

DOCUMENTARY FİLM : A DEFINITION PROBLEM

Doç. Dr. Nazmi ULUTAK

It is not always easy to find or make a definition of a term in the fields of social sciences and arts. But, one must use these terms in order to communicate, criticize or add new aspects to that field. By using these terms one can express his thoughts quickly and clearly, unless he can make a clear definition or explain what s/he meant by that term. Documentary is one of the complex terms in cinema and television.

G. Roy Levin, as the writer of **Documentary Explorations**, showed the problem directly; "A definition of documentary? Fifteen interviews with documentary film makers and still it would be difficult to find a satisfactory one."(1) Also, Giannetti indicated that, "documentarists -both practitioners and theorists- are by no agreed on the definition of a documentary movie."(2) The term documentary has been used from newsreels to instructional films to travelogues and television specials, and so it is the most known but most abused and most misunderstood term in the film tradition.(3) To understand the problems of defining the documentary film, we have to see the differences between documentary film and fiction film. These differences will show us the area and concept where the documentaries are used.

In addition to this, we have to look over the definitions of documentary which were made by film makers, film historians and critics.

Documentary, as a term, was first used by John Grierson in the New York Sun (8 February 1926) about Robert Flaherty's *Moana*. "Being a visual account of the daily life of a Polynesian youth", he wrote, the film "has documentary value." (4) Grierson adapted this term from the French word 'documentaire' which was used to describe travel films. (5) This term had begun to be used among the films which had some basic differences from the fictional films. These differences between the fiction films and documentary films are now more important to understand the principles, concepts and forms of documentary films.

Grierson gave the name of this special kind of motion picture in 1926 but the beginning of this genre started with the history of cinema. According to Lewis Jacobs, "what has to be called documentary" developed from 1894 to 1922, "emerging finally as an original model distinct from all other types of motion pictures" (6) Jacobs adds that after this thirty years of growing, "the documentary film came to be identifiable as a special kind of picture" with "social purpose", "real people", "real events" and "as opposed to staged scenes of imaginary characters and fictional stories of studio-made pictures."

Grierson showed the differences between documentary film and fiction film clearly when he set up the principles of documentary film. He believed that there are three main principles of documentary:

1— We believe that the cinema's capacity for getting around, for observing and selecting from life itself, can be exploited in a new and vital art form. The studio films largely ignore this possibility of opening up the screen on the real world. They photograph acted stories against artificial backgrounds. Documentary would photograph the living scene and the living story.

2— We believe that the original (or native) actor, and the original (or native) scene, are better guides to a screen interpretation of the modern world. They give cinema a greater fund of material. They give it power of interpretation over more complex and astonishing happenings in the real world than the studio mind can conjure up or the studio mechanician recreate.

3— We believe that the materials and stories thus taken from the raw can be finer (more real in the philosophic sense) than the acted article. Spontaneous gesture has a special value on the screen.

Cinema has a sensational capacity for enhancing the movement which tradition has formed or time worn smooth. Its arbitrary rectangle specially reveals movements; it gives maximum pattern in space and time. Add to this that documentary can achieve an intimacy of knowledge and effect impossible to the shimsham mechanics of the studio, and the fifty-fingered interpretations of the metropolitan actor. (7)

In these principles we can easily see the importance of the real people, real events, real places and real stories in documentary films. These elements make documentary film a unique art form. First of all, real people are the main subjects of documentary films. Professional or non-professional actors, who have to act, do not have a part in documentary films; because the main goal of a documentary film is the life of a normal person who lives in her or his own condition. This condition has a meaning which comes from social, economic, cultural, personal and environmental relations of that person. "The documentarist", according to Giannetti, "tends to withhold judgement until observing how the person reacts in fact ..., the documentarist prefers the real thing to the likely thing." (8)

While the documentarist aims to work with real people, s/he also works on the real events where the real people live. A documentarist does not create a new event to present his or her subject; just real life is observed. Through this approach a documentarist "arrives at truth through authentic facts, not artistic falsehoods." (9) S/he is very sensitive to inaccuracies, distortions and fakeries so that authenticity becomes the basic support. Giannetti gives an example of this; "a shaky, blurry shot of an actual murder is more emotionally moving than a carefully photographed recreation of the event."

Also a documentarist uses the real places or spaces in his or her film when he or she presents the real people and real events. He can not use the sets like fiction filmmakers. The documentarist must be in the life where the real people live. Barsam explains that a documentary "usually filmed on the actual scene, with actual people, without sets, costumes, written dialogue, or created sound effects." (10) For Barsam, a documentary film tries to give the feeling of 'being there', with faithfulness to the fact. Spectators become a witness to the fact which the film or the documentarist shows.

Fiction films always tell a story, but documentary films, first of all, are interested in facts and they try to explain or comment

on these facts. In fiction films, we can easily understand the cause-effect pattern; after the conflict is set up, each scene has a function to reach the climax and then the conflict is solved. Giannetti explains that "one could not rearrange such sequences without damaging the logic of the rising action." (11) Documentary films dramatize fact instead of fiction or a created story. A documentarist, for Barsam, "focuses his personal vision and his camera on actual situations and attempts to render a creative interpretation of them." (12)

Fiction films are generally called 'story' or 'theatrical' films, and they are made by major studios, companies and producers for showing in public theaters. Their main goal is to make a profit while entertaining the people who watch them. Barsam summarized this subject very clearly: "Theatrical generally implies commercial, and the main purpose of most of these films is to make money." (13)

These distinctions between documentary and fiction films might give general information about documentary films; their concepts, forms, areas and aims. But defining the documentary as a term, becomes more complicated because of the use of documentary techniques in fiction films and sometimes it is difficult to say whether a film is fictional or documentary. (14) With a large view, as Andrew Sarris defines; "all films are documentary films in the sense that all films are documents of someone, something, sometime, someplace." (15) Basil Wright sees documentary films as a method which is an approach to public information. (16) In the Encyclopedia Britannica documentary is defined as a film which has an educational or entertainment purpose, while dealing with factual materials. (17) The World Union of Documentary defined the documentary film in 1948:

... all methods of recording on celluloid any aspect of reality interpreted either by factual shooting or by sincere and justifiable reconstruction, so as to appeal either to reason or emotion, for the purpose of stimulating the desire for, and the widening of human knowledge and understanding, and of truthfully posing problems and their solutions in the spheres of economics, culture, and human relations. (18)

Another institutional definition was made by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences for the Special Rules for Documentary Awards:

... these dealing with significant historical, social, scientific, or economic subjects, either photographed in actual occurrence or re-enacted, and where emphasis is more on factual content than on entertainment. (19)

Willard Van Dyke looks at this definition suspiciously; he says that documentary has an epic quality because it deals with social or political forces instead of individual ones. For him, documentary can not be re-enactment; "documentary deals with real people and real situations -with reality." (20)

One of the most important American documentary filmmaker Pare Lorentz defines documentary as "a factual film which is dramatic." (21) Paul Rotha, also writes that, "documentaries essence lies in the dramatization of actual material." (21) According to Richard MacCann the important point in documentary film "is not authenticity of the materials but the authenticity of the result." (23) Jean-Luc Godard explains this approach more clearly: "Documentaries do not seek the instantaneous for its own sake, but for what it secretes of eternity." (24)

The classic definition of documentary film, which was made by John Grierson, is the most commonly used one: "the creative treatment of actuality." (25) While Grierson was making his definition, he also added that the word documentary was "clumsy". (26)

To define the term in the fields of arts and social sciences can often be a hazardous task. Especially, in the fields of arts, when a theorist or critic tries to define the documentary, s/he has to encounter the clarifying reality of each artist's vision and technique. This point is the main difficulty in making a successful definition of documentary film. The definitions, which are shown above, agree on the 'reality' and give 'reality' as the main principle of documentary film. But, their differences become important when they try to solve 'how' the documentaries show reality. A definition of documentary must answer the question 'how', but this definition becomes a kind of limit to the documentarist who will make his or her film. Because of this, the definition of documentary becomes a paradox.

As a result, the meaning of documentary film will expand and change from time to time through the works of documentary filmmakers and also critics and theorists. Jean-Luc Godard made an interpretation about the 'cinema' which implied both documentary and fiction films:

Beauty-the splendor of truth-has two poles. There are directors who seek the truth, which if they find it, will necessarily be beautiful; others seek beauty, which, if they find it, will also be true. One finds these two poles in documentary and fiction. (27)

Notes

- (1) G. Roy Levin, **Documentary Explorations: 15 Interviews with Film-makers** (New York: Doubleday and Co., Inc., 1971), p. 3.
- (2) Louis Giannetti, **Understanding Movies** (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1982), p. 333.
- (3) Richard m. Barsam, **Non-fiction Film: A Critical History** (New York: E.P. Dutton and Co., Inc., 1973), p. 1.
- (4) Forsyth Hardy, **Grierson on Documentary** (London: Faber and Faber, 1979), p. 11.
- (5) Ephraim Katz, **The Film Encyclopedia** (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Pub., 1979), p. 345.
- (6) Lewis Jacobs, **The Documentary Tradition** (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., Inc., 1979), p. 2.
- (7) Hardy, pp. 36-37.
- (8) Giannetti, p. 337.
- (9) Giannetti, p. 335.
- (10) Barsam, p. 4.
- (11) Giannetti, pp. 337-338.
- (12) Barsam, pp. 3-4.
- (13) Barsam, p. 6.
- (14) Levin, p. 3.
- (15) Barsam, p. 2.
- (16) Barsam, p. 2.
- (17) **Encyclopedia Britanica, Micropedia Vol. III** (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britanica Inc., 1980), p. 596.
- (18) Barsam, p. 1.
- (19) Jacobs, p. 276.
- (20) Barsam, p. 2.
- (21) Barsam, p. 2.
- (22) Jacobs, p. 12.
- (23) Barsam, p. 2.
- (24) Giannetti, p. 333.
- (25) Hardy, p. 13.
- (26) Hardy, p. 145.
- (27) Giannetti, p. 336.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- BARSAM, Richard M.; **Non-fiction Film : A Critical History.**, E. P. Dutton and Co., Inc., New York, 1973.
- GIANETTI, Louis; **Understanding Movies.** NJ : Prentice Hall, Inc., Englewood Cliffs, 1982.
- HARDY, Forsyth; ed. **Grierson on Documentary.** Faber and Faber, London, 1979.
- JACOBS, Lewis; **The Documentary Tradition.** W.W. Norton and Co., Inc., New York, 1979.
- KATZ, Ephraim; **The Film Encyclopedia.** Thomas Y. Crowell Pub., New York, 1979.
- LEVIN, G. Roy; **Documentary Explorations: 15 Interviews with Film-makers.** Doubleday and Co., Inc., New York, 1971.
- Encyclopedia Britannica;** (Micropedia Vol. III), Encyclopedia Britannica Inc., Chicago, 1980.