

Making Documentary Films

A For much of the twentieth century, documentary films were overshadowed by their more successful Hollywood counterparts. For a number of reasons, documentaries were frequently ignored by critics and film studies courses at universities. Firstly, the very idea of documentary film made some people suspicious. As the critic Dr Helmut Fischer put it, 'Documentary makers might have ambitions to tell the "truth" and show only "facts" but there is no such thing as a non-fiction film. That's because, as soon as you record an incident on camera, you are altering its reality in a fundamental way'. Secondly, even supporters of documentaries could not agree on a precise definition, which did little to improve the reputation of the genre. Lastly, there were also concerns about the ethics of filming subjects without their consent, which is a necessity in many documentary films.

B None of this prevented documentaries from being produced, though exactly when the process started is open to question. It is often claimed that *Nanook of the North* was the first documentary. Made by the American filmmaker Robert J. Flaherty in 1922, the film depicts the hard, sometimes heroic lives of native American peoples in the Canadian Arctic. *Nanook of the North* is said to have set off a trend that continued through the 1920s with the films of Dziga Vertov in the Soviet Union and works by other filmmakers around the world. However, that 1922 starting point has been disputed by supporters of an earlier date. Among this group is film historian Anthony Berwick, who argues that the genre can be traced back as early as 1895, when similar films started to appear, including newsreels, scientific films and accounts of journeys of exploration.

C In the years following 1922, one particular style of documentary started to appear. These films adopted a serious tone while depicting the lives of actual people. Cameras were mounted on tripods and subjects rehearsed and repeated activities for the purposes of the film. British filmmaker John Grierson was an important member of this group. Grierson's career lasted nearly 40 years, beginning with *Drifters* (1929) and culminating with *I Remember, I Remember* (1968). However, by the 1960s Grierson's style of film was being rejected by the Direct Cinema movement, which wanted to produce more natural and authentic films: cameras were hand-held; no additional lighting or sound was used; and the subjects did not rehearse. According to film writer Paula Murphy, the principles and methods of Direct Cinema brought documentaries to the attention of universities and film historians as never before. Documentaries started to be recognized as a distinct genre worthy of serious scholarly analysis.

D Starting in the 1980s, the widespread availability of first video and then digital cameras transformed filmmaking. The flexibility and low cost of these devices meant that anyone could now be a filmmaker. Amateurs working from home could compete with professionals in ways never possible before. The appearance of online film-sharing platforms in the early 2000s only increased the new possibilities for amateur documentaries were being made, perhaps the most popular documentary of 2006 was still the professionally made *An Inconvenient Truth*. New cameras and digital platforms revolutionised the *making* of films. But as critic Maria Fiala has pointed out, ‘The arguments sometimes put forward that these innovations immediately transformed what the public expected to see in a documentary isn’t entirely accurate.’

E However, a new generation of documentary filmmakers then emerged, and with them came a new philosophy of the genre. These filmmakers moved away from highlighting political themes or urgent social issues. Instead the focus moved inwards, exploring personal lives, relationships and emotions. It could be argued that *Catfish* (2010) was a perfect example of this new trend. The film chronicles the everyday lives and interactions of the social media generation and was both a commercial and critical success. Filmmaker Josh Camberwell maintains that *Catfish* embodies a new realization that documentaries are inherently subjective and that this should be celebrated. Says Camberwell, ‘It is a requirement for documentary makers to express a particular viewpoint and give personal responses to the material they are recording.’

F The popularity and variety of documentaries today is illustrated by the large number of film festivals focusing on the genre around the world. The biggest of all must be Hot Docs Festival in Canada, which over the years has showcased hundreds of documentaries from more than 50 different countries. Even older is the Hamburg International Short Film Festival. As its name suggests, Hamburg specializes in short films, but one category takes this to its limits – entries may not exceed three minutes in duration. The Short and Sweet Festival is a slightly smaller event held in Utah, USA. The small size of the festival means that for first timers this is the ideal venue to try to get some recognition for their films. Then there is the Atlanta Shortsfest, which is a great event for a wide variety of filmmakers. Atlanta welcomes all established types of documentaries and recognises the growing popularity of animations, with a category specifically for films of this type. These are just a few of the scores of film festivals on offer, and there are more being established every year. All in all, it has never been easier for documentary makers to get their films in front of an audience.

READING PASSAGE-2 Questions

Questions 14-19

Reading Passage 2 has six paragraphs, **A-F**.

Choose the correct heading for each paragraph from the list of headings below.

*Write the correct number, **i-viii**, in boxes 14-19 on your answer sheet.*

List of Headings

- i** A contrast between two historic approaches to documentary filmmaking
- ii** Disagreement between two individual documentary makers
- iii** A wide range of opportunities to promote documentary filmmaking
- iv** A number of criticisms about all documentary filmmaking in the past
- v** One film that represented a fresh approach to documentary filmmaking
- vi** Some probable future trends in documentary filmmaking
- vii** The debate about the origins of documentary filmmaking
- viii** The ability of ordinary people to create documentary films for the first time

- 14** Paragraph A _____
- 15** Paragraph B _____
- 16** Paragraph C _____
- 17** Paragraph D _____
- 18** Paragraph E _____
- 19** Paragraph F _____

Questions 20-23

Look at the statements (Questions 20-23) and the list of people below.

Match each statement with the correct person, A-E.

Write the correct letter, A-E, in boxes 20-23 on your answer sheet.

20 The creation of some new technologies did not change viewers' attitudes towards documentaries as quickly as is sometimes proposed.

21 One set of beliefs and techniques helped to make documentary films academically respectable.