meanings from their bondage to mere lumpenreality' (O'Sullivan *et al.*, 1994b: 234). Documentary, on the other hand, has always (almost as one of its first principles) claimed an especially close relationship with what we have described as the 'socio-historical world'. Anything which might be seen to render this relationship more insecure – in this case postmodernism's 'anarchic' aspirations – might be seen as having a negative impact on the referential claims that have been made hitherto on documentary's behalf. (One can see a possible link here between the remarks above and the disconcertment of our student who was not at all certain whether one particular programme was authentic or just an elaborate tease.)

The status that documentaries enjoy with their viewers has been further complicated in recent years by developments that are more technological than cultural in origin. We refer to the rapid advances in digital technology that have made it possible to manipulate, transform and distort any recorded image in such a way as to make a nonsense of the notion of there being any firm indexical bond between signifier and signified. Some critics have seen these developments as altering (potentially at least) the whole manner in which viewers relate to documentaries (Winston, 1995: 259). No longer can the evidentiary aspects of the image be taken on trust. No longer do we have any guarantee that what is projected in a single image has been captured in one location at a specific moment in time. Digital techniques can now integrate elements from many different sources or introduce computer-generated images into scenes produced using more traditional modes of filming. Although these techniques have so far not been used to any great extent in documentary work, it is clearly only a matter of time before they are.⁴

Towards a definition of documentary

Having introduced some of the issues which have always been prominent in debates on documentary's form and function, we

would like in the following section to explore in a little more detail the ways in which the term 'documentary' has been understood and how, in the course of time, it has acquired a wider range of associations.

The creative treatment of actuality

The term 'documentary' was apparently first coined in 1926 by the man usually considered to be one of the founding fathers of documentary, John Grierson. He used it when reviewing the film *Moana* made by the American film maker Robert Flaherty. ('Of course, *Moana*, being a visual account of events in the daily life of a Polynesian youth and his family, has documentary value', cited in Rosenthal, 1988: 21.) Although Grierson's roles as a documentarist in his own right and as a publicist concerned to promote the 'cause' of documentary have been the subject of critical review (see especially Winston, 1995), there can be no questioning the significant role he played both in terms not only of the interest he stimulated in defining and developing the fledgling form but also of the impetus he gave to other film makers to produce work which had a clearly defined social purpose (see Corner, 1996: 11-16).

Grierson's much-quoted definition of documentary – that it is 'the creative treatment of actuality' (Grierson, 1966: 13) – also provides a useful starting-point for discussing documentary artefacts. In particular, it highlights the process by which a documentarist welds various components (words, music, images and sound effects) into an artefact that can have both functional and aesthetic appeal. And although Grierson probably did not recognise it at the time, the definition also usefully points up one of the more problematical aspects of documentary. As we already identified in our preliminary discussion, there are two counterpoised tendencies in documentary: with one (the actuality component) the documentarist is claiming our attention on the strength of her or his ability to reproduce or represent events which have occurred in the external world; with the other (the creative component) a whole series of structuring and narrativising ploys have been brought to bear in order to heighten the impact of the film or programme on an

audience. It is this relationship between the selection and filming/recording of actuality material and its transformation into a skilfully crafted artefact that lies at the heart of the whole documentary enterprise.

Problems of definition

Documentary – like any mode or genre of film making – has gone through a major developmental process since Grierson's pioneering days. Some of these developments have resulted, not surprisingly, in a significant increase in the number of characteristics which have been attributed to the 'documentary' artefact. As is so often the case in such matters, views on specific defining characteristics differ according to who is doing the defining. Producers of documentary will tend to take their cue from the broadcasting institutions who commission their work. Critics and reviewers on the other hand will be inclined to measure 'documentariness' in terms of a set of values and properties derived from a large body of (allegedly) documentary material, produced over several decades. And finally – as we have seen from the comments of our students – viewers themselves will have their own ideas on what documentaries should deliver. In the case of television viewers, for instance, the defining qualities of documentary are likely to be determined by being measured against other types of broadcast output (news and current affairs programming) or set in contrast to the 'endless round of games and quiz shows which seem to dominate the schedules nowadays'.

Some of these definitional problems have to do with the fact that the label 'documentary' is now attached to a much wider range of audio-visual material than when it began to be used in the pre-war era. 'Documentary' can nowadays just as easily be applied to a thirty-minute piece of investigative reportage on television as it can to a full-length feature film such as *Hoop Dreams* (USA, 1994), which had a theatrical release and employs the full resources of cinematic language. 'Documentary' has in short become a *portmanteau* word with multiple points of reference.

Something of term's multiplicity is reflected in the differential usage of the documentary label in contemporary broadcasting.

First, the most common use is as a noun referring to a specific film or programme: 'Last night's Channel 4 documentary brought a harrowing account of human rights' violations in East Timor.' Second, in addition to this very specific usage, however, there is a marked tendency to apply 'documentary' in a far looser sense to suggest a style or mode of film making that accords with certain conventions on how information and evidence are gathered and incorporated into a programme. When used in this way, the emphasis is on the distinction between fiction and non-fiction film making: 'The films in this series are clearly the products of a very fertile imagination. At the same time they frequently veer in the direction of documentary.' Finally – and possibly most tellingly – 'documentary' is being increasingly used in a purely adjectival sense: 'The film used some very innovative documentary techniques' or 'This was a well-researched documentary investigation'. Here the reference is either to a general tenor of factuality which pervades the piece in question or to the adoption of a certain style or approach. 'Documentary', when used adjectivally, can also carry with it a further set of associations: that the programme or film is serious and sober and, as such, is deserving of due audience attention!

In all the attempts to map out the documentary terrain one of the favoured strategies has been to operate with the notion of exclusion zones. The particular concern here has been to mark documentary off from all forms of fiction film-making activity. Some observers see the matter in relatively black-and-white terms. For them the principal task of documentary is to produce a suitably authenticated account of a real-life event. This is in stark contrast to what they see as the main defining feature of fiction film (in all its many guises): that it deploys a variety of narrative and presentational techniques in the telling of a story that has been made up for the specific purpose of providing dramatic entertainment. For all these reasons – so the argument goes – documentaries can be conveniently labelled as 'non-fiction'. As such, they are – so the argument concludes – definable in terms of their oppositional or complementary status *vis-à-vis* the fiction film. The attempt to pigeon-hole documentary in this way may have its superficial attractions in that it appears to establish a neat, satisfactory division. As a critical project, however, it is

fundamentally flawed. It suggests a distinction in form and function between the two categories, which proves in the event to be untenable. To give only one example, many fiction films make the claim that they are chronicling important realities of the human condition, whilst others are explicitly based on historically documented events. By the same token, documentary films frequently make use of a variety of fictional and dramatic techniques. Certain well-known documentarists (Paul Watson is an example) have sometimes claimed that *all* documentaries are to some extent fictional constructs.

Documentary as a genre?

The difficulties in reaching a consensus over documentary's defining characteristics are mirrored in a similar disagreement over how to categorise it using the standard critical terms. There is, for instance, no generally accepted view as to whether 'documentary' refers to a genre, a style, a type of artefact or just a particular mode of film making. Some critics (Britton, 1992: 26) happily employ the designation 'genre', whilst others feel that using it is potentially misleading. As Dai Vaughan has shrewdly observed:

If it has proved notoriously difficult to define documentary by reference to its constantly shifting stylistic practices, it is because the term 'documentary' properly describes not a style or a method or a genre of film-making but a mode of response to film material... The documentary response is one in which the image is perceived as signifying what it appears to record; a documentary film is one which seeks, by whatever means, to elicit this response; and the documentary movement is the history of the strategies which have been adopted to this end. (Cited in Crawford and Turton, 1992: 101)

The point that Vaughan is making here – and it is a view we share – is that it will always be difficult to gain a wide measure of agreement as to what are the particular generic features of documentary. It is true that viewers of factually based programming may have certain general expectations of those works which are promoted as documentaries (Nichols, 1991: 18–23), but uncertainty still remains

concerning the *criteria* that should be applied in determining which works to include or exclude. Should the touchstone be the aims or purposes of the programme makers in producing their accounts? Should it be certain intrinsic features of the works themselves – in particular, all that appears to link the account rendered with the world 'out there'? Or should one allow the audience itself to be the final arbiter in deciding where to draw the line, especially since – as our student responses show – viewers have a clear notion in their minds about what constitutes a documentary? (See also Winston in Rosenthal, 1988: 21–33.)

Critics have sought to extricate themselves from this terminological dilemma by breaking down the wide range of 'documentary' material into more convenient sub-genres. Thus, whilst the term 'documentary' has not outlived its usefulness as indicating certain general qualities or viewer expectations, we have in the last two or three decades witnessed the introduction of a set of new terms to distinguish between different types of work. These terms (e.g. natural history documentary, fly-on-the-wall documentary) have had the effect of establishing new, more particularised sub-genres, even though – it has to be said – some of these are still notoriously imprecise.

National and historical contexts

Views differ as to how far back one has to go to discover the roots of documentary, but by common consent the major impetus came in the 1920s when groups of film makers – in Britain, Germany, the Soviet Union and the USA – began to produce ideas and develop practices which in retrospect can be seen to have contributed significantly to the documentary tradition. (For a good overview see Barnouw, 1974, and Jacobs, 1979.) It is important to recognise the contribution of these early pioneers. First and foremost, they promoted a lively debate on the nature and function of documentary expression: what it might achieve and what means it could employ to pursue those ends.

When one reviews the contributions of the documentary pioneers, one is always struck by the way in which, for all the short-

comings of the technology available at that time, their work highlights some of the central issues which have continued to dominate documentary discourse and practice. The work of Robert Flaherty (still best remembered for his *Nanook of the North* (1922)) raises a whole series of questions about restaging events for the camera. Dziga Vertov's work on the other hand (especially his *The Man with the Movie Camera* (1929)), focuses attention on the purposes for which documentary film can be employed and what steps can be taken to encourage critical reflection on the part of the audience. By contrast, the work of the German film maker Walther Ruttmann, especially his *Berlin: Symphony of a City* (1927), shows what poetic and aesthetic effects can be elicited by the careful structuring of actuality sequences, thus laying the foundations for what has come to be known as the poetic documentary (see Chapter 3). And last but not least, Grierson's own documentary *œuvre* (together with his many *ex cathedra* pronouncements) highlights the potential uses of film documentary for social comment.

Although documentary is highly indebted to the generation of film makers who began working in the 1920s, its origins can be traced to a still earlier period. In one respect, of course, they lie in what we might call the documentary impulse: humankind's deeply ingrained desire to keep a record of transactions and events that are considered in some way significant. The resulting documentation – in whatever form it is set down – provides a testimony to the event's occurrence. (Here again one needs to emphasise that every document has to be treated with some of the same qualifications as the documentary itself. All documents are produced at some individual's or some institution's behest and this must be taken into account when assessing any 'truth value' they may contain.)

The manner in which any act of documenting has been undertaken has also always depended on available technologies. Until the invention of photography humankind's capacity for chronicling events had been limited to verbal or written accounts and to various forms of pictorial representation. With the coming of photography the process by which scenes from the actual world could be captured on light-sensitive film opened up new possibilities for accurately documenting the real. Photography was immediately heralded as a

medium which could achieve hitherto unprecedented authenticity in the reproduction of scenes from everyday life. Although initially regarded as a largely mechanical operation, photography soon began to be recognised, however, as a much less neutral medium than many had so fondly imagined. (Here we uncover the seeds of what has subsequently become one of the main topics in the documentary debate: on the one hand the claim that what we are witnessing is a faithful portrait of the real, on the other the equally compelling recognition that to obtain these pictures the film maker had to intervene and that particular viewer positions were constructed from which this 'witnessing' could take place.)

Nineteenth-century developments in photography paved the way for the introduction of moving-image technologies later in the century. And just as it was possible to discern a strong documentary element in photography, so too the same impulse is evident in early cinema. The early, short films of the Lumière brothers, for instance, which delighted French audiences in the 1890s, again home in on scenes from everyday life (Roud, 1980: 394–7, Barnouw, 1974: 3–24). For the crowds who flocked to see them, one of the attractions of these actuality entertainments was that they could recognise so much of themselves, or others like them, in these brief snippets of reality. Coupled with this was the pleasure of what we might term 'surrogate observation' – the experience of being cast in the role of witness to a series of real-life events. Audiences knew that these events were historical, but the recordings carried with them a freshness and vitality so as to make it appear that everything was being played out in the here and now.

Many of these early essays in film making, as well as simply recording everyday incidents, concentrated on capturing the humorous and whimsical aspects of life, frequently with a view to maximising the commercial potential of the product. (This is, incidentally, something one encounters to an increasing extent in contemporary documentary!) Gradually, however, during the first two decades of the twentieth century film makers began to broaden the range of their film-making activities. Recordings were made of public or national events in which public interest could be expected or presupposed. Film makers journeyed to distant lands to produce

the first travelogues or ethnographic accounts. Educationally enlightening films describing simple scientific processes began to be made. In other words, even though film makers were still severely limited by the nature of the equipment then available, the embryonic possibilities of documentary were already being actively explored. Formats and approaches which were to prove to be mainstays in the later history of documentary were already being tried out long before the 'movement' itself actually got under way (see Barnouw, 1974: 29–30).

From the 1920s onwards, as we have seen, documentary or non-fiction film began to achieve much greater recognition. And just as with any other cultural artefact, its development was determined in no small measure by the socio-cultural and political environments in which individual directors and film-making groups operated. We shall be exploring this topic in more detail in Chapter 7, but should like to illustrate the point here by briefly comparing the work of two of the best-known pioneers, John Grierson and Dziga Vertov. Grierson's strongly held belief was that documentary could be used as an effective tool in the task of providing cultural or educational enlightenment (Grierson, 1966: 141–55). At the same time, the funding for the work which he and other members of the British documentary movement produced came principally from state and/or industrial sponsorship. Opinions differ on the extent to which these agents actually exercised a controlling influence on the work produced, but recent evidence suggests that the leverage effected was greater than Grierson himself was wont to admit. Similarly, Dziga Vertov's views on what documentary could achieve are closely connected with, and determined by, the ideas which underpinned the Soviet system in which he lived and worked. For instance, in his critical essays he is concerned to emphasise how (documentary) film can be used as an instrument of consciousness-raising and as an aid to critical reflections about society. At the same time, for all his bold innovations (see in particular his *The Man with the Movie Camera* (1929)), much of his other work remains beholden to a political system which required of Soviet artists that they fall in line with the doctrine of Socialist Realism (the requirement that artwork should provide invigorating accounts of Soviet actuality).

The role of television

Few would question the significant, some would say life-saving, role that television has played in the continuing development of documentary. In the second half of the twentieth century television has been the single most important formative influence in determining the types of documentary that are produced and the forms in which they appear. Moreover, just as tracing the development of film documentaries through the early decades of the century throws some revealing light on the growth of cinema as a mass medium, so a close study of television documentary provides some fascinating insights into the workings of television (both with respect to its institutional practices and to its role within the wider society). The kinds of issue we shall be considering in the course of our inquiry are:

- (1) How the institutional constraints under which television operates impact on the documentary material commissioned or acquired for transmission (including decisions on what programmes will not be shown)
- (2) How commissioned material is required to adhere to certain preferred house-styles or to slot into established programme formats
- (3) How certain steps are normally taken to ensure that material is accessible to a large mass audience.

In assessing the various ways in which documentary has been shaped by television we should make clear at the outset that for some commentators television is considered to have been a particularly malign force (see Rosenthal, 1988: 215, Loizos, 1993: 115–16). How legitimate are these charges and, in particular, what evidence is there for suggesting that television has stymied some of documentary's more interesting developmental possibilities?

Certainly it cannot be denied that television has used documentary for its own ends. Film makers and programme producers have always been expected to format their work in such a way that it falls in line with standardised broadcasting requirements. Likewise, in recent times the growing forces of commercialism in broadcasting have led to an increase in the number of dramatically enhanced modes of presentation. And it is equally true that, in whatever broadcasting system they are working, programme makers have

been well aware that what they might wish to articulate (especially with regard to the expression of political views) is conditioned by certain set limits. Nevertheless, and in spite of all this, television has continued to provide important opportunities for documentary film makers.⁵ It has, for instance, been instrumental in encouraging the development of interesting new formats. Some, such as the innovative *Video Diaries* format (about which more in Chapters 3 and 4), have grown out of earlier access programme initiatives whereby 'ordinary' viewers are given the chance to contribute their own programmes with the minimum of institutional or editorial control. Others, such as the popular though often controversial drama-documentary form, have resulted from the amalgamation of what were once considered two distinct programming categories into a single hybridised form (see Chapter 6).

As already suggested, the development of television documentary is very closely connected with the more general history of the medium. Where television has been dominated by a small number of terrestrial public-service channels operating in tightly regulated conditions, documentaries have often been deployed as a means of reinforcing the public-service credentials of the channel. They have been regarded as a highly appropriate vehicle for underlining that channel's commitment to a form of programming that has a high informational and educative value. Documentaries have been included in the schedule because they have been felt to encourage a thoughtful, reflective response and to act, in some measure, as an antidote to the large swathes of entertainment programming that make little or no demand on the audience's intelligence. As television has increasingly been subject to forces of commercialism, however, factual broadcasting in general and documentary in particular have had to adjust to the demands of a rapidly changing medium. In the eyes of more pessimistically inclined critics, this (as far as documentary is concerned) has turned out to be not so much an adjustment as a fatal downward spiral.

The result has been that, for some commentators at least, the question now is how much longer documentary can survive in an increasingly hostile environment. Our own view is that these gloomy prophecies of documentary's imminent demise are altogether too

doom-laden, and we hope to illustrate that there are many signs of vigorous life. Certainly, from the perspective of the late 1990s, all the evidence points to a state of affairs where documentaries are more than holding their own against the 'challenge' of other types of programming. As one BBC editor, writing in March 1996, has commented:

Faced with the question in 1991 or 1992 [as to how documentaries would fare in the coming years] many British documentarists would have predicted a bleak future. Refranchising ITV and allowing Channel 4 to raise its own advertising revenue were bound to create a much more competitive broadcasting world. And traditionally it was sport, feature films, drama and light entertainment which were the winners in a ratings game. Documentaries were an ornament on the mantelpiece of broadcasting and the first to go ... The reality could not have turned out more different. There has been an outpouring of documentaries on all the terrestrial channels and a flood of new factual material on the satellites and cable. Up till now, at least, the quality has been high – better perhaps than at any time in the past. (Triffitt, 1996: 1)

We shall be looking more closely at how documentaries are fashioned to maximise audience appeal in Chapter 9. For the moment, however, we should just like to note that the rapid changes that have transformed the television landscape in the 1990s have caused television executives and producers to radically rethink how documentaries could be deployed in the programme schedule. Moreover, in contrast to the earlier broadcasting age, which was primarily determined by public-service concerns, today's broadcasters are more interested in what contribution documentaries can make to the overall identity of a channel or how they can be used instrumentally to compete with the programming put out by a rival channel.⁶

It would, however, be wrong to assume that we are necessarily entering a new golden age of documentary. Documentarists themselves take the view that they are now required to work under much tighter constraints than they ever did previously: to stand any chance of being broadcast the material has to fall in line with each channel's standard documentary formats. For many documentarists

the requirement that all their work be tailored in this way is regarded as a major constraint on their artistic freedom. Certainly, in the case of the documentary series, these straitjacketing pressures do sometimes result in individual programmes having to display a uniformity of style which may not always be appropriate to the subject matter. On the other hand, the knowledge on the part of the documentarists that their work is going to have to conform to a range of standardised criteria can sometimes prove to have a beneficial disciplinary effect; it does not necessarily result in the sort of compromises into which some documentarists feel they are being forced (see Rosenthal, 1988: 38–9, 204).

Apart from the constraints imposed by broadcasters' stranding and branding policies, one also has to recognise that nowadays most documentarists operate under very different working conditions from those of their colleagues in an earlier generation. The bureaucratic and institutional structures of television have always meant that documentarists working for this medium are subject to tighter control and regulation than those working in film units whose products were destined for cinematic exhibition.⁷ But as television has moved into a progressively more deregulated age, so the conditions under which documentarists operate have also changed (in Britain and elsewhere in Europe). Far fewer documentaries are now made 'in house' by specialist documentary units, and an increasing number are produced by independent companies working on a single-commission basis. Whilst these companies may be spared some of the bureaucratic excesses associated with being employed by a large organisation, the conditions under which they now work have introduced a new set of constraints.

Modes of address: filmic and televisual

If television as an institution has had a shaping influence on what types of documentary are made, it has also had a marked impact on documentary's functions and characteristic modes of address. In the pre-television era documentaries were mostly screened in cinemas as part of an evening programme of entertainment which would typically include an introductory newsreel and/or a documentary, followed after a short interval for refreshments by the screening of

a full-length feature film (never, for fairly obvious reasons, in the reverse order!). Knowing that these would be the circumstances in which many viewers would consume their films, documentarists adopted what they saw as an appropriate mode of address. They recognised, for instance, that the majority of viewers went to the movies primarily for diversion and entertainment. Therefore, if documentaries were to stand any chance of being even halfway positively received, their makers would have to adopt at least some of the dramatising strategies employed by fiction film makers of the day.⁸

When television was in its infancy, there was an initial tendency to assume that broadcast documentary would, broadly speaking, follow in the footsteps of the film pioneers. In Britain, for instance, there was a belief that television documentary could continue the task of cultural and social enlightenment to which Grierson and his co-workers had committed themselves some two decades previously (Scannell, 1979: 106, Bell, 1986: 65–80).

Gradually, however, as the new medium developed its own preferred formats, small-screen documentary began to be pulled away from its cinematic origins and be influenced more and more by specifically televisual modes. Although it still had many points in common with cinema, television acquired a different set of priorities. In particular, it was committed to a more diverse range of programming. Documentary therefore found itself in the position of having to adapt to the new styles and modes of address, as well as having to adjust to a stricter regulatory regime. In other words, some film makers felt that in order to gain entry to the television market they could not afford to be too politically outspoken or to produce work which might be considered otherwise too challenging for television's mass audience.⁹

As documentaries gradually became a regular feature of television's bill of fare, not surprisingly, they acquired some of the features of other programming modes. News and current affairs were one area of broadcasting that had much in common with documentary, and, institutionally, there were many opportunities for fruitful interchange (even though in most cases each 'sector' jealously guarded its rights to a degree of departmental indepen-

dence). Here lie the seeds for what has become a sub-genre of documentary, the 'extended reportage' (Corner, 1996: 2). The tendency to blur the boundaries between a 'purer' type of documentary (one closer to its cinematic origins) and other broadcast forms has continued to the present day.

When we compare the different modes of address of television and cinema we should always be aware that they are at heart different signifying systems and that each addresses its respective audience in quite distinct ways. This is nowhere better illustrated than in a comparison of the 'conditions of reception' of the two media. With cinema the combination of high-definition image, large screen and darkened auditorium has always been thought to promote a more concentrated viewing experience. The cinema audience is arguably more committed in the sense that cinema-goers have purchased a ticket or built the visit into their social schedule. With television, on the other hand, the conditions of reception are quite different. Viewing usually takes place in the domestic environment and is consequently open to many more distractions (see Ellis, 1982). Broadcasters will therefore, so it is claimed, always have to work that much harder to retain the attention of viewers.¹⁰ They have accordingly had to devise a whole series of strategies, some of which we will be considering in more detail in the final chapter.

For all these reasons, those involved in producing documentaries for television have had to become proficient at playing according to the medium's rules. Producers have by and large learned how to produce work that is not heavily dependent on the stylistic effects that can be achieved through a large- or wide-screen format or through superior sound reproduction (see Jacobs, 1979: 455). By the same token, they have also learned how to harness the new technologies (especially lightweight cameras and digital editing machines) to produce strikingly innovative work, some of which has taken documentary in exciting new directions.

There are also signs that some of the documentary die-hards are beginning to shed their old prejudices about the status of television documentary. In the early days of television there was often considerable friction between those who were committed to the new medium and those who had learned their trade as film makers.

Many belonging to the former camp were made to feel that they were betraying the cause of 'classic' documentary. It was certainly the case that the primary historical values of documentary were determined by cinema. It is just as true, however, that television has played a major role in revitalising the genre and in challenging some of the old orthodoxies.

Thus, in the final years of this century the prospects for documentary, including the many mutants which television has spawned, look relatively bright. The digital revolution – whether in the form of the various aids it brings to documentary production or in the way it is opening up new transmission opportunities – will certainly be a major force in determining the future of documentary. Not only will the production of documentaries become much cheaper than hitherto, but the proliferation of channels and other media outlets will lead to new possibilities for marketing and consumption.

On the other hand, one cannot afford to be too sanguine about documentary's prospects in today's rapidly developing media environment. For all its proven ability to adapt to changing circumstances, the chill winds of commercialism which blow through today's television institutions do not always make for a particularly conducive environment for documentary. For this reason we may well see more and more documentarists turning to those alternative modes of delivery (CD-ROM and the Internet) to accommodate work which in a previous age would have been commissioned and screened by terrestrial broadcasters.¹¹