

The background features abstract, overlapping green geometric shapes, primarily triangles and polygons, in various shades of green, creating a modern and dynamic visual effect.

SUBJECT: FILM STUDIES
TOPIC:DOCUMENTARY FILMS
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DOCUMENTARY FILMS

DOCUMENTARY

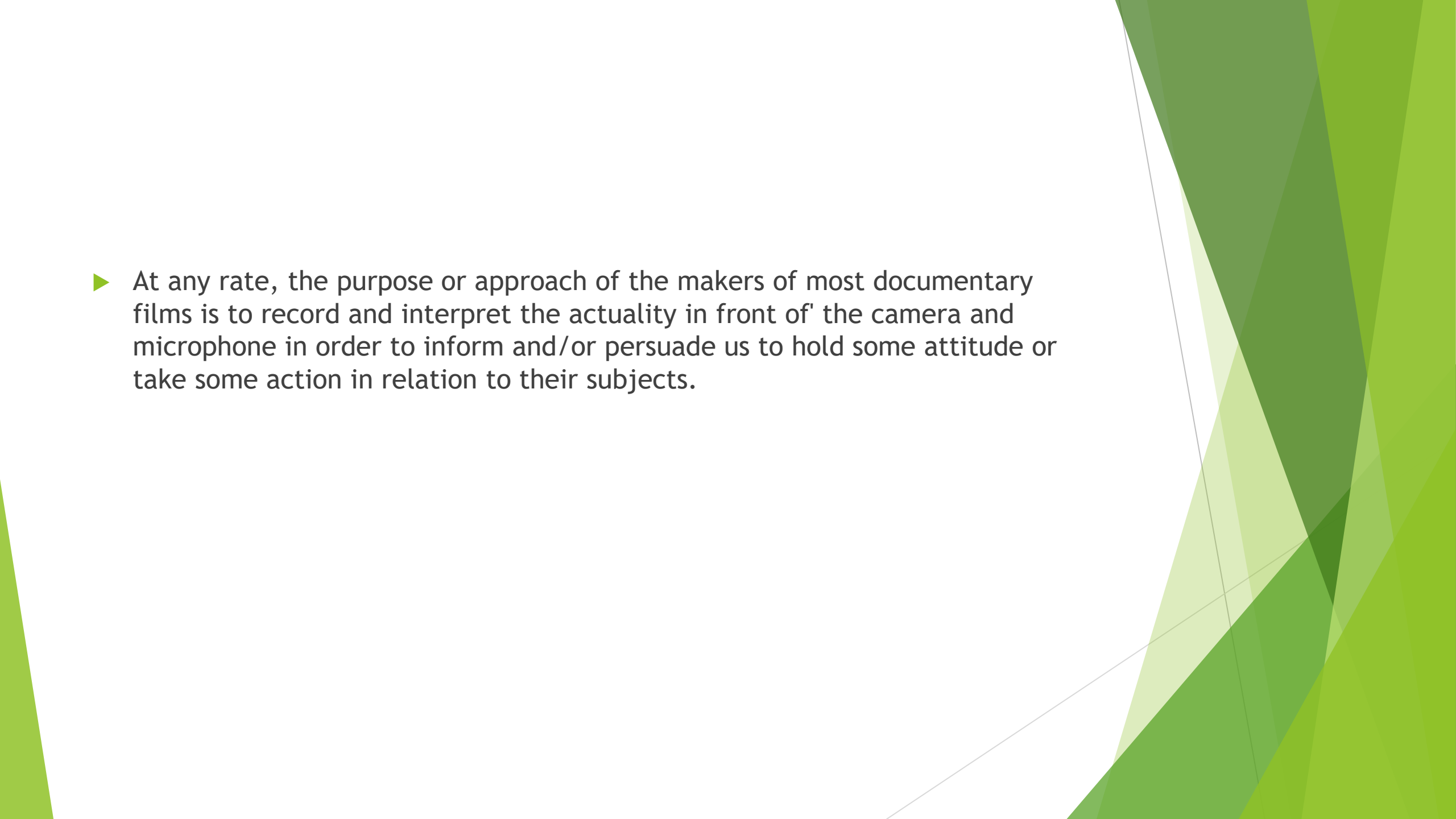
- ▶ Characteristics documentaries have in common that are distinct from other film types (especially from the fiction film) can be thought of in terms of: 1) subjects; 2) purposes, points of view, or approaches; 3) forms; 4) production methods and techniques: and 5) the sorts of experiences they offer audiences

Subject

- ▶ Subject of focus on something other than the general human condition involving individual human actions and relationships, the province of narrative fiction and drama.
- ▶ For example, *The Fourth Estate* (1940), a British documentary made by Paul Rotha, is about a newspaper, the *London Times*
- ▶ Generally, documentaries are about something specific and factual and concern public matters rather than private ones. The people, places, and events in them are actual and usually contemporary.

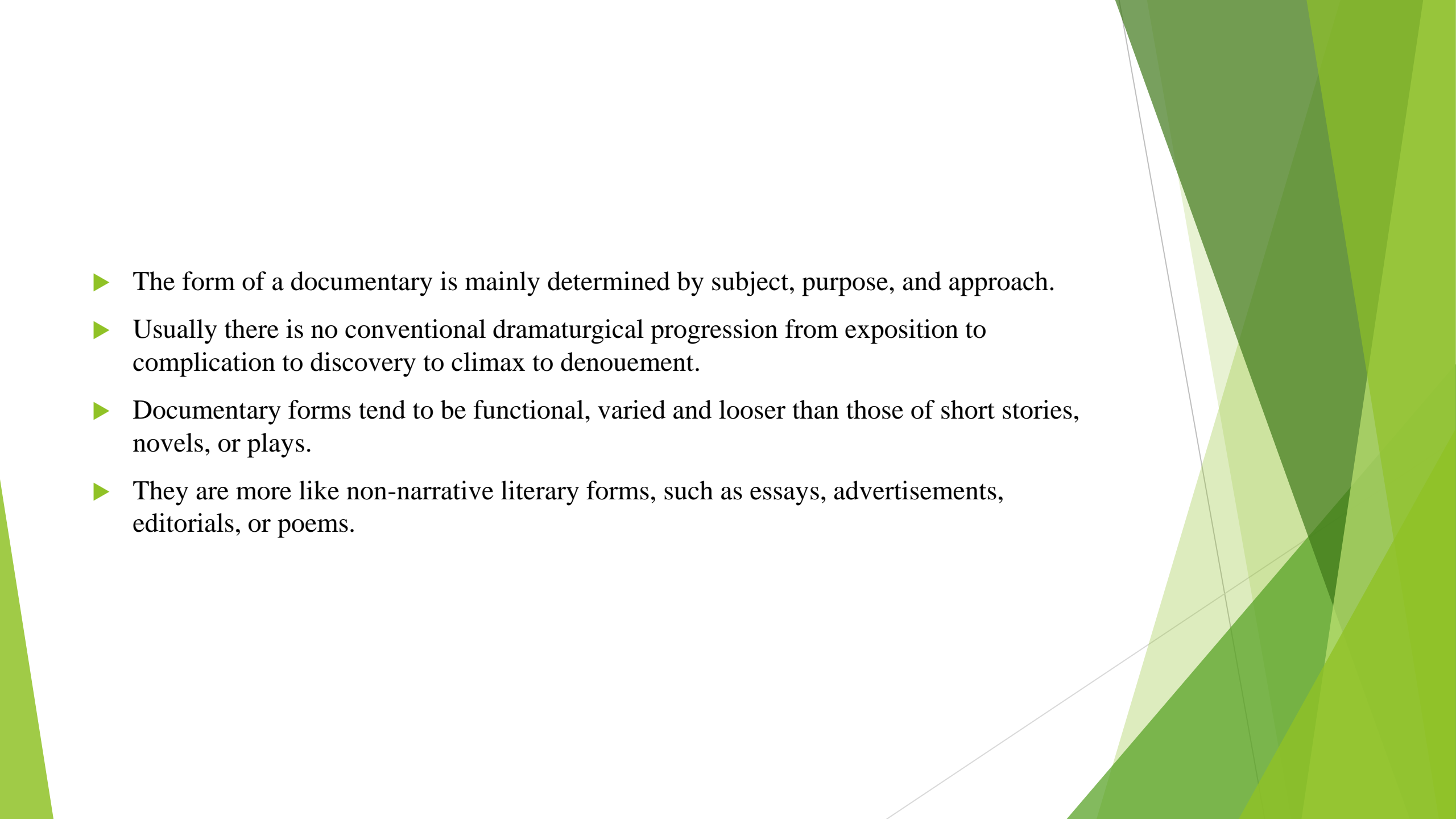
purpose/point of view/approach

- ▶ They record social and cultural phenomena they consider significant in order to inform us about these people, events, places, institutions, and problems.
- ▶ In so doing, documentary filmmakers intend to increase our understanding of, our interest in, and perhaps our sympathy for their subjects.
- ▶ They may hope that through this means of informal education they will enable us to live our lives a little more fully and intelligently.

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- The background of the slide features abstract, overlapping geometric shapes in various shades of green, ranging from light lime to dark forest green. These shapes are primarily located on the right side and bottom of the frame, creating a modern, layered effect. The main content area on the left is white.
- At any rate, the purpose or approach of the makers of most documentary films is to record and interpret the actuality in front of the camera and microphone in order to inform and/or persuade us to hold some attitude or take some action in relation to their subjects.

form

- ▶ Documentaries, whether scripted in advance or confined to recorded spontaneous action, are derived from and limited to actuality.
- ▶ Documentary filmmakers confine themselves to extracting and arranging from what already exists rather than making up content.
- ▶ They may recreate what they have observed but they do not create totally out of imagination as creators of stories can do.
- ▶ Though documentarians may follow a chronological line and include people in their films, they do not employ plot or character development as standard means of organization as do fiction filmmakers.

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- ▶ The form of a documentary is mainly determined by subject, purpose, and approach.
 - ▶ Usually there is no conventional dramaturgical progression from exposition to complication to discovery to climax to denouement.
 - ▶ Documentary forms tend to be functional, varied and looser than those of short stories, novels, or plays.
 - ▶ They are more like non-narrative literary forms, such as essays, advertisements, editorials, or poems.

production method and technique

- ▶ It refers to the ways images are shot, the sounds recorded, and the two edited together.
- ▶ One basic requirement of documentary is the use of nonactors ("real people" who "play themselves") rather than actors (who are cast, costumed, and made up to play "roles").
- ▶ The other basic requirement is shooting on location (rather than on sound stages or studio backlots). In documentaries no sets are constructed.

- ▶ Lighting is usually what exists at the location, supplemented only when necessary to achieve adequate exposure, not for atmosphere or mood.
- ▶ Exceptions to these generalizations occur, of course; but, in general, any manipulation of images or sounds is largely confined to what is required to make the recording of them possible, or to make the result seem closer to the actual than inadequate technique might.

audience experience

- ▶ documentary filmmakers seek to provide is generally twofold: an aesthetic experience of some sort, on the one hand, and an effect on attitudes, possibly leading to action, on the other.
- ▶ documentary filmmaking offers more that could be described as professional *skill* than as personal *style*; communication rather than expression is what the filmmaker is usually after.
- ▶ Consequently, the audience is responding not so much to the artist (who keeps under cover) as to the subject matter of the film (and the artist's more or less covert statements about it).
- ▶ art should both please and instruct.

- ▶ Robert Flaherty's *Nanook of the North*. He wanted to show the Eskimo, whom he had gotten to know in his travels, to the folks back home. To accomplish this purpose, he fashioned a new form of filmmaking.
- ▶ His second film *Moana* (1926)
- ▶ John Grierson- "Of course, *Moana* being a visual account of events in the daily life of a Polynesian youth and his family, has documentary value."
- ▶ Grierson's principles of documentary were that cinema's potential for observing life could be exploited in a new art form

- ▶ Documentary has as its root word *document*, which comes from the Latin *docere*, to teach.
- ▶ The American film critic Pare Lorentz defines a documentary film as "a factual film which is dramatic."