

Media Literacy
Documentary terminology

I. Some of the modes of a nonfiction film:

Expository: documentaries that are intended to inform and/or persuade the audience about an issue

Observational: filmmaker as “fly on the wall.”

Interactive: filmmaker involves himself in on-screen action (like interviews and narration)

II. Elements of a nonfiction film:

Visual track, including the following:

- primary footage aka A-roll(interviews of subjects, scenes of the surroundings, reenactments, or action as it occurs)
- B-roll (including cut-in and cutaway)
- archival or found footage, ex. news broadcast, home movies, other films, still images (like photos, maps, charts, etc.)

Audio track, including the following:

- Voices

Diegetic—what could be heard during filming, including dialogue

Non-diegetic including 3rd person narration—can be on-screen and off-screen, “Voice of God” narration

Narration—includes 1st person on-screen (could be primary or B-roll) or 3rd person off-screen (“Voice of God”)

- Music

Diegetic—what could logically be heard during the filming

Non-diegetic—music that is added after filming and intended solely for audience reaction

- Sound effects

Diegetic—any ambient sounds at the time of recording that may be significant to include (or even highlight) in the film

Non-diegetic—any sound added or deliberately manipulated for a particular purpose

Text track (aka graphics track) involves all the writing and graphics that are added to the film and which often overlay the visual track—ex: charts, drawings, and other graphics and can also include subtitles.

- Subtitles can...

Identify the person speaking, the location of the scene, the source of the stock footage, or translate dialogue spoken in a foreign language.

III. Other terms:

Cinema verite—literally “film truth,” it refers to a type of interactive documentary that tries to present a version of reality by documenting the encounters between subject and filmmaker.

Direct cinema—Films in the observational mode that have little interaction between filmmaker and subject.

Mockumentary—fiction film that takes on the style of a documentary often for humor’s sake

Docudrama—a fiction film based on real-life events

Ethnographic filmmaking—observes a “culture” (broadly defined) and presents his/her findings to a larger audience

Montage—editing together several different types of shots for a particular effect

Realism—Although all nonfiction films are in most ways considered “real,” this term applies to the feelings and degree of reality the filmmaker chooses to include

IV. Framing/ Shots

Long shot—shot taken from some distance; shows full subject and perhaps the surrounding scene

Establishing shot—often a long shot or series of shots that sets the scene or shows the space of the scene

Close-up—the image being shot takes up at least 80% of the frame. An extreme close-up shows one part of the body or a portion of the object.

Medium shot—in between the Long Shot and the Close-up; people are seen from the waist up.

V. Camera Angles

Low angle—camera shoots subject from below; has the effect of making the subject look larger than normal—strong, powerful, threatening

High angle—camera is above the subject; usually has the effect of making the subject look smaller than normal—weak, powerless, trapped

Eye-level—accounts for 90 to 95 percent of shots seen because it’s the most natural; camera is even with the subjects’ eyes

Dutch angle—shot that is tilted sideways on the horizontal line; used to add tension to a static frame; it creates a sinister or distorted view of a character

VI. Lighting

Low-key—scene is flooded with shadows and darkness; creates suspense/ suspicion

High-key—scene is flooded with light; creates bright and open-looking scene

Neutral—neither bright nor dark—even lighting throughout the shot

Bottom/ side—direct lighting from below or from one side; often dangerous or evil looking, may convey split personality or moral ambiguity

Front/ rear—soft, direct lighting on face or back of subject; may suggest innocence

VII. Editing Techniques

The most common is a “cut” to another image. Others are:

Fade—scene fades to black or white; often implies that time has passed

Dissolve—an image fades into another; can create a connection between images

Crosscutting—cut to action that is happening simultaneously

Flashback—movement into action that has happened previously; often signified by change in music, voice-over narration, or a dissolve

Eye-line match—a shot of a person looking, then a cut to what he or she saw, followed by a cut back for reaction

VIII. Camera Movement

Pan—stationary camera that moves left or right

Tilt—stationary camera that moves up or down

Zoom—the camera is stationary but the lens moves, making the objects appear to grow larger or smaller

Dolly—the camera itself is moving with the action—on a track, on wheels, or held by hand; often called “trucking” when the camera moves left or right