THE ISSUE OF REPRESENTATION IN DOCUMENTARY FILM

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines the concept of documentary filmmaking which is based on the actuality, truth, social reality and historical reality, and also some filmmakers’ perceptions, which I term them as “there is no correct definition of documentary”. I had identified and analyzed the principle modes in documentary filmmaking. These include the historical aspect and the development of documentary filmmaking. Through the thesis film, I concluded that documentary filmmaking is not only adopting the formal modes of documentary but the influencing of the selective method of the documentary filmmaker.
ABSTRAK

Tulisan Ilmiah ini mengkaji konsep dokumentari berdasarkan realiti sosial, kebenaran, kejelasan dan realiti sejarah. Pengkarya berpendapat bahawa tiada definisi yang tepat mengenai dokumentari. Pengkarya mengenalpasti dan menganalisis ciri-ciri model yang terdapat di dalam dokumentari. Melalui filem dokumentari TUDTU pengkarya merumuskan bahawa dokumentari bukan sekadar mengaplikasi ciri-ciri model utama dokumentari tetapi juga dipengaruhi oleh kaedah yang disertakan oleh pengarah.
Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 Background of study

Filmmaking is a reflection of culture, people, habit, story and etc. It is a way of representing the society and culture. The strongest social representation in filmmaking is through documentary form. Documentary differs from other type of film because it is non-fiction. Nichols Bill described it "an institutional framework". The institutional framework for documentary suppresses the complexity in the relationship between representation and reality. It does not only achieve the clarity and simplicity in documentaries but also directly access to the real. Therefore, it has become the prime attractions among all of the documentary forms.

John Grierson, the father of British and Canadian documentary film indicates the term documentary as “the ability of medium to document the particular event and it views as “the creative treatment of actuality” undercuts the claim of truth and authenticity on which the documentary depends. (1991: 25)”. Cinematic publication can be defined as the creative of actuality. The actuality is recognized as the subject to reveal the truth. In other words, recording the reality. The truth, reality and objectivity as read as “actuality”

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can be defined through the documentary mode that adapted; that is to anchor the presentation in time and place through a long take without any interference.

In 1895, the Lumiere brothers constituted some of the earlier non-fiction films. It was the trend in the art of recording the reality in the most accurate way when the camera cinematographe was invented by them. One of their films includes *Workers Leaving the Lumiere Factory*, it is a shot about 100 workers leaving the factory without acknowledging the camera. French critic Andre Bazin once added Lumiere’s film is to record everyday life as it happened; it was shot without adornment and editorial rearrangement. And through this classic documentary form, this is read as "actuality".

Today, it is the reference of "historical" shot in documentary filmmaking history. Besides, Lumiere’s film is categorized as direct cinema. Direct cinema is a term that addressed by the American documentaries in the 1960s and 1970s. It recorded “actuality” in a way that achieved history and accuracy. It is also defined as “cinema truth”. With the advancement of technology such as a portable light and camera, most of the filmmaker could literally film anywhere. As for the subject matter during the time, it was been observed and delivered directly to the viewer. For example, Lumiere’s film *A Train Entering a Station* indicates the real event that happened without the social actors’ notice. Audiences were shocked to watch the moving train, assuming it was moving towards their direction.
The issue of representation arises when subjects are aware of camera. Most of the time, they react differently because they know their action will be recorded. In order to address this problem, most of the filmmakers begin with the documentary’s mode.\(^3\)

Literally, there are six major documentary modes. Each mode’s characteristic will be discussed further in Chapter 2.

Andrew Britton (1992) extended his point by suggesting a great documentary is analytical which presents not only the social reality but also its historical reality. In addition, it lays no claim to objectivity. It presents actively through the structure and organization of certain point of view. In order to support the above statement, brief history of documentary filmmaking will be discussed further in the coming chapter.

Documentary offers visible evidence of what the camera sees. Fictional films give the impression of a private or unusual world to the viewers while documentary films give the impression of what we wish to discover of the world onto some other part of the same world. Richard Baram (1973) mentioned that it is important to think outside the box. He stressed the role of documentary filmmaker is to determine the interpretation of the subject matter. Therefore, it becomes subjective. Nichols (1991) explained the reason it becomes subjective is due to the formal reflexivity broken down into Stylistic

\(^2\) Nelmes J. *An Introduction to Film Studies*. (Routledge, London, 1999), 225

\(^3\) Modes come close to movements; there are six modes in documentary filmmaking. Each mode has its champions as well as its principles or goal. They will discuss further in chapter 2.
Reflexivity. It means stylistic reflexivity attempts to break the conventional as in objectivity in order to draw attention to the work of style from audiences. 

However, there are some different viewpoints towards the documentary. According to another documentary filmmaker Jill Godmilow (1991; 63) he stressed classic documentary had limited kind of text. It needs to claim the “truth”, the “actuality”, but he as a filmmaker wants an open kind of film text to develop. For example, a director will apply the reenactment to his work to achieve the incomplete materials, multivalent and heteroglossic. Documentaries of social representation offer us new point of views of our common world to explore and to understand.

Peter Moore (1999) added that the documentary form is in a permanent crisis. As how things change over time, the definitions will gradually change as well. Therefore, most of the filmmakers think the documentary needs alternative approaches to constantly the attempt but they adopt no fixed techniques in it. Bela Balaz (1999) a screenwriter and a director, stressed that documentation process is part of the representation. A reproduction by its originality, we judge representation based on the nature of the pleasure it offers. Documentary is a surprise! As a result, it is necessary to take into consideration of the filmmakers’ behavior, attitude and approach towards the subject matter.
This study will draw the reader’s attention to the diversity and range of opinions within the subject matter and also representation in a balance perception. Methods of study will include the understanding of the key words, concepts and the representation method theory approach in documentary filmmaking.

1.2 Problem statement

Although representation is a key issue in filmmaking practice, but it has stimulated some highly contentious debates in relation to mainstream cinema. Documentary has a social mission, and it is a medium to convey messages. The issues of representation include; there are many ideas about representation and it is confusing. It questions lots about the objectivity and subjectivity in the documentary. For example, some filmmakers stress on the originality and their own way of seeing the world. Some will stress the authenticity and fidelity of the representation. On the other hand, some will see the world as to share and the perceptions of the filmmaker. Besides, there is also issue of misrepresentation.

From the discussion above, there are many different ideas about representation but there are non-specific answers to address it. Other than that, there are articles and books in filmmaking which provide the key ideas towards the definition of the representation. Such as, non-fiction, non-narrative, purpose, subject, archival footage, on location shoot, real people, conventions including to make sure documentary has
voiceover narration, interviews, social actors, etc. However, not all documentaries exhibit all of the above characteristics. So, will a documentary film have a new definition when a documentary filmmaker uses a technique that avoids the typical feature?

1.3 Objective

To collect and understand the key concept of representation in documentary, such as the actuality in objectivity, subjectivity and perception of a documentary filmmaker. To organize all the terms in an understandable manner.

1.4 Hypothesis

The concept of documentary filmmaking is based upon the actuality, truth, social reality, historical reality and also filmmaker’s perception. There is no correct definition.

1.5 Methodology

As mentioned in the introduction, this study consist the key concepts and understands the representation in documentary, such as social reality, truth, historical reality and so on. Furthermore, the interpretation is a matter of how it conveys meaning and value.

There are three films to be discussed in the later chapter. The first film is Nanook of the North (1922). A film by Robert Flaherty. It was a study of the Inuit Eskimos in Northern Canada. The film is acknowledged as one of the most influential film in the
documentary genre. The second film is Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11*. Lastly, Morgon Spurlock's *Super Size Me*.

Chapter 4 is a discussion on a thesis film of a Kelabit family who produces Kelabit Salt in Bario. It recalls and restages the former and the primitive era of the Kelabit lifestyle by applying my own choice of representation system.

My final project will include an introduction of Kelabit community, their way of living and also some interviews with the Kelabits living in Bario. This documentary will apply the standards of journalistic objectivity (voice-over commentary which sometimes can be poetic, sometimes factual but almost omnipresent) where we can expect each story to be both entertaining and informative. Any claim made will be backed up by a credible display of evidence. The structure of this film may include: (1) Introduction to the Salt making as the background, (2) Present an argument about salt making; that it is full of hardship and rarely practiced now in the community. (3) Stress the filmmaker's responses to the process of filmmaking, representing it by technical skill, (4) Narrate the story of a particular, typical Kelabit family in salt making.

1.6 Conclusion

The issues of representation triggers the question of the unsettled assumption in documentary film. I strongly agree with John Grierson who noted that the construction of documentary needs the creative element of actuality but in which it should remain as the
key concept. Documentary film is a text where truth exists. However, the text of the film will be viewed at the secondary as we begin the process of construction. Thus, the documentary truth is described as the reality of human experience in balancing perspective.
Chapter 2

Overview of the Form of Documentary Filmmaking

This chapter outlines the historical aspect of documentary filmmaking by identifying the common findings of research related to documentary modes. I contextualize my research by elaborate the key words, themes and examples of the films, related to the topic. Documentary that falls in period. Most importantly, this chapter gives the readers the basic concept and different approaches in documentary filmmaking.

In the early nineteenth century, documentary films were practiced in every region of the world. With the style, technique, editing, story telling, narration and intent. It is a medium to record the cross-section of human experience. It includes the monumental conflict to simple lives. For examples, it documented the events, pressures, institutions of modern society, traditional cultural practices, cultural changes, natures, animal world and etc. Besides the form and subject matter, documentary film has many missions as well. It was created to inform, intrigue, teach, enlighten, convert, outrage, accuse and to serve as newsreel such as propaganda.4

There are few documentary filmmakers who had contributed to the history of documentary filmmaking. The Lumiere Brothers, Louis Jean and Auguste Marie Louis Nicholas
were the creators of the Cinematographic projector—cinematographe in 1895. They were the first magnates and a major prophet in documentary filmmaking. There were sharp contrasts between Lumiere and Edition in their technical inventions. Edition's Kinetoscope had limitations in its functions. It needs power supply and men power to move it. On the other hand, Lumiere's cinematographe is totally different. It weighted 5 kilograms and can be easily carried anywhere. Furthermore, it does not depend on power supply. Therefore, considering the technical elements, Lumiere's work consisted mainly of moving images from everyday life scenes.

In 1884, documentary filmmaker Robert Joseph Flaherty began his career as a prospector and explorer in the Hudson Bay region of Canada. His first feature length documentary film, *Nanook of the North, 1922* was highly mentioned in the documentary history. He was particularly interested in the life of the local Eskimos and spent so much time filming them. His method was to live with his subjects as a participant-observer and become familiar with their way of life before filming it. Flaherty once mentioned that there are no inherent conflicts in the people's way of life, providing further incentive not to shoot anything. In Flaherty's films, he exposed his characters to extreme danger. And more importantly, he sensed that he himself needed to represent the cultural destruction and he wanted to show the former majesty and the character of these people. Further discussion on *Nanook of the North* will be in Chapter 3.

John Grierson, (1898-1972) was the founder of the British documentary movement as mentioned earlier. Griersons' major contribution to the world cinema is the influence on both

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4 The systematic construction of a text in which the ideological principles of a political stance are promoted,
aesthetic and also act as important institution. He highlighted the instrument of education and enlightenment in documentary film. In 1930s and 1940s, John Grierson managed to get state sponsored bodies with responsibilities for wartime and postwar propaganda. Institutionally, Griersons' achievement was helping to establish the government – sponsored sector within the non-commercial cinema with serious purpose. Aesthetically, the documentary attitude was credited with dominance of social realism towards the British Cinema. Therefore, Grierson declared himself laid in the sociological mission rather than aesthetic idea. This was because he always saw himself as an educator than an artist. This can clearly clarify by his mythology to rise out the contemporary problems during the periods. Such as labor problems, class problems, psychology problems etc. This idea helped the citizens to understand their social problem. In another word, it created the social awareness for the nation.

Documentary modes do not only fall into movements but also periodizations. No one set out the definition of neither documentary nor documentary tradition. In fact, it comes with the desire of filmmaker or writer to discover the new form. The desires of a filmmaker can be different ways of representing the subject matter. New modes arise partly to perceive deficiencies of previous mode. It has transformed into another genre because the documentaries went through different construction.

John Corner suggested documentary representation to be defined through three main points; the technology factors, sociological dimensions and aesthetic concerns. In the technology factors, earlier documentary filmmaking explains how the technology changed the style of endorsed and made attractive to the viewer in order to influence the viewer’s beliefs and preferences
representation. For sociological dimensions, it focuses on recording certain aspect of “reality” in that particular time and space. The documentary implicitly and explicitly locates itself in historical moments. It focuses on cultural code. As for aesthetic concerns, documentary modes are discussed. Therefore, the aesthetics of a documentary is to determine its context.

The earliest mode was Poetic mode in the 1920s. Poetic mode emphasizes on visual association, rhythmic quality, descriptive passages and formal organization. This mode bears a close proximity to experimental, personal and avant-garde filmmaking. It records what it sees faithfully and accurately. It often works with photographic images of everyday reality. Poetic documentaries draw on the historical world to their raw material reality in term of fragments, subjective impressions, incoherent acts and loose associations. This is generally the effect of the World War I which broke up the traditional terms, such as the time and space into personal vulnerable. Documentary films which applied the Poetic mode are Robert Flaherty’s Man of Aran in 1934, it showed dramatic framing of material presents mythic image of man in harmony with nature. Another film was Olympia 1938 by Leni Riefenstahl. It presented a glorified view of (Aryan) athletes during the 1936 Olympic Games. It celebrated the power and the beauty of the (Aryan) human form.

5 Nichols Bill, Introduction to documentary (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 32
6 Literally the advanced guard of experimental film makers who reject the dominant form of mainstream cinema in favour of innovation and experiment in filmmaking, often producing non-narrative, non-illusionistic, sometimes abstract films.
The Second mode is the expository mode\textsuperscript{7} which falls in the same period as Poetic mode. Expository mode addresses the viewer with its title and voices that propose the perspective of the recount history. It is a rhetorical and argumentative frame than aesthetic poetic mode. The expository adopts the “Voice of God”, the speaker or commentator who is heard but never seen. In short, expository documentary is carried by the spoken word. Although image serve as supporting role in documentary filmmaking but the voice accompanying the image emphasizes more meaning and interpretation. For example, Pare Lorenz's \textit{The Plow that Broke the Plains} 1936. It was an argument for. In shot, what the filmmaker saw through the viewfinder was the actual event.

The result of footage recalled the work of Government sponsored efforts to stop soil erosion and revitalize the soil of the Great Plains. Besides, the editing in expository mode establishes certain rhythm and formal pattern. It is to maintain the continuity and perspective on the subject matter. Later on, it utilizes a “voice of authority commentary” as the speaker is heard and also seen. Besides, documentaries filmmaker in the expository mode has a great freedom in arrangement of image to emphasize the impression of objectivity with well-supported argument material.

In the 1960s, the observational mode\textsuperscript{8} was invented when several of new technology such as lightweight camera and tape recorder as mentioned earlier. These new technology are easily

\textsuperscript{7} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{8} Ibid
handled by one person and it could move freely to record as it happened. The style in observational mode has no voice-over commentary, no supplementary music, no historical reenactment and no repeated behavior of camera. For example, Robert Drew's Primary 1960 and Richard Pennebacker's Don't Look Back 1967. The Observational mode also known as the Italian neo-realists. The observational mode poses series of ethical consideration such as to what extent can the filmmaker explains the possible consequences of allowing the behavior to be observed and represented to others. Therefore, the relationship issues between the subject matter and filmmaker arises. This is caused by the "sense of loss seems to identify positive values perceived in the rushes and intended by the filming but unachieved in the complete film".

Participatory mode was invented with the anthropology movement in 1960s. It is defined by practicing of fieldwork. Fieldwork is where anthropologist lives among the community for certain period of time note down what they observed. There are three different degree of observation in anthropology. There are fully observation, participant-observation and fully participation. Participatory mode in documentary filmmaking gives audience the sense of filmmaking process. Audience is given the possibility of filmmaker's emotional perception towards subject matter. Therefore, the filmmaker in participatory mode can perform as mentor, critic, interrogator, collaborator or provocateur to the subject matter. For example, Nick Broomfield's work, such as Kurt and Courtney 1998. Not all participatory documentaries stress on personal perception of filmmaker.

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9 Ibid
There are filmmakers who create the broader perspective through interview. Audiences can make their own judgment by looking at the distinct form of social encounter through the interview. It represents the world historical form by specific perspective by the filmmaker and subject matter. Eric Barnouw (1993) characterized it as the cinema verite. Cinema verite is a phase that acknowledges the film making process upon recording the “actuality”. It recognizes the subjectivity of the filmmaker’s intentions. Jean Rouch who invented the word “Verite” suggested that the documentary form should be defined through the purpose of its author or the director. In other words, cinema verite supports the documentary truth through the intention of those who produce it. As cinema verite becomes the trend, it questions of objectivity in historical accuracy as mentioned earlier. At the same time, it questions the responsibility of the filmmaker towards the subject matter. Bill Nichols addresses this function as a part of realist conventions construction. It means the representation issues include the process of a documentary filmmaking. In documentaries, there are categories of different genre, for examples, factual film, ethnography film, exploration film, propaganda film and etc.

In the 1980s, Reflexive mode11 is where the process of negotiation between the documentary filmmaker and their audience or viewer. The problem is reflecting the circumstances that they facing during the filming. Reflexivity also draws viewers’ attention to their assumptions and expectations about the documentary form itself. For example, Dziga Vertov’s *Man with a Movie Camera* 1929 which documented the mechanization of Soviet life in late twenties. It emphasises on the mechanical camera. The cameraman initially becomes part of

10 ibid.,226
the subject. Reflexive can become too abstract and lose the actual issues of the subject matter. Abstract is referring to the subjectivity that carries along by the film maker.

Performative mode\textsuperscript{12} raises the question of knowledge in the 1980s. It is like poetic mode of documentary representation, which was discussed earlier. The question toward the knowledge is based upon the factual information given by classically objectivity. It stresses on the subjectivity aspect, emotionally and expressively. In other words, performative losses on the objectivity that relegates to avant-garde style. Documentary films that show the Performative mode was Brett Morgen's \textit{The Kid Stays in the Picture} 2002 which offered a personal and emotional account of Robert Evan's tenure as Hollywood producer.

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid

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