

# Conventional Markers of Authenticity in Documentary

## Introduction

Documentary is defined as a film genre that recreates an actual event or tells a nonfictional story. But every representation or storytelling needs filmmakers' creativity. That's why the Scottish film theorist John Grierson called documentary the "creative treatment of actuality" in the 1930s (Grierson, 1966). The relationship between documentary and reality has been widely discussed for decades. No matter how many scholars question how real the reality in documentary is, and no matter how creative and various the treatment of the reality is, once a film is labeled as documentary it simultaneously signifies one essential fact to viewers: this film works with the real-  
"actuality."

As the documentary genre has evolved over years, there has been an increase in the creative ways that filmmakers deal with reality. These ways on one hand could make documentary more interesting to watch, on the other may spontaneously leave the audience with doubt about the authenticity of the storytelling.

In fact the relationship between documentary and reality has been widely discussed for decades. No matter how many scholars have questioned how real is the reality in documentary film, and no matter how creative and various the treatment of the reality has

become in an increasing number of documentaries, once a film is labeled as documentary it simultaneously signifies one essential fact: that this film works with the real-  
“actuality.”

Films that are tagged as documentaries can be very different from each other. Some documentarians are not journalistically based and hold the belief that they can construct a version of truth from their framing. Jean-Luc Godard, a famous director once said: “Cinema is truth 24 times a second, and every cut is a lie.” (1960) Each documentary editor has his or her own judgment and is editing the truth instead of just showing it raw.

However, they are at the same time faced with the responsibility to legitimize the film as documentary, different from a fiction. Documentaries are supposed to deal with reality truthfully. Even though documentarians exert their creativity and embed their own interpretation, they also need to think about the techniques that can help build the credibility of themselves and their documentaries. For filmmakers, these techniques are dependent on their own idea of truth, their ethics of journalism and understanding of the cinema language. For an audience, these techniques are the signs and symbols that they can recognize and relate to authenticity.

This research explores the construction and justification of authenticity in documentary films. The three Oscar award-winning documentaries from 2010 to 2013 are selected and carefully examined to look for visual and audio symbols of authentic storytelling that

help communicate between filmmakers and their audience. Previous literature has discussed about several conventional visual and audio techniques of documentary filmmaking: voice-over narration and subtitles, “talking heads” or “confessional” interview, documentarian’s on-screen presence, participants’ consent, on-location sound recording, real people as social actors, blurred focus, long takes, flat lighting, handheld camera and son on. This research focused on the most prominently used visual and audio markers as well as the manipulation of the past. It will provide a unique approach for future scholars and professionals to understand the documentary techniques by applying Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotics theory.

## **Theoretical framework**

Semiotic theory, which studies signs, symbols and their interpretations, has been established as an insightful theoretical framework for this kind of textual and visual analysis research.

From a Greek root meaning sign, semiotics is literally defined as the study of signs. As scholar Daniel Chandler points out, this might be the “shortest definition” (2007, p.1) of semiotics. This shortest definition makes the scope of semiotics study breathtakingly both simple and comprehensive (Hodge, 1988). Chandler (2007) claims it is necessary to clarify the meaning and scope of signs, which, possibly to some people’s surprise, may actually include a considerable variety such as “drawings, paintings, photography” (p.1) as well as “words, sounds and body language” (p.2). Because of this wide range of

subjects and interdisciplinary research, there has been much dispute among leading semioticians as to what should be involved (Chandler, 2007) and what should be established as the common basis for the science of semiotics (Solomonick, 2008).

The history of semiotics identifies two primary founders of the science: Swiss linguistic Ferdinand Saussure and American philosopher Charles S. Peirce (Sebeok, 2001; Chandler, 2007). For the linguist Saussure, semiology studies the role of signs as part of social life (Thibault, 1997). He defined it as a dyadic form made up of signifier and signified (Sebeok, 2001). For example, the word “rose” could be the signifier of the signified concept that rose is a flower with a sweet smell that is usually white, yellow, red, or pink and that grows on a bush which has thorns on the stems. Sebeok concluded that in Saussure’s semiotics theory the signification between the signifier and the signified is an arbitrary one that has been established by the society at will. Which signifier pairs with which signified is determined by convention.

However, for the philosopher Peirce semiotics was the “formal doctrine of signs”, which was closely related to logic (Chandler, 2000). For Peirce, signs function as mediators between the external world of objects and the internal world of ideas. He characterized signs as occurring in a triadic relationship of object, representamen and interpretant. Object refers to a thing or a thought, representamen to the corresponding sign, and interpretant to a relationship between the object and the representamen (Dimitrova, 2010, p.87).

Based on these two foundations of semiotic theory, scholars have expanded the study with knowledge from other disciplines. A variety of branches have been developed under the umbrella of semiotics. For instance, social semiotics tries to combine semiotics with social theory and believes that signs and messages must always be situated in the context of social relations and processes (Hodge, 2001). Najafian (2011) concluded through analyzing two advertisements from Time magazine that image, word and color are just three of the many semiotics modes through which social meanings are coded. The social semiotics references are how ideology is implied in the advertising discourse.

This research applied Charles Peirce's semiotics theory in which he categorized the signs into three types: icons, which have relationship of similarity or close resemblance and offer the most direct communication; Indexes, which might not look similar to the object they refer to, bear a relationship or proximity to the object they represent; and symbols, which presume neither resemblance nor physical connection to the referential world, meaning that the relationships are arbitrary or conventionally established. (Peirce, 1906, p.531)

There have been quite a number of books and journal articles discussing the usefulness and problems of his theory, but little research has been done using his theory to analyze cinema language. Although this theory is more than a century old, it is still effective and remains as a very important categorization of signs. This theory guided this research to

identify the markers of authentic storytelling and discuss the relationship between the marker and the represented.

## **Literature Review**

### *Defining documentary*

The Scottish filmmaker and theorist John Grierson called the documentary the “creative treatment of actuality” in the 1930s (Grierson, 1966). His concise definition has drawn wide discussion and recognition ever since. This view distinguishes the documentary from the fiction film, which is not thought to be primarily a treatment of reality, and also from the non-fiction film, which is not thought to be creative or dramatic (Plantinga, 2005). However, this characterization leaves the obvious tension between “creative treatment” and “actuality” unresolved (Nichols, 2010, p.6).

This tension has been on the side of heated debate by a large number of scholars and documentary filmmakers as well. Some dispute the documentary’s ability to represent reality. Michael Renov claims:

*“it is important to recall that the documentary is the cinematic idiom that most actively promotes the illusion of immediacy insofar as it forswears ‘realism’ in favor of a direct, ontological claim to the ‘real’. Every documentary issues a ‘truth claim’ of a sort,*

*positing a relationship to history which exceeds the analogical status of its fictional counterpart.” (1986:71-72)*

Even more, questions have been posed about the documentary’s claim to truth.

Documentary filmmaker Marcel Ophuls likewise mistrusts the form even though it has been his career.

*“I don’t trust the motives of those who think they are superior to fiction films. I don’t trust their claim to have cornered the market on the truth.” (Closely Watched Trains, p.19)*

The key problem of clarifying the tension and defining documentary is, as Dirk Eitzen noted, to determine what constitutes “actuality” (1995, p.82). This seems to lead to a philosophical question, just as indicated by Plato’s Cave<sup>1</sup>. The shadows on the wall are essentially different from the reality even though they are as close as the prisoners get to viewing reality. “Actuality” is infinite and can never be wholly represented.

However, as Susan Sontag put it: “The picture may distort; but there is always a presumption that something exists; or did exist, which is like what’s in the picture” (Sontag, 1977, p.5). Just as scholar Stella Bruzzi has indicated, documentaries were like “a negotiation between filmmaker and reality” (2006, p.186). A documentary will never

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<sup>1</sup> Plato’s Cave: An allegory used by the Greek philosopher Plato in his work *The Republic*. In the allegory Socrates describes a group of people who have lived chained to a wall of a cave and faced a blank wall. They watch shadows projected on the wall by things passing in front of a fire behind them, and begin to ascribe forms to these shadows. According to Socrates, the shadows are as close as the prisoners get to viewing reality.

be reality nor will it invalidate that reality by being representational (Stella, 2006). Louise Spence and Vinicius Navarro (2011) made a clear argument:

“What is at issue is not so much ‘Is it true or untrue?’ but rather ‘how is actuality treated in order to sanction the documentary’s claims to be telling the truth?’” (p.2).

Spence and Navarro asserted that all representation is transformation. And they further proposed that documentary, as a distinct genre of film, has already established its own conventional nature of representations that aims to offer a credible account and convey a sense of authenticity to the audience. These conventional procedures and techniques, which distinguish it from other types of film, make it easy for audiences to recognize a documentary. Spence and Navarro based their analysis on Charles Sanders Peirce’s semiotics theory and especially pointed out that the conventionalized visual analogies create a symbolic relation to that which they represent. One of the symbols in nonfiction films is the marker of authenticity. Through comprehensive examination of serious documentaries, Spence and Navarro discovered quite a broad range of markers of authenticity, such as muddy sound, blurred focus, long takes, flat lighting, handheld camera, etc (2011).

To this point, the relation between creative treatment and representing reality seems not irreconcilable nor intrinsically contradictory. By balancing these two elements, new ways of defining documentary have been put forward. Carl Plantinga (2005) proposed two terms: Documentary as Indexical Record (DIR) and Documentary as Assertion (DA).

DIR means “a documentary is a sustained discourse of narrative, categorical rhetorical, or other form that makes use of moving or still photographic images predominantly as traces to represent what the photographic images are of” (p.107). DA differently holds that filmmakers take an assertive stance toward the world of the work.

Famous documentary theorist Bill Nichols (2010) defined documentary with the following four components:

1. an institutional framework
2. a community of practitioners
3. a corpus of texts
4. a constituency of viewers (p. 20-41)

Generally, he concluded that documentary uses conventional means to represent or make claims about historical reality. By “conventional means,” he explains in Chapter “a Corpus of Texts” that the group of documentary works is linked by its common features or conventions. Just as a complement to Spence and Navarro’s research, he listed a few other symbols that these conventions might include:

1. Voiceover narration
2. Talking heads interview
3. Real people as social actors
4. On-location sound recording (p.18-23, p.26-32).

These conventions are significant characteristics of a documentary and also signs that audience can associate with authenticity of the representation.

## *Semiotics and Cinema*

Semiotics is a large theoretical system that contains many branches of subgenre theories or convergence with other subjects or theories. Even in the field of cinema study, several branches have been commonly applied such as cognitive semiotics, film semiotics, social semiotics, semiology and so on.

It will be a complicated and huge project to explain and elaborate all the terms proposed by different theorists at different times. But generally, the fundamental premise of semiotics is that “the whole of human experience, without exception, is an interpretative structure mediated and sustained by signs” (Buckland,1995, p.6). All types of phenomena have a corresponding underlying system that consists of both the specificity and intelligibility of those phenomena. Studying film from a semiotics perspective means that film, as a photographic media, is basically a representation that constitutes icons, signs and symbols (Metz, 1974).

Semiotics has been a vague and broad term, leading scholars to elaborate and apply it different in their own means. Christian Metz defined film specificity in terms of a specific combination of five overlapping traits -iconicity, mechanical duplication, multiplicity, movement, and mechanically produced multiple moving images (p.235-252).

Picchietti (2006) summarized the signs of a Jewish experience by analyzing three films. However, he did not base his exploration and explanation of the signs on any branch of the semiotics theory. By using “semiotics” in the title, he actually only indicates that he examines signs instead of anything else.

Rick Iedema (2001) analyzed television and film content by using social semiotics. Social semiotics is concerned with the political understandings, the reading positions and the practical possibilities which analysis makes available. When analyzing, social semiotics does not focus on “signs” but on socially meaningful and entire texts. Basically social semiotics attempts to examine how audiences are positioned by the tele-film in question and how audiences perceive certain values as being promoted over others.

Therefore, it is obvious to tell that social semiotics theory aims to question the ways in which films present “social reality,” further questioning the objectivity of the representation.

Iedema provides some examples of analyzing film in his social semiotics study of a documentary on a hospital. He analyzed the action of the character, the pace of the editing, tone of the voiceover, durations of each side’s appearance and the spatial distance between the subject and the camera. Every shooting and editing technique could

convey the director's intentional or subconscious representation of the reality could be impetrated in a certain direction (p.183-186).

### *Documentary techniques*

Compared with fiction film or other nonfiction films, the documentary has some of its own featured techniques that function as the symbols or conventions that distinguish itself. Spence and Navarro (2011) provided an extensive discussion of the techniques of editing, camerawork, the profilmic<sup>2</sup> and sounds.

Besides the same techniques employed in fiction films, documentary's editing is less controlled. For instance, cutaways<sup>3</sup> are not as necessary in documentary as in fiction films. Also, documentaries' adherence to the "unauthored" representation of the referential world makes continuity editing<sup>4</sup> rare (p.168). Contrast and contradiction is also a basis for documentary editing. Documentarians provide different opinions on a subject or both sides of an argument to make the documentary appear impartial. In addition, documentaries use montage sequences to give a quick history of the subject under investigation (p. 161-186).

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<sup>2</sup> Profilmic: Profilmic refers to the selected elements of reality (the actor, the decor, etc.) that are placed in front of the camera then captured on film. The term was paired with the 'afilmic', indicating unselected reality, reality independent of any relation with film.

<sup>3</sup> Cutways: a cutaway shot is the interruption of a continuously filmed action by inserting a view of something else.

<sup>4</sup> Continuity editing: an editing style which aims to smooth over the inherent discontinuity of the editing process and to establish a logical coherence between shots.

In terms of camerawork, documentarians are careful with the scale of the subject photographed and the angle and height of the camera to avoid any misrepresentation. Second, camerawork indicates the approach of the documentarians toward the historical reality. Observational documentarians try not to interfere with what they see. These documentaries might use unusually long shots to indicate waiting for something to occur. Another sign that might add to the observational immediacy is the movement of handheld camera. Interpretive documentaries use the camera as an expressive tool. The third aspect of concern is the point of view of the shot (p.187-212).

How documentarians treat profilmic reality is another important aspect of production. Documentaries are most often shot on location when events occur. Besides, lighting can also affect audience's perception of the character, the environment and the authenticity of the film, so artificial lighting is tricky to use in documentaries. (p.213-238)

Audio is as important as visual in film study. Documentary's sound, from many aspects, has different requirements from fiction film. The types of sound could be summed up as speech, including voiceover commentary and interview, ambient sounds, effects, music and silence. The sounds that are recorded on the location with messiness and uncontrolled feeling will enhance the authenticity of the scene. Music could contribute to the aesthetic effect of a film, yet leave audiences with a deceptive feeling of whether the character can hear what audience hear. (p.239-264)

These special techniques that balance uncontrolled cinematic approach with creativity and aesthetic pursuit lie in the center of the art of documentary and are crucial to its identity as a nonfiction film (2011).

Based on my literature review on semiotics theory and conventional documentary techniques, this research puts forward a hypothesis that viewers tend to associate the application of certain conventional documentary techniques with the authenticity of the documentary. This research further proposes three research questions:

1. What is the most prominently used visual marker communicating authenticity in a documentary?
2. How is sound used to communicate authenticity?
3. How is the past used to communicate authenticity?

## **Methodology**

To answer the above questions, the research used textual analysis to interpret the visual and audio language of three American documentaries.

Textual analysis is a very useful qualitative research method for disciplines like communication and media studies, cultural studies and sociology. As Alan McKee (2003) defined it, textual analysis is used to specifically gather data about how other people

make sense of the world. Researchers “make an educated guess at some of the most likely interpretations that might be made of that text” (McKee, 2003, p.1). “Text” of textual analysis does not only restrict to linguistic text, but generally refers to anything that we could make meaning from (p.4).

Lea Jacobs (1988) used textual analysis method to study the censorship of a 1932 movie “Blonde Venus.” Through close examination and comparison, he found that the industry self-regulation imposed clear rules of compensating moral values but also enhanced certain conventions of narrative storytelling. However, Jacobs also admitted that this mode of analysis could not avoid the problem of interpretation that the spectator in 1933 would have interpreted the same way as he did.

Jacob’s concern of the procedural difference between the analyst’s and the mass audience’s interpretations has been identified by some scholars as the prominent shortcoming of textual analysis as a valid and reliable research method (Philo, 2007).

Elfriede Fursich (2009) admitted that “a clearer understanding of the situation governing the production and reception of the text under investigation would add important context to the textual discourse” (p.249) but defended textual analysis as a very important research method for journalism and media studies by pointing out that the significance of textual analysis is to establish the “ideological potential of the text between production and consumption” (p.249). Mixed-method approach has its strength, but is not necessarily an advantage.

Julie Karceski (2009) used textual analysis to study the stereotype of female scientists in American movies in the past 50 years. She used a flexible approach for data collection. The researcher simply took notes during observation, and later these notes were examined for emerging patterns and themes related to the research question (p.53).

My research applied Karceski's approach of less structured observation, analyzing the documentaries' video, audio and use of the past based on Peirce's semiotics theory and my literature review.

During the screening, the film was marked when there was an instance of a visual marker which implied authentic storytelling and make notes about the appearing time, shot, how this technique was applied and so on. Also, the use of sound and the manipulation of the past were carefully examined. And after taking notes of the whole documentary, analysis is focused on patterns and repetitive techniques and draw conclusion on the signs of authenticity in their storytelling and how these signs are embedded.

## **Sampling**

Based on extensive research on a large number of popular documentaries, awards and film festivals, the research chose purposive sampling method and picked the latest three documentaries that won the Academy Award for Best Documentary Feature. The

Academy Awards have been the most authoritative and best known film awards in America. The winners of the best documentary feature award generally enjoys a large audience, good gross box office revenue, being screened in a number of theaters and in festivals (Dickerson, 2012). The award has a very high standard for documentaries to compete. Dickerson (2012) designed a rubric to help determine the films to analyze out of 14 candidates for his study on modern documentary. He collected data for several factors including director, release date, lifetime gross, number of theaters screened and number of accolades each film accrued from popular worldwide film festivals. Then he created a formula called “viewership quotient” and ordered the films. Four of his final selected five films were Oscar winners or nominators. Therefore, Oscar is seriously a good and convenient criterion for my sampling. Selecting the latest three award-winning documentaries will provide my study with high-quality, professional and contemporary material on which to base my analysis, raise readers’ interest in the issue and draw more up-to-date findings and value.

The three movies from 2010 to 2012 are *Inside Job*, *Undeclared*, and *Searching for Sugar Man*. Through textual analysis method, the three documentaries will be analyzed respectively on their visuals and audio with reference to the camerawork, editing and sounds.

## **Film Description**

The three Oscar-award winning documentaries Searching for Sugar Man, Undefeated and Inside Job happen to be different from each other in aspects like subject matter, photography style, narration and storytelling approach, providing me diverse material for analysis.

#### *Inside Job*<sup>5</sup>

Charles Ferguson uses 120 minutes ambitiously attempting to explain the sophisticated causes and consequences of 2008 financial crisis in the documentary Inside Job. As the director and scriptwriter, he directly points to the systematic corruption of the financial services industry and uses extensive interviews with big shots in the related field, including politicians, financial insiders, academics and journalists, to support his argument. The film is based on intensive research finding and meticulous organizing of the information.

#### *Undefeated*<sup>6</sup>

Undefeated, the 2011 Oscar best documentary award winner, is a sports documentary about a underdog inner-city high school football team Manassas Tigers of Memphis struggling to reverse its fortune and reach its first-ever playoff game after years of losses. The film was released in March, 2011.

#### *Searching for Sugar Man*<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Inside Job: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1645089/>

<sup>6</sup> Undefeated: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1860355/>

<sup>7</sup> Searching for Sugar Man: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt2125608/>

The 2012 Oscar best documentary winner *Searching for Sugar Man* tells a story about an American rock songwriter Sixto Rodriguez whose first two albums sold zero in the United States but unbeknownly to himself, have been selling millions for more than 25 years in South Africa. The documentary was released in January 2012 and accumulated around 7 million dollars in domestic box office revenue.

## **Research Findings**

No matter whether a documentary is intended to inform, inspire, educate or entertain, or no matter how much creativity a filmmaker wants to inject in the movie, he needs to first secure a sense of authenticity in his film. There are certain things that build up the reliable relationship between filmmakers and viewers. They are the markers of authenticity that filmmakers embed and viewers comprehend, contributing to this distinctive trait of documentaries.

Through textual analysis of the three award-winning documentaries, I have found that several conventional documentary photography and editing techniques were applied to communicate the sense of authenticity. Talking head interview is the most prominently used visual marker of authenticity in the three films. Voice-over as well as narration is how sound was incorporated to communicate the authenticity of documentary. Besides,

documentarians brought up the past by using archival materials to secure the authenticity of documentary.

### **Talking Head Interview**

A talking head is a format of interview where only the interviewee's head and shoulders are visible to the camera and he is the focus of the shot. The talking head interview is commonly used in the broadcasting industry, especially popular in documentaries and reality television programs. With a close shot on the interviewee's face, talking head leaves audience the impression of immediacy as if the subject is talking to them directly. Talking head is especially powerful when the interview subject gets emotional or the conversation gets tension.

### *Inside Job*

Considering the complexity and abstractness of the topic, Inside Job heavily depends on interviews to explain the issue and make points. There are 64 people from all relevant sectors of the society interviewed for the film, the majority of whom are senior management staff or elites in their profession and industry. Table 1 is a list of names and titles of the interviewees in order of their first appearance in the movie.

It is an incredible number of interviews and significant amount of insiders' information for a two-hour documentary. The subjects provide a variety of insights and together untangle the complex causality of the global financial system.

Director Ferguson never wants *Inside Job* only to be an explanatory piece with scattered information here and there. *Inside Job* has the characteristics of an investigative journalism piece as well as an editorial. Ferguson evidently holds a stand in the movie implied by its script. Therefore he needs extensive sound bites to spice up the conflict and support his argument.

All of the interviews are professionally lit, well composed and recorded with high-quality synchronous audio. According to the screenplay of the film, the interviewer of all the interviews is Charles Ferguson himself. This well-preparedness though makes the shots seem conspicuous, does not undermine the authenticity of the movie, instead enhance it. It leaves audience with an impression that the production team is rather professional (there are also shots of the production team setting up the interviews in the beginning of the movie) and has done exhaustive research ahead. Besides, the biggest advantage of this neat talking head interview is that audience would not be distracted by other messiness from the subject and his speech. The connection between the subjects and audience is direct and strong. Audience can easily associate the interviewees on the screen with those in reality.

## *Undefeated*

Undefeated takes an observational approach, and the camera basically follow the characters and captures what happens day by day. The flow of the shots explains the story well so that the director does not need to set up specific talking head interviews to provide audience with additional information. The leading character Coach Bill Courtney is a great speaker and talks about a lot on location to the cameraman who just leaves the tape rolling with his handheld camera. In this way the director has already got extensive audio to narrate the story and only needs to interview for further explanation or expression.

The talking head interviews used in this film are relatively short and shot plainly with no elaborate setup. This is in consistency with the photographic style of the b-roll and the overall grab-and-go style of the documentary. Also, this kind of interviews impresses viewers with a feeling that they are shot right in the middle of something going on and the interviewees are not prepared for the questions and just say to the camera what's on his mind at that moment, hence conveying a message of authentic storytelling to viewers.

## *Searching for Sugar Man*

The 2013 documentary *Searching for Sugar Man* tells a story that happened in the late 1990s. For this kind of documentary which traces back history, talking head interview is almost an indispensable technique and component of storytelling.

In this documentary, the director uses talking head interviews with Rodriguez's album producers to uncover his short music career in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and then interviews "Sugar" Segerman and Willem Moller, two South African fans of Rodriguez to explain his popularity and influence there. Instead of using a specialist voice actor to narrate the story, the director uses interviews with these most relevant subjects to efficiently picture the story. For example, at 0:19:57 in the film, over the shot of ocean view from inside a car starts a voice saying for many South Africans Rodriguez's album is the soundtrack to their lives. And the voice continues narrating until the shot is cut to a talking head of "Sugar" Segerman. In this way viewers understand that the voice they've just heard before the talking head shot belongs to Sugar, which means it's not written or narrated by someone not from the movie. The manipulation of interview in such a fashion of truthiness helps reinforce the objectivity and authenticity of the documentary's storytelling.

Most of the subjects are interviewed in their workplaces or home. Because several subjects have music-related careers, they are interviewed in record shops, studios or with music-related objects in the backgrounds. The background and lighting of the talking

head interviews keeps a consistency, and at the same time enhances the credibility of the subjects' identity.

Interviews can be divided into two styles by whether interview questions are included. There is an increasing popularity for documentary filmmakers to exclude the audio or visual of asking questions. Filmmakers try to prompt interviewees to include questions in their answers. This technique has many advantages: First, it increases the speed of storytelling and eliminates possible repetition; second, it avoids the presence of the usually unnecessary and anonymous interviewer, who is deemed to represent the production crew; third, the edit creates a style of self-expression, deluding audience into thinking that interviewees just express what they want to instead of being asked to.

In *Searching for Sugar Man*, most of the interview questions are not included, however, in the interview with Clarence Avant (from 00:36:00-00:39:00), former owner of Sussex Records, also former boss of Rodriguez, the interviewer reveals himself by several uncut questions. First because audience need a context to understand Avant's answers; second the questions are follow-ups to Avant's answers and audience could feel the tension in the interview and the improvisation of the interviewer. Third, some audience might recognize that the interviewer speaks a South African English accent, which enhances the credibility of the production crew as well as the authenticity of the story which is based in South Africa.

## **Voice-Over and Narration**

Voice-over and Narration are two terms that are often seen together and used interchangeably, and sometimes used together, like “voice-over narration.” While basically voice-over means the voice of an unseen narrator speaking, in documentaries, it specifically refers to an unseen subject’s voice that is cut from his narration in the interviews with him. The term “Narration” in documentary, on the other hand, more stands for the narration that is not voice-over, the narration that is scripted and narrated by someone not in the movie.

Besides talking head interview, voice-over and narration are very important components of the audio in a documentary. Although some fiction films also use narration, narration and voice-over are more commonly seen in nonfictions, especially broadcast style videos. They have become a conventional technique for documentary.

### *Inside Job*

Charles Ferguson does not hide his dominant role in the documentary. He makes it clear in the opening credit that *Inside Job* is “produced, written and directed” by him.

In the screening of the 108 minutes' film, the researcher noticed 113 instances of narration segments, compared with 475 instances of interviewees' sound bites. The narration totally takes up around 35 minutes, one third of the film's length.

The narration plays a very important role of connecting the sound bites and laying out the structure of the whole storytelling. Charles Ferguson structures the documentary as a long-form journalism article, breaking it up into several parts using subheadings to lead audience: How we got here; the bubble; the crisis; accountability and where we are now. The complicated phenomenon is analyzed and presented in this logical order. Thanks to the abundant facts and clear logic in the narration, the story proves convincing and persuasive.

Ferguson uses an amount of narration to introduce the interviewee in the subsequent shots. These interviewees are not familiar to audience, and their viewpoints are closely relevant to their titles and personal backgrounds. Therefore the introduction of these interviewees are crucial information.

Compared with the amount of scripted narration and talking heads, *Inside Job* uses relatively few voice-overs. Ferguson is very careful with his manipulation of the talking head interviews with all these big figures from political and financial circles. For most cases, he just leaves audience with the visual of them talking. For one thing, it is important to see their faces and eyes while they make comments and clarify their stands;

for another, because voice-over easily gives viewers an impression that the voice is commenting on the visuals presented at the same time, it is dangerous for Ferguson to use their voices over other visuals. If not properly edited, it might harm the authenticity and credibility of the movie. One example of voice-over is used at 01:09:01 when two subjects were interviewed about that happened after Lehman Brothers announced bankruptcy. Visuals of anxious brokers and securities companies are laid over the interviews. Because they are basically describing what happened it is safe to lay the visuals as a reference to the audio.

### *Undefeated*

Undefeated does not use scripted narration in its storytelling. The story just holds together by synchronized audio and voice-overs. Coach Bill Courtney is the main character and narrator in the documentary. He knows the history of Manassas football team, the schedule of the games and stories of the players. The director uses Courtney's speech recorded at the training field, the battle ground, and in interviews as voice-overs throughout the film.

For example, at 00:05:50 of the film, with the title saying "Bill Courtney began volunteering at Manassas 6 years ago", starts Courtney's voice saying "When I got here, there were 17 kids..." and right away the title is cut to a shot of Courtney with his team

practicing on the playground. The next moment viewers watch and hear Courtney shouting to his team "...Let's move", and with almost no break at all, another piece of his voice- "There are good athletes in the neighborhood, but they weren't gonna play for Manassas"- is laid over the shot of his players getting ready for practice. In the next second comes a shot of Courtney's talking head in his office: " Do you blame them?" With his voice still going on talking about how worst Manassas football team had been doing, the director immediately cut to a montage of black and white newspaper photos of Manassas and a newspaper article title "'Whipping Boy' Manassas." The cuts are quick and smooth, using Courtney's simple and short sentences as voice-overs to effectively summarize Manassas's past. If it had only been Courtney's talking head, it would have been tedious to watch. By using old newspaper pictures as visual reference to Courtney's narration, it effectively enhances the reliability of his speech.

### *Searching for Sugar Man*

Like *Undefeated*, *Searching for Sugar Man* does not use a professional narrator, either. As a loyal and active fan of Rodriguez, Stephen Segerman "Sugar" is the initiator of the continual hunt for this mysterious poetic singer. Using his voices laid over referential visuals at the beginning, middle and the end of the documentary, the director seems to use him as the narrator of the story. This technique helps the story to be told from the

first-person perspective of a subject in the story and avoided the potentially intrusive presence of the director's version of the story.

One thing needs to be paid attention to is that in several instances, it is hard to tell whether Sugar's narration are sound bites that are cut from the interviews with him or it is recorded separately because his narration seems to be too literal and neat than average interview answers. Besides, there are several instances of his voice-overs that are placed separately far from his talking head interviews, leaving audience suspicious of where this voice originally came from.

### **Archival Material**

Apart from talking heads, narration and voice-overs, the third most commonly embedded symbol of authenticity is the use of archival material in documentary. Archival material refers to press reports, photos, film or video footage recording information about the historical world. It is previously produced and obtained by someone else for other uses. People seldom question the truth claim of archival material and worry about its representation of the world. Documentary audiences treat archival material as proof of fact, and the use of it as directors' respect to history. The use of archival material can for most time add to audience's perceived authenticity and objectivity of the storytelling.

## *Inside Job*

To talk about a topic as abstract and complicated as global financial crisis, there is apparently not many specific shots that could be used to visualize the story or illustrate what's discussed in the audio. Ferguson uses old pictures of the interview subjects, newspaper articles and legal documents, archival footage of Wall Street, financial corporates, TV newscast, court record and others as major b-roll in the film.

In the five parts of *Inside Job*, the first part *How we got here*, which talks about the how American economy and financial industry had been deregulated by the cooperation of the government, Wall Street and elite scholars since the 1980s, is mostly about the history, hence needing the most archival materials to illustrate interviewees' speech and work as factual evidence to Ferguson's scripted narration. At 00:14:29, after narration says "In 1981, President Ronald Regan chose as Treasury secretary the CEO of the investment bank Merrill Lynch, Donald Regan," the shot is cut to an archival footage of Donald Regan giving speech: "Wall Street and the president do see eye to eye". The footage here ~~does~~ not only works as an enhancement to the authenticity of the narration ahead, but also provides another layer of information that the relationship between Wall Street and the government is very close.

For another instance, from 00:20:18 to 00:22:18, in two minutes, the director compiles a number of materials including archival footage, newspaper headlines and articles, court records, shots of corporate buildings and titles with a rhythmic background song singing “I’ll be taking care of business...” in order to summarize and illustrate the fact that the world’s largest financial companies have been engaged in large-scale criminal activities. The montage of all kinds of archival materials appears as powerful evidence to the narrator’s statement, and the jaunty rhythm of editing makes the combination of visuals and narration appear like the director is announcing his sweeping victory of holding all the firms accountable. Audience will be easily convinced by the facts and the atmosphere created.

### *Undefeated*

Undefeated comparatively uses very few archival footage because the directors followed the then ongoing story for two years. They recorded the team’s practice, games and individual problems of different characters, and presented what they witnessed to audience. The directors only uses some archival materials in the four-minute opening part of the film while introducing the history of Manassas football team and the role of Coach Courtney.

In this four minutes, the film has three people: journalist Jason Smith, Manassas principle Gloria Williams and teacher Ruth Burke introducing the characters of this documentary.

The directors uses group photos of previous team members, newspaper headline which says “Manassas: 0-10” and newspaper photos of Courtney joining the team to authenticate for audience the team’s disappointing history.

### *Searching for Sugar Man*

For a 2012 documentary about an obscure singer from the 70s, honestly it is hard to shoot relevant b-rolls for the story as well as to find abundant archival materials about the hero, otherwise it would probably mean the hero was not that unknown.

The film could be divided into two parts. In the first part when Rodriguez has not been found and appeared on the screen, the director only uses a couple of his old photos and pictures of his album as archival material to accompany narrations about him or accompany his songs. When explaining Rodriguez’s influence on South Africans, from 00:21:00 to 00:24:30, the director uses archival footage showing protest again apartheid in South Africa in the 70s. These visuals are very powerful to illustrate what society it was and what was the socio historical context when Rodriguez’s songs came to the country. These archival footages take audience back to that time and help them empathize with the interviewees, whose voices are over these footages.

In the second part after Rodriguez was found in the 1997, the director starts to use more black and white photos of him. As the focus of the story shifts to Rodriguez's tour and concert in South Africa, the director has access to more video records about that trip, hence using more archival footage in the film. In spite of the low quality of these records, they still contribute a lot to the authenticity of the story.

In this film, there are many stylized shots of random things, like birds flying over the ocean, bird view of mountains and houses, night scene of a city, etc., which are used as b-rolls over the interviews. Some of them have a strong referential relationship with the audio, but some not. These shots have a very grainy look and seem like footage shot decades ago with antique video cameras. On first thought audience will not doubt that they are archival footages director pulled out from video libraries. However, as director Malik Bendjelloul himself revealed to CNN that he was "running out of money for more film to record the final few shots, he used an iPhone app called 8mm Vintage Camera to complete the film," suspicion arises whether these grainy shots were just created by the app.

Technology has developed so rapidly that the manipulation of shots can be very easy and various. Although it is hard to identify by audience which shots are archival and which are manipulated, and it's also difficult to determine whether the director's intention to use this stylized effect of the shots was to keep the consistency of the overall film look or to delude audience into believing these are archived and authentic historical materials, the

director's use of the app effects and manipulation of shots is bold, worth a second thought. Is the manipulation necessary? Isn't there better visualization of the audio than these random stylized shots?

## **Conclusion**

Charles Peirce held that anything is a sign, and semiosis is a triadic relation between sign (also called representamen), object and interpretant. A sign is what represents a denoted object and an object is what a sign encodes. An interpretant is the meaning of the sign, how the sign is decoded. Previous research shows that over the years, the documentary film industry has already established its own code, a set of conventions, to represent the reality in a credible and authentic way. These conventions range from photographic techniques to editing and storytelling techniques.

Based on the textual analysis of the three latest Oscar Best Documentary Award winners *Inside Job*, *Undefeated* and *Searching for Sugar Man*, the research takes a close examination of how conventional techniques are employed and how the convention contributes to the storytelling's authenticity perceived by audience.

Talking head interview is an effective approach to get visual-audio information for stories and issues that are hard to visualize, such as financial crisis in *Inside Job* and unknown

singer Rodriguez's story in *Searching for Sugar Man*. Because of the custom composition, talking head gives audience an impression of immediacy, which enhances the atmosphere of the interview, either confrontational, confessional, or other. The employment of talking head, which is seldom seen in fiction films, let real subjects narrate the story, which lends a sense of authenticity to the storytelling.

Voice-over and narration are ways filmmakers add audio of factual information to accompany visuals. Voice-over technique is used in order to make full use of the interview audio material and avoid boring audience with a barely moving talking head for minutes. Narration is used to provide background as well as in-depth messages to connect or balance information from real subjects. Voice-over is used in all the three films analyzed while narration is only used in *Inside Job*. Voice-over is gaining more popularity than narration in documentary storytelling as narration more or less still involves the voice of the production crew, which is potentially subjective.

The use of archival materials is another conventional technique conveying documentary's authenticity. Archival materials are seen as records of the socio historical world. The use of them enriches documentaries with materials from various sources, convincing audience of the objectivity and truthfulness of the story.

Admittedly, there are scenarios where these techniques are manipulated by filmmaker and causes suspicion. Images and footage can be manipulated to look ~~like~~ decades old.

Script written by the director can be narrated by a real subject in the story and use the voice over referential visuals. These traps sometimes get the audience, while sometimes draw question to its own authenticity.

My research provides a new examination at the changing conventions of documentary filmmaking, and proposes to bring semiotics theory into the understanding of documentary language. However, there are several limitations of this study that needs to be acknowledged. First, the sample size is only three, which means that my research finding may not be an accurate generalization of the characteristics of Oscar award-winning documentaries. Second, although Oscar is one of the prestigious documentary awards, it mainly recognizes a certain style of documentary that is popular in the Hollywood whereas there are many other national as well as international awards and film festivals that award documentaries of other style, including indie docs. The conventional techniques that these documentaries apply may be very differently from my research findings. Future research is needed to examine how visual markers, audio as well as the past are incorporated to communicate authenticity in indie documentaries. Quantitative research methods such as content analysis and surveys are also recommended to be imported into this area of study

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Charles Morris	Author of Two Trillion Dollar Meltdown
Robert Gnaizda	Former Director of Greenlining Institute
Willem Buiters	Chief Economist of Citigroup
George Soros	Chairman of Soros Fund Management
Eliot Spitzer	Former governor of New York
Scott Talbott	Lobbyist of Financial Services Roundtable
Andrew Sheng	Chief Advisor of China Banking Regulatory Commission
Andrew Lo	Professor and director of MIT Laboratory for Financial Engineering
Michael Greenberger	Former Deputy Director of Commodity Futures Trading Commission
Satyajit Das	Derivatives Consultant
Author of Traders	Guns and Money
Frank Partnoy	Professor of Law and Finance
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Rep. Barney Frank (D-MA)	Chairman of House Financial Services Committee
Gillian Tett	U.S. Managing Editor The Financial Times
Martin Wolf	Chief Economics Commentator of the Financial Times
Kenneth Rogoff	Professor of Economics, Harvard
Daniel Alpert	Managing Director of Westwood Capital
Raghuram Rajan	Chief Economist of International Monetary Fund
Lawrence McDonald	Former Vice President of Lehman Brothers
Harvey Miller	Lehman's Bankruptcy lawyer
Jeffrey Lane	Vice Chairman of Lehman Brothers
Kristi Davis	runner of an elite prostitution ring
Allan Sloan	Senior Editor of Fortune Magazine
Bill Ackman	Hedge Fund Manager
Jerome Fons	Former Managing Director of Moody's Rating Agency
Narration	voiceover
Soundbites	voiceover commentary
Dominique Strauss-Kahn	Managing Director of International Monetary Fund
Christine Lagarde	France Finance Minister

Simon Johnson	Professor of MIT and Former Chief Economist of International Monetary Fund
David McCormick	Under Secretary of the Treasury of Bush Administration
Joanna Xu	Former Worker of China Grand Lighting Factory
Patrick Daniel	Editor-in-Chief of Singapore Press Holdings
Lee Hsien Loong	Prime Minister of Republic of Singapore
Eric Halperin	Director of Center for Responsible Lending
Columba Ramos	resident from San Jose, CA
Steven A. Stephen	Former Construction Worker
Martin Feldstein	Professor of Economics of Harvard
Glenn Hubbard	Dean of Columbia business school