

## THE DOCUMENTARY FILM AND THE NEW MEDIA

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### Abstract

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For quite a long time, classifications of television documentary productions started from the similarities and differences between the documentary and the TV documentary film. The real "transfiguration" of the non-fiction film was manifested in the era of digital revolution. Hybridization of postmodern television communication and of the interactivity concept, promoted by the new media, has gained ground and led to new structures of audiovisual type. Numerous researchers show that the quality of information is losing ground in favour of the visual impact. At the same time, the documentary film has to observe and obey the new rules, adapted for surviving on a media market increasingly subservient to facile entertainment productions.

**Keywords:** *documentary film, traditional classification, audiovisual hybridization phenomenon, new media, web-documentary*

The documentary film has become popular to the cinematic audience, primarily by the impact of the visual images it offers, and by the power of the millennial art of dialogue it renders, being always viewed as a referent to objective reality. It does not appear as a faithful and impartial reproduction, or as some topic simply transposed into a visual language, instead it is a deliberate, more or less subjective action, reflecting the attitude of film-makers on the theme addressed. In other words, there are countless opportunities to capture raw reality and combine the journalistic approach with the visual one. This explains the impossibility of identifying a typology of ideal or universal nature, capable to circumscribe the composition of multiple formulas, used in such a highly dynamic audiovisual creation.

Traditional classification of documentaries is related to the ratio in which the publishing material and cinematic substance of the film occur. In fact, no documentary contains equal amounts of these elements, as, usually, it is either

the poetic vision or the journalistic perspective that prevails. In other words, either cinematographic art or journalism dominates. Thus, taking into account the "mixture" of journalism and documentary cinema films are made of, documentaries are classified as documentary movie, thematic documentary and news documentary<sup>1</sup>.

The first category - documentary (artistic) movie relies on the expressive values and virtues of the creative cinematic metaphor. The structure of this documentary type is concentrated on the enormous charge of emotional images, while information is left somewhere in the background, having a more complementary role.

The thematic, specialized (niche) documentary is the main and most important product of television media, such as Viasat History or Discovery Channel, Animal Planet and National Geographic. Topics covered in these documentary products refer usually to people's normal activities, important scientific discoveries, animal life in different parts of the world or mysterious pages of the troubled world history... Theme-oriented documentaries show that life should be attractive, while providing useful pieces of information.

On the Northern American continent, the news documentary - more extended, investigative, applying reportage techniques - was created, frequently as a serial movie. In 1951, the first series produced by CBS television was a news documentary entitled *See It now*, realized by the famous journalist Edward R. Murrow. Later on, an anthological production was to become the documentary series *Person to person*, in which Edward R. Murrow "politically abolished", literally, Senator Joseph McCarthy, a sinister character who, in the 50's of the XX

century, initiated the so-called "witch hunt" against the Americans suspected of having communist political beliefs...

Another operational classification of the documentaries includes – even if numerous interferences may be observed among them – *portrait documentary, documentary on a problem, historical documentary and documentary file*. For example, the documentary entitled *Piața Universității - România*, the film of Stere Gulea, Vivi Drăgan Vasile and Sorin Ilieșiu (1991), could be seen on TV only in 2004. The film, including historical documentary and documentary records, was produced in the studios of the Ministry of Culture of Romania, with materials provided by the archive of the Romanian Television, as well as of some foreign TV channels, such as RAI DUE, Antenne DEUX, CANAL CINQUE, etc. In the final credit lines, the film makers apologise for the low technical quality of images and sound of the amateur sources they used.

The editing documentary is a film or TV species which, basically, uses only archive images. Historians of the seventh art agree that the most famous example of edited film is *The true face of fascism* (*Обыкновенный фашизм* - 1965) by Mikhail Romm. Using a huge archive film material, the film is a true historical reconstruction of German Nazism and Italian Fascism. Artistically valorising the most expressive archive images and the unlimited possibilities of associative editing, the great Russian film-maker discloses the inner mechanism that led to the occurrence and incredible proliferation of such a phenomenon. The message of this documentary is a passionate warning against neo-Nazism (and not only).

Sometimes, when the preexisting material does not cover certain aspects of the topic or some chronological segments, film iconography may be added, as well as shoot video interviews with people in video – synchrony, as the actors of the interviews are also witnesses, active participants, informers on the event or phenomenon under discussion. This can compensate for the lack of image-document. In this context, a memorable edited documentary film is *Copiii decretului*, the film of the Romanian Florin Iepan, presented for the first time in 2005 (TVR).

Finally, *the artistic documentary* represents the preferred TV version, aiming at attaining the status and quality sanctioned by the art of motion pictures. It is focused mainly on the status and specific quality of the documentary film. For example, the protagonist of the artistic documentary *Aria* (2004-2010), realized by the Moldavian producers Dumitru Olărescu (screen play) and Vlad Druck (image, graphics, montage), is our great singer Maria Cebotari. This documentary has a polyphonic structure, which is unusual for a non-fiction film, worth mentioning in this respect being: the original artistic vision (original compositional scenario, original stage solutions), the linguistic audio-visual resources offered and the novelty of the media techniques applied (photo vintage images) contributing decisively to its quality, so that it can be included in both artistic categories: film and TV production.

The above-mentioned typologies were "legitimated aesthetically" in a period in which the first signs of the digital revolution laying ahead were hardly visible. Therefore, such classifications depend, to a large extent, on the traditional methods approached in documentary films. In addition, marketing of audiovisual culture was very modest.

Mention should be also made of the fact that, for the time being, no unitary, unequivocal conceptual framing of the documentary film has been generally acknowledged, as possibly due to its complex structure, which cannot be related exclusively to journalism or to cinema.

An original, relatively recent vision of the documentary, belongs to the Russian researcher Elizaveta Manskova<sup>2</sup>. She situates the socio-cultural status of the documentary creations between the two borders of the *elite-mass* paradigm, making the necessary distinctions between the concepts of *genre* and *format*, highlighting the influence of *trash* aesthetics on the contemporary documentary productions. In her opinion, the demarcation lines of the documentary productions of today are established by the documentary of author, by the festival documentary film and by the documentary which complies with the rigours of a format (a set of conventions establishing the "game rules").

One of the criteria of documentary film classification which, 2-3 decades ago would have

been considered unimportant, involves the technological support employed for catching the most significant images, best expressing the increasingly diversified and complex reality which surrounds us. The access to the new media permitted the realization of an imposing, somehow unique cinematographic project: a documentary film gathering the images caught by amateurs all over the world along one single day – July 24, 2010. This was an unprecedented challenge: to address the people of the Terra a question on the way in which they live that day of the year. The documentary got a simple, plain title, suitable to the objective had in view: *Life in a Day*. The consequence was that 88,000 persons from all corners of the world, visitors of YouTube site, responded to this most unusual stimulus, which resulted in 4,500 filming hours collected from 192 countries. This ample material was taken over by the winner of Oscar and BAFTA Prizes - stage director Kevin Macdonald - who transformed it into a 95 minute documentary, the semantics of which offers a hint on the possible significance of living in our time. As a mediatic event of worldwide significance, the film was first posted *live* on [youtube.com/lifeinaday](http://youtube.com/lifeinaday), on January 27, 2011, being subtitled in 25 languages. Kevin Macdonald worked to this documentary film more than 7 months.

The most unusual aspect of the project is the fact that the film is made of a plurality of video productions realized by amateurs, for whom art cinema is - at best - a hobby involving no professional ambitions. However, the technological progress of our times has made the seventh art available to ordinary people, annulling the differences between amateur and professional film-makers. Consequently, the heroes of each story or "movie" are ordinary people, transformed into "actors interpreting their own lives"<sup>3</sup>, invited to TV shows. However, one has to recognize that, in the absence of internet, the film would have remained only a good intention.

As known, the widely accessed and all-embracing online YouTube platform was launched in the beginning of 2005. Therefore, the film project meant at celebrating the fifth anniversary of YouTube put together remarkable artistic productions, selected from the huge raw video materials, filmed and posted on this media

channel by all its 88,000 internet users, who honoured the invitation launched by Ridley Scott (producer) and Kevin Macdonald (director). These passionate lovers of audiovisual works "played as children on the 24th July 2010, sincerely, throwing away any social mask: in happy and tragic moments of their lives, when facing terrible suffering or experiencing full happiness, in poverty, when laughing or when crying. A puzzle made up of innumerable destinies, producing magic moments of intense beauty"<sup>4</sup>.

Even in the documentary entitled *Life in a Day* the film-makers selected and mixed images of a huge conglomerate broadcasting, they finally succeeding in producing a coherently coated fabric, whose dynamic structure is no longer enrolled in traditional narrative patterns, reminding of video aesthetics. *Life in a Day* was highly appreciated throughout the world, ordinary spectators and professional critics equally enjoying it. Worth mentioning is also the fact that the final image of the documentary *Life in a Day* lists the most representative names of the participants involved in the project.

TV professionals have always wanted to keep viewers in front of the small screen, which induced some ambiguity in terms of visual gender approach, with reference to the new television hybridization products, capable of reshaping TV production. If "it is claimed that the documentary is the real world, than it should be mentioned that it borrows some of the codes and conventions used in other types of programs"<sup>5</sup>, from news bulletins to fiction products.

The new media invented the Web documentary or the "live" documentary. Scientists defined such televisual products in several ways: "interactive" documentary / "cross-media" / "multimedia" / "hybrid". In our opinion, it is more important to establish which is the difference between the Web documentary and the traditional one. Assuming that the Web documentary is designed to the Internet space, its structure is necessarily complex, involving numerous items for transmitting the message had in view (video, photography, sound, text, music, graphic design, comics, animation, computer graphics, data journalism), mingled in

the most unusual combinations. However, apart from the fact that the web offers an impressive range of opportunities, the essential quality that makes the difference between them is the concept of interactivity: "If traditional documentaries are usually linear and do not offer to the public an opportunity to interact with the content, the basic principle of web documentaries is to let the user decide how to manage the story. Watching television and using a browser are two completely different experiences. When you watch a movie on TV, you have two choices: watch to the end or use the remote. On the web, thanks to the browser, the public can be involved, click on an item or another, which should be had in view by the authors of web documentaries"<sup>6</sup>.

In this way, by virtue of the competition between channels, the audience gets a hint of reference of any program, which creates a sort of complicity between the people on the small screen. Public participation is encouraged in the visual show, people being invited to become permanent actors, on an always open stage. The new media have literally disrupted the media space, imposing total revision of the traditional concepts and values, including how to develop audiovisual works. This relates mainly to the documentary film, always in search of a new identity.

### Endnotes

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