

SUBJECT: FILM STUDIES
TOPIC: Types of documentary
SEETHU BABY MANGALAM
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Types of documentary

Poetic Documentaries

- They focus on experiences, images, and showing the audience the world through a different set of eyes. Abstract and loose with narrative, the poetic sub-genre can be very unconventional and experimental in form and content. The ultimate goal is to create a *feeling* rather than a *truth*.
- Since [poetic documentaries often have little or no narrative content](#), the director of photography is often asked to capture highly composed, visually striking images that can tell a story without additional verbal context.
- Some examples of poetic documentaries include:
 - [Coal Face](#) (1935) — Dir. [Alberto Cavalcanti](#)
 - [Fata Morgana](#) (1971) — Dir. [Wermner Herzog](#)
 - [Tongues Untied](#) (1989) — Dir. [Marlon Riggs](#)

Expository Documentaries

- In sharp contrast to poetic, expository documentaries aim to inform and/or persuade — often through omnipresent “[Voice of God](#)” narration that’s devoid of ambiguous or poetic rhetoric. This mode includes the familiar [Ken Burns](#) and television (A&E, History Channel, etc.) styles.
- Some examples of expository documentaries include:
 - [*City of Gold*](#) (1957) — Dir. [Colin Low](#) and [Wolf Koenig](#)
 - [*Waiting for Fidel*](#) (1974) — Dir. [Michael Rubbo](#)
 - [*March of the Penguins*](#) (2005) — Dir. [Luc Jacque](#)

Observational Documentaries

- They aim to simply observe the world around them. A style of documentary embraced by the cinema vérité movement, observational documentaries attempt to discover the ultimate truth of their subject by observing the subject's real-life without interrupting.
- Observational documentaries attempt to give voice to all sides of an issue by offering audiences firsthand access to some of the subject's most important (and often private) moments.
- some examples of observational documentaries include:
 - [*Crisis: Behind a Presidential Commitment*](#) (1963) — Dir. [Robert Drew](#)
 - [*Salesman*](#) (1969) — Dir. [Albert Maysles](#), [David Maysles](#), and [Charlotte Zwerin](#)

Participatory Documentaries

- **Participatory documentaries** include the filmmaker within the narrative. This inclusion can be as minor as a filmmaker using their voice to prod their subjects with questions or cues from behind the camera — or as major as a filmmaker directly influencing the actions of the narrative.
- Participatory documentaries are defined by the interaction between the documentary filmmakers and their subject. It is also known as **interactive documentaries**, often present the filmmaker's version of the truth as “the” truth, focusing on direct engagement with subjects and capturing real emotional responses and interactions.
- Some examples of participatory documentaries include:
 - [*Chronicle of a Summer*](#) (1961) — Dir. [Edgar Morin](#) and [Jean Rouch](#)
 - [*Sherman's March*](#) (1985) — Dir. [Ross McElwee](#)

Reflexive Documentaries

- **Reflexive documentaries** are similar to participatory docs in that they often include the filmmaker within the film. However, unlike participatory, most creators of reflexive documentaries make no attempt to explore an outside subject. Rather, they focus solely on themselves and the act of making the film.
- [Reflexive documentaries focus on the relationship between the filmmaker and the audience](#). Since the subject matter is often the process of documentary filmmaking itself, a cinematographer will shoot behind-the-scenes style footage of the entire film production process, including editing, interviewing, and post-production.
- The best example of this style is the 1929 silent documentary [*Man with a Movie Camera*](#) by Soviet filmmaker [Dziga Vertov](#). It's a classic showcase of the creative — and quite challenging — images a true reflexive documentary can create.

Performative Documentaries

- **Performative documentaries** are an experimental combination of styles used to stress subject experience and share an emotional response with the world. They often connect and juxtapose personal accounts with larger political or historical issues. This has sometimes been called the “[Michael Moore](#)-style,” as he often uses his own personal stories as a way to construct social truths
- [Performative documentaries focus on the filmmaker’s involvement with their subject](#), using his or her personal experience or relationship with the subject.