

# Representation through Documentary: A Post-Modern Assessment

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Like photography, documentaries are a representational medium: They record and occasionally reconstruct the everyday reality viewers typically cannot experience themselves. Because photography is an indexical sign signifying truth, audiences understand the documentary, a moving photograph, to signify truth also. However, they are able to make the distinction between the “everyday reality” presented by documentaries and the fictive “reality” of cinematic films.

But the documentary’s version of reality is not as innocent as it presents itself to be. Because of the perceived indexical truth-value of the film, the audience is drawn into an everyday reality that seemingly does not need questioning. There is “a sense of co-presence between creator and viewer that gives the viewer the sensation of being both here, now, looking at the image and there, then, looking at what the image represents or evokes.”<sup>[1]</sup> This relationship is a window for the audience, where “the lens of the camera is, in effect, the eye of the person...with the implication that the two are interchangeable, so that the viewer is in effect ‘there.’”<sup>[2]</sup>

This perception of co-presence, which, when genuine, is precisely how one experiences reality, is dangerously disarming for audiences. Despite their presentation, documentaries are not an objective but a subjective device, a medium that “marshal[s] systems of representation to encourage point of view about something”<sup>[3]</sup> This inherent subjectivity, drawn not only from the construction of the film but also from the interpretation of the filmmaker, makes it impossible for a documentary to ever accurately represent the everyday.

Furthermore, a representation is not the same object as the reality it represents. When screening a documentary, the audience is not watching reality, but a recorded representation of what it once was. Drawing upon post-modernist Jean Baudrillard’s theory of the hyperreal, Bennett argues that “if an object needs a representation, then it is part of that logic that the representation is not its object; but if the representation is different from its object, how can it stand for it truly?”<sup>[4]</sup>

In an attempt to answer Bennett’s key question, this paper will critically assess the documentary’s ability to represent everyday reality. First, it will examine issues inherent in the construction of a documentary. Then, using Baudrillard and Bennett’s arguments as framework, this paper will address the overarching philosophical problems with representing reality through this medium. Finally, it will analyse an alternative to traditional documentary-making that attempts to form a different kind of truth.

## I. Issues Inherent in Documentary Construction

Documentary construction can be divided in two halves: filming and the narrative. The latter complements the former and is composed of interviews or a “voice of God” narration. Both elements are not merely dry recordings of events. There is an art to documentary that obliges the filmmaker to choose camera angles, to string words together into sentences that are not just informative but that tell a story – an art that draws not from objective methods of representing

reality, but the fictive world of cinematic production. “The documentary transforms its object into a spectacle of sound and image that draws on signs from the fictive and social worlds...Fictional and factual protocols become tropes of production and reception, as filmmakers and viewers draw on intersecting textual norms to make and decipher meaning”<sup>[5]</sup>

As a “human document” dealing with not only the hard facts but also the “social and personal aspects” of the theme, the documentary is a representational, recorded version of the everyday created through “[the director’s] personal interpretations of what he or she chooses to place in front of the camera lens.” The “informational value is mediated through the perspective of the person making it, and it is presented as a mixture of emotion and information”<sup>[6]</sup>

This “mediation,” or personal interpretation of the topic, is influenced by any number of factors: preconceived attitudes, biases, and what story they hope to get out of the filming. Frederick Wiseman, a documentary maker himself, writes of the impossibility of objectivity in representation: “Any documentary...made in no matter what style, is arbitrary, biased, prejudiced, compressed and subjective. Like any of its sisterly or brotherly fictional forms, it is born in choice – choice of subject matter, place, people, camera angles, duration of shooting, sequences to be shot or omitted, transitional material and cutaways”<sup>[7]</sup> No matter how objectively a filmmaker approaches a topic, they will always be filtering the topic through their personal lens – not just the camera’s.

Subjectivity, and therefore a departure from the real, is thus introduced in the documentary as soon as the filmmaker makes a decision on how the everyday should be represented. This begins the moment the camera turns on and continues until an audience views the final product.

### Conveying the Emotion of Reality

To be an effective representational medium, the documentary must make audiences feel as if they were co-present to the recorded reality captured by the documentary. Roy Stryker, who documented America’s Great Depression, wrote that “a good documentary should tell not only what a place or a thing or a person looks like, but it must also tell the audience what it would feel like to be an actual witness to the scene”<sup>[8]</sup>

In the case of the extraordinary everyday, this is not easy: Events such as war and genocide are generally beyond the lived experience of audiences. Documentaries are unable to convey an intimate understanding of these events, simply because is afforded to those who have experienced the horror firsthand.

Any portrayal of that reality, even excluding all other barriers to true representation, will lack a certain je-nesais-quoi, detracting from the film’s authenticity. Thus, the experience of watching a documentary on the Holocaust might leave one shaken, but it cannot begin to represent the experience of living through it. The documentary can only represent a shadow of the real. Ultimately, the audience, who lacks any deeply personal connection to such events, is presented with a sanitized image produced by an impersonal camera: “To ‘reheat’ a historical event (the Holocaust) is to beam a cold event via a cold medium to a cold mass. The horror is made inoffensive in the posthumous shudder of TV...TV immunizes the real”<sup>[9]</sup>

## II. The Problem with Truth: Post-modern Issues with Representing Reality

Many critiques of how reality and the everyday are represented come from 20th-century postmodernists, such as Baudrillard. For them, any attempt at representing the real is suspect: An image in a documentary is not simple or innocent but is deliberately used to shape the film’s

meaning, as well as to help form the context through which to interpret the meaning of subsequent images. Thus, as Wiseman also argued, one cannot interpret a documentary's narrative as objective truth, but must see it as a form of subjective truth, shaped by the filmmaker. As filmmaker Jean-Luc Godard reminds us, "in every image, we must ask who speaks"<sup>[10]</sup>

Baudrillard has three main problems with the representation of the everyday by documentaries. The first is a problem addressed earlier: that of interpretation during documentary construction.

He then suggests representation is both staged and narrated. Because the "real" includes that for which is possible to provide an equivalent representation, but a documentary is merely a representation of reality, it never truly captures the real. Even observational documentaries that simply let the camera roll are still representations: The viewer can't be transported back and be co-present to the actual events.

Baudrillard develops this critique by suggesting that as soon as one tries to represent reality, the process of its destruction begins: Some aspects of it, both benign and impactful, will inevitably be omitted. In the case of documentaries, this is most obvious during the essential editing process. With every click of the mouse, the documentary becomes less of a true representation. But the destruction actually begins during filming: Everything the camera does not capture also omits a portion of reality.

Once one has recorded what was once reality, the resulting representation is "hyperreal." It is no longer reality but something else entirely: the overflow from reality. Documentaries, especially reflexive ones, simulate what was once real through reconstruction, bridging the gap between reality and hyperreality.

Finally, Baudrillard addresses over-determination. He argues that any given occurrence is at the centre of an infinitely expansive web composed of other decisions and events. Too many factors play a role in any given chain of events to ever permit the accurate representation of reality.

Thus, the distinction between the everyday and its representation becomes blurred as the latter bridges the gap into hyperreality. Signs take on a life of their own in a representation, causing a breakdown between signified and signifier. This is especially prevalent in reconstructive narratives, where the actors cease to be signs and instead become the signified.

Baudrillard terms this phenomenon a "simulacrum," a disparate model or simulation that exists in a hyperreal space. Because the documentary is a hyperreal simulation of what happened in the past, it serves only to process and recycle events within its own system. The reality it represents no longer exists – only the simulation of it captured in the film's footage.

Baudrillard finishes his critique of representing reality by arguing that the world is increasingly shaped by media of all forms, including documentaries. Because of this, the link between images and reality has imploded, and as a result, humanity's sense of the real has disappeared. One can no longer prove the real, because the models that represent it have become more important than the event itself. For example, in a reflexive documentary, there is greater emphasis on the reconstruction than on the event that actually happened. The real therefore becomes a product of the simulation: The audience viewing a reconstruction views it to be the reality of the given event.

Baudrillard's final points seem a bit of a stretch when applied practically. If, as he argues, reality is mediated always through representational devices (such as documentaries), the question then becomes how close a documentary can come to representing reality, rather than whether it can capture it perfectly.

### III. The Admission of Exteriority as a Solution

In a response to Baudrillard, Abigail Solomon-Godeau suggests documentaries are based on a presumption of “insiderness,” that first-hand, lived experience that can never quite be true if the documentary maker is “coming in” to make the film. She argues that if a film admits to its “implaceable exteriority,” it can yield a truth of its own. For example, Chantal Akerman’s *D’Est* chronicled his journey across Eastern Europe, but cognizant of his status as an outsider, he did not add narration, explanation, or commentary. Instead, the film is composed of panning shots and ambient sound, creating a “seemingly nonselective and passive outsider’s look.” Solomon-Godeau suggests that by harnessing this “zero-degree” of exteriority, “there is produced...a kind of knowledge, a certain kind of truth”<sup>[11]</sup>

Can the recorded admission of one’s outsider status indeed bring a different kind of truth to light, one that comes closer to approaching reality than a documentary maker filming from an “inside” perspective? Solomon-Godeau’s argument seems plausible, but even she mentions that the shots are “seemingly nonselective.”<sup>[12]</sup> Even if there is no narration, no commentary, and no post-filming edit, Akerman cannot possibly film everything at once. He is, in fact, being selective about what he does choose to film, and by doing so, is still framing the audience’s perception of reality.

Thus, both practical and philosophical problems with representing reality begin the moment the camera begins filming. The lens can never capture the entire environment; the narrator will always leave out details; the filmmaker will always be influenced by his own perceptions and interpretations. The audience is even further away from grasping reality: The filmmaker determines not only the reality shown to them but the context through which they view reality. For better or for worse, the documentary maker shapes their interpretation of the represented reality.

Although the documentary has some value as a truth-telling device, its presentation of reality will always, inherently be subjective. It guises itself as objective and indexical in its representational techniques, especially through reconstructions, but this serves only to blur the line between what was once real, and what is now something else entirely – the hyperreal. The “everyday” it shows us will never come close to the actual reality it strives to represent: Documentary, as a form, is far too subjective and is shaped by too many determinants to approach genuinely representing everyday reality.

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[12] *Ibid.* ↵





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