
Stories We Tell



Stories We Tell - The Documentary Form

What is Documentary?

Writing / Discussion task:

What is a documentary? Write a definition. Share those definitions as a class. Are there any points at which you disagree?

Write down television and film documentaries that you have seen.

What are the two most different types of documentary you have come up with as a class? Can you group them into similar types?

After reading the definitions below, try to come up with a more comprehensive version.

Try to incorporate everything from *Stories We Tell*.

[Watch this list from 4:37](#)

There has been a strong history of documentary film since the invention of the art form. The Lumière brothers early work *Train Pulling into a Station* and much of the other early work of cinema contains very little artifice, it is purely a recording of a thing that happened.

John Grierson defined documentary very early on as:

...the creative treatment of actuality. (1932-34)

His definition accepts the role of the filmmaker as a 'creative' force in shaping the presentation of a narrative in the final product. But the word 'actuality' suggests a preponderance of factual or 'truthful' substance.

In Bordwell and Thompson's *Film Art* (1997) they defined documentary as:

...a documentary film purports to present factual information about the world outside the film.

The use of the word purports raises questions about the reliability of the documentary as a form. Can a documentary ever present an objective truth?

Singleton and Conrad (2000) define documentary as:

Film of actual events; the events are documented with the real people involved, not with actors.

This might seem straightforward and true but becomes difficult when documentaries use reconstructions and other creative touches.

James Monaco (2000) adopts a broader definition:

A term with a wide latitude of meaning, basically used to refer to any film or program not wholly fictional in nature.

The Documentary Boom: Context

It might seem that documentary cinema is a niche genre but the movement is experiencing something of a protracted renaissance. Whilst cinema attendances and box office takings are not especially high the proliferation of digital distribution (Netflix, Amazon, Curzon etc) has given documentary cinema and series a significant boost in popularity. Netflix have been particularly busy in the market for 'True Crime' documentary TV series: *Making a Murderer*, *Evil Genius*, *The Staircase* and more have been significant successes for the company.

Stories We Tell had a limited theatrical release, opening on two and hitting a maximum of 70 screens at its widest release point. However, despite this, it is apparently one of the most successful Canadian films of all time: it was listed on the TIFF all time top ten, has a 94% rating on Rotten Tomatoes and 91% on Metacritic as well as a score of awards from festivals and critics groups.

Stories We Tell: Context

In her book *Documentary Film: A Very Short Introduction* Patricia Aufderheide states that there are three primary sources of funding for documentary film: corporate/government sponsors, advertisers or users. *Stories We Tell* was funded by the National Film Board (NFB), a national Canadian body that has been a supporter of documentary since Grierson's involvement in the 1930s. In tandem with the NFB the Canadian Film Centre created a documentary development programme called Creative Doc Lab which led to the production of *Stories We Tell*.

Due to the unique circumstances of its production there were specific benefits to the filmmaker, in this case Polley. She had the freedom to experiment with and challenge, what executive producer Anita Lee called, 'traditional notions of documentary'.

Writing/Discussion task:

What are the potential advantages and disadvantages of the three funding models described by Aufderheide?

How does Sarah Polley challenge some 'traditional notions of documentary'? Think of all the documentaries we've listed previously. What does this one do differently? How does it do it?

Listen to the NPR interview with Polley - make notes on her approach to making the film and the decisions she made.

<https://www.npr.org/2013/05/15/180847785/a-polley-family-secret-pieced-deftly-together?t=1537132005869>

Further Contexts

What is a Canadian?

What do you understand to be the national characteristics or stereotypes of Canadians?

What does it mean to be Canadian on the 150th anniversary of Canada coming into existence as a country?

Canada is a country made up of over 200 ethnic groups, spread over six time zones.

What does this have to do with *Stories We Tell*? What does this film tell us about Canadians, are there immigrants in the film, what are the national characteristics that come to the surface during the course of 'the story'?

Media Context

As the media landscape shifts and changes the broad definitions of what is and isn't a documentary change all the time. In 2005 Channel Four screened 'The 50 Greatest Documentaries' a list show that ranked *Wife Swap* and *Faking It* alongside films like *Nanook of the North* and *Hearts of Darkness: A Filmmaker's Apocalypse*.

Faking It

Wife Swap

With television moving increasingly toward scripted 'reality' television, where situations are constructed for entertainment purposes, it can be difficult to know where to draw the line for documentaries. Made in Chelsea...

Increasingly complex narratives, especially in documentary forms, are accepted by audiences now. While plot twists have always been popular with audiences Sarah Polley offers something further with her film: a construction twist. Are there any other films that offer this sort of twist on their construction? Perhaps Exit Through the Gift Shop?

Writing/Discussion task:

Look at the television texts we've talked about - are they documentaries? Is 'reality' television a form of documentary?

Why is 'reality' television so frowned on, when documentaries are so lauded by critics?

Why might the 'construction twist' be so important in the film, what does it tell us about the notion of 'truth' and the complication of memory.

Research - listen to Malcolm Gladwell's revisionist history podcast Season 3, Episode 4.

<http://revisionisthistory.com/episodes/24-free-brian-williams>

Documentary Form in Stories We Tell

Documentary as a genre is a broad church with some wide stylistic differences. *Stories We Tell* uses a lot of traditional genre techniques.

The following prompts are for your notes, we'll be making detailed notes on the usual forms adopted by documentarians and the reasons why Polley has decided to use them in this film.

Handheld

Handheld footage is often favoured by documentarians for a variety of reasons, what are these reasons?

Both the archive footage and the reconstructions from *Stories We Tell* use handheld camera techniques. Why has Polley done this? What was she potentially seeking as an outcome for the audience?

Voice-Over or Narration

What is the effect of a voice-over in a documentary? How does it lead us to a preferred reading? See Grizzly Man. Who is the dominant voice-over in *Stories We Tell*, there may be more than one? What does Polley do with the Voice-Over that is unusual in the film?

Talking Heads

Usually respecting the 'rule of thirds' talking heads are interviews composed with experts, witnesses or some other corroborative person. The framing of people in talking heads can often lead to the sense that some are more important than others. See Touching the Void (25:00 +) How are they framed in *Stories We Tell*? Does it lend a sense of importance to any one person above any other?

Archive Footage and Photographs

What is it and why do you use it? See Ken Burns. What does Polley use? She draws from a couple of different places. What does all of this lend her film?

Reconstructions or Re-enactments

What is it and why do you use it? See The Thin Blue Line. How does Polley present these in the film, what is she trying to achieve?

Hyper-real or Extraordinary Subjects

Often the subject of a documentary will be someone extraordinary or bizarre. See Big River Man. Does Sarah Polley's family qualify under this umbrella? What is notable or interesting about them?

Modes of Documentary

Bill Nichols' seminal text *Introduction to Documentary* (2010) breaks down the documentary into six frequently cited sub-genres or 'modes'.

"In documentary film and video, we can identify six modes of representation that function something like sub-genres of the documentary film genre itself: poetic, expository, participatory, observational, reflexive, performative.

These six modes establish a loose framework of affiliation within which individuals may work; they set up conventions that a given film may adopt; and they provide specific expectations viewers anticipate having fulfilled."

For each of the following 'modes' try to write what are the advantages and disadvantages of such an approach. Also try to see how much *Stories We Tell* fits into any of these particular modes.

Poetic

Bursting into popularity in the 1920s, a **poetic** documentary is often non-linear and lacking a clear narrative thrust. They rely instead on juxtaposition of images and sound to create a mood or tone. Of course, the go to film is *Koyaanisqatsi* (1982) and its sequels but Leni Reifenstahl's films, like *Olympia: Festival of Beauty* offer a politically charged alternative. What are the advantages and disadvantages of this mode, especially in approaching a sense of 'truth'?

- *Rain* (1928) – Joris Ivans
- *Play of Light: Black, White, Grey* (1930) – Laszlo Moholy-Nagy
- *Sans Soleil* (1982) – Chris Marker

Expository

Also popular from the '20s onward are documentaries with a clear authoritative narration/ voice-over with mostly an educational aim. More recently this particular mode has become entwined with nature documentaries - especially the incredibly successful BBC series *Planet Earth* and *Blue Planet*. You can go quite far back to see John Grierson's *Night Mail* for a classic example. Typical production elements include interviews, illustrative visuals, some actuality, perhaps some graphics and photos and a 'voice of God' narration track. Scripted narration connects the story elements and often unpacks a thesis or an argument. What does the voice-over achieve in films like this, how does it affect the relationship between the sound and images - what does it encourage within us, as viewers, to believe?

- *The Plow That Broke the Plains* (1936) - Pare Lorentz
- *City of Gold* (1949) - NFB
- *The Civil War* (1990) - Ken Burns

Participatory

This particular mode has a clear relationship between the film-maker and the subject(s). The film-maker here is frequently seen on screen, asking questions and expressing their own opinions. Originating in the 1960s this particular form has boomed in popularity from the 1980s onwards. Nick Broomfield and Michael Moore have had significant financial and critical successes with their films, often featuring them in a leading role within in the film. Other major financial and even socially important films include Morgan Spurlock's Supersize Me and Louis Theroux's My Scientology Movie. Why are these films so popular? What kind of truth do they actually approach?

Chronicle of a Summer (1960) - Jean Rouché

Sherman's March (1986) - Ross McElwee

Approaching the Elephant (2014) - Amanda Wilder

Observational

Also originating in the 1960s, and in response to the criticisms of other modes, this kind of documentary took advantage of smaller cameras and faster lenses to shoot in low light and attempted to film their subjects with as little intrusion and intervention as possible. Often referred to as cinema vérité, direct cinema or 'fly-on-the-wall' this is possibly the most analysed form of documentary. Frederick Wiseman, a particularly grumpy man, has worked in this particular milieu from the sixties and made classics of the genre, High School and the controversial Titicut Follies. Is this mode the closest to the truth? What stops it from being fully true?

Primary (1960) - Robert Drew

Don't Look Back (1967) - D.A. Pennebaker

Salesmen (1969) - Albert and David Maysles

Reflexive

Documentaries made in reflexive mode evolved through the 1980s to provoke audiences to "question the authenticity of documentary in general," writes Bill Nichols. Reflexive docs challenge assumptions and expectations about the form itself. They often focus in part on the process of making the film, how and why they are constructed in a certain way. In his 1992 film *Aileen Wuornos: The Selling of a Serial Killer* Nick Broomfield spends an inordinate amount of time focused on actually getting an interview with Wuornos. Louis Theroux often spends time exploring the process of getting access to celebrities in this reflexive fashion. Perhaps the grand-daddy of this mode is Dziga Vertov's Man With a Movie Camera.

Exit Through the Gift Shop (2010) - Banksy

Performative

Personal and focused on much more subjective ideas of truth that are of importance to the subject (or more often the filmmaker). This is the direct opposite of the Objective mode emphasising the filmmaker's own involvement with the subject. The filmmaker shows a larger political or historical reality through the window of her own experience. Rather than rely on the expository approach, the rhetoric of persuasion, the performative filmmaker becomes a personal guide who shows it and tells it like it is with raw emotion. In *Tongues Untied* (1989) the late African-American filmmaker Marlon Riggs combines actuality, re-enactments and his personal account to shine a light on black gay American identity.

Night And Fog (1955) - Alain Resnais

Paris Is Burning (1991) - Jenny Livingston

Forest of Bliss (1986) - Robert Gardner

Writing/Discussion task:

There's a lot of really big ideas in the discussion of Documentary Modes so to keep it simple, which of these suit *Stories We Tell*?

If you had to categorise *Stories We Tell* in terms of a series of percentages (eg 10% reflexive, 90% participatory) how would you go about doing that?

Finally, there is a kind of documentary that Nichols does not explore in his book: the 'Personal Documentary'. Generally autobiographical in the story they seek to tell the personal documentary usually combines interviews, voice-overs, archive footage, photographs and other artefacts to explore a person's life. This might sound like our film but Sarah Polley isn't a fan herself:

Personal documentaries have always made me a bit squeamish. I've seen some brilliant ones, but they often push the boundaries of narcissism and can feel more like a form of therapy than actual filmmaking.

Does this explain Polley's own role in the film?

Linda Williams view if the personal documentary seems apt for *Stories We Tell*.

such films challenge viewers to recognise that truths exist in a context, in relationship to lies, and are selected from other truths. Going beyond the reflexivity (that is calling attention to the fact that the film is a film), such films posit that there are important truths to be revealed and they can be revealed in spite of - or even by calling attention to - the partiality of our understanding.

Storytelling & The Truth

The whole story, in your own words...

Sarah Polley's film wrestles with the notion of an 'objective truth', a single truth that is the same for all people that encounter it. Polley's film rejects this idea with only Harry Gulkin providing a real voice of dissent.

We've discussed the notions of bias and balance in documentary film-making, often finding that any approach to some form of objective truth is heavily compromised by the involvement of the film-maker itself. An idea that Polley's film addresses through the use of some self-reflexive techniques, like asking the interviewees what they think of the act of making the documentary in the first place.

Bill Nichols describes these techniques as follows:

Reflexive strategies that call the very act of representation into question unsettle the assumption that documentary builds on the ability of film to capture reality. To remind viewers of the construction of the reality... undercuts the very claim to truth and authenticity on which the documentary depends. If we cannot take its images as visible evidence of the nature of a particular part of the historical world, of what can we take them? (2010)

We're going to watch an [interview with Sarah Polley](#) now and take some notes whilst we do. Look specifically for what Polley says about the process of finding the idea of storytelling, rather than a specific story, at the heart of what she was doing.

The Four Tendencies

In “Toward a Poetics of Documentary,” Michael Renov outlines four tendencies of documentary. He places these tendencies within theories of poetics in order to show that they are products of historical, cultural, and technological contexts. As a result, these tendencies serve as a way to see how to widen the gap between the image and its representation, making more room for both aesthetic and political interpretation.

The four tendencies are

- To record, reveal, or preserve
- To persuade or promote
- To analyze or interrogate
- To express

To record, reveal, or preserve

Documentary possesses a strong desire to fix a moment and to hang on to it for posterity. This fixing prevents moments from being lost, and in effect it recreates history, a reality, within a medium outside that reality. By representing that reality in an image, the gap between that image and the reality it represents seems almost to collapse, when instead it should widen. There should be no promises between an image and its representation. In other words, what we see in the image might not be what is actually there now. For example, in *Roger & Me*, Michael Moore shows Autoworld, which was built in Flint, Michigan, to help attract tourists. Moore’s images of the amusement park are from the 1980s. By 2006 the park had now been demolished and replaced with a parking lot and buildings for the University of Michigan-Flint.

Flaherty’s *Nanook of the North* is an example of this tendency.

To persuade or promote

For this tendency, Renov draws directly from John Grierson. He notes how for Grierson “the screen was a pulpit, the film a hammer to be used in shaping the destiny of nations.” Often, documentaries that serve as propaganda seem to be viewed as monolithic in their intentions and voices, but persuasion can appeal in a variety of ways, including interviews, evocative images, and statistical information. The overall important thing to remember here is that the propaganda is the product of a particular moment in history and was made with specific intention.

Examples of this tendency include Leni Reifenstahl’s *Triumph of the Will* and Frank Capra’s *Why We Fight* series.

To analyze or interrogate

This tendency calls attention to the seemingly direct link between image and reality. It reminds that an image is an image, and in doing so pushes open a gap in that link between the representation and the reality it represents. Within that gap the audience finds a place to analyze and even act upon what it sees.

One way to raise this awareness is to call attention to the complementary relationship between sound and image. Voiceover narration, for example, typically comments on or explains the image, connecting it with other images. In *Land Without Bread*, the voiceover comments on the life of Las Hurdes but instead of a detached tone or an informative tone, it adopts a more cynical and judgmental one, almost disdainful of the people in the film. Another example is *Surname Viet Given Name Nam*.

To express

Typical representations of reality are more functional than artistic because they appear more objective. This clinging to function negates the possibility for artistic interpretation, but Renov finds that these expressions and representations should not be mutually exclusive. By allowing more expressive techniques into representation, again a space is created for exposing the gap and denaturalizing the image.

Potential examples here include Joris Ivens's *Rain* and *The Bridge*, not to mention other city symphonies.

Renov stresses throughout his piece that these tendencies do overlap and that each allows room for both political and aesthetic inquiry.

Source: Renov, Michael. "Toward a Poetics of Documentary." In *Theorizing Documentary*, ed. Michael Renov. New York: Routledge, 1993. 12-36.

Writing / Discussion task:

Michael Renov's tendencies are a critical part of documentary theory. Try to write down, in your notes, a short summation of what each of the four tendencies is an attempt to do.

So which of the tendencies does *Stories We Tell* fall into? Is it more than one?

Try to categorise ten more documentaries.

The Elements of Stories We Tell

In this section of the booklet we'll be making our own notes on the various techniques used in *Stories We Tell*. Instead of studying individual scenes, which is harder to do in this kind of documentary, we'll be making notes on lots of different sections from throughout the film.

Cinematography

Traditional uses of documentary form include:

talking heads in medium / medium close-up.

moments of fly-on-the-wall filming.

performed / reconstructed scenes.

What is achieved by using such a wide range of techniques?

Look at the section of close-ups of Diane just prior to Michael remembering the day she died. What function do they serve? What do they elicit from the viewer?

Contrast the 'voyeur' reconstructed footage with the 'interactive' reconstructed footage. What are the effects here?

Polley blends 16mm footage with digital footage for the contemporary scenes. Why? Just to aid deception?

What is the effect of 8mm / 16mm footage with its circular film grain and warm tone?

What is the effect of the very occasional pan (see Michael's home)?

Mise-en-scène

Playbills and articles, mementos from Diane / Michael's acting careers give what effect?

By showing mixing desks, cameras and lighting rigs what does Polley create?

Location, set, costume and styling are all used to create what sense of reality in the course of the film?

Editing

The narrative structure of the film is non-linear. Despite asking for the story 'from the beginning' we learn different elements of the story at different points in the film. Diane's first marriage is a good example. Why? What is Polley creating with this approach? What is she giving the spectator?

Does the film give you a sense of narrative closure?

Some specific cuts are designed to have a powerful emotive effect.

Archive footage of Sarah cut to Michael discussing abortion.

Contemporary footage of Sarah to archive of her mother.

Overall, the complexity of the edit has a strange effect on the spectator the first time they watch the film compared to the second time.

Sound

Song choices:

Skippy Love by Bon Iver and Demon Host by Timber Timbre bookend the movie. Listen again - check the scenes.

Light hearted piano music used at points. Play Me a Movie: Piano Music to Accompany Silent Movie Scenes by Abraham Lass

Many voices are heard, Michael Polley's is most prominent and contains elements of his cultural capital.

Polley herself said:

"I declined to use a 'voice of God' first person voice over narration because it felt false, self involved, and besides the point. But I found I could lose myself in the words of the people closest to me. I can feel and hear and see their histories, and I wanted to get lost, immerse myself in these words, and be a detective in my own life and family.

Performance

How much of this film is performed? The reconstructions? The interviews? The voice over? What about the texts within the text. Michael and Diane meet on the set of a play; Michael even suggests they were playing roles themselves.

Aesthetics: Home Movie/Super 8

Sarah Polley uses Super 8 footage to create a home movie aesthetic.

The excellent Royal Ocean Film Society has decided to explore if life looks better on Super 8, what do you think? What are the feelings and emotions brought about by using this film type? What is Polley trying to do by using both original Super 8 footage and reconstructed footage?

Does Polley have an overall aesthetic to all of her films?

Away From Her

Take This Waltz

Anita Lee, producer of *Stories We Tell* suggests there is an overarching series of common themes to Polley's films:

Her signature is to look at relationships deeply and honestly in a microscopic way, and the emotional waves these relationships have on the people around them. A deep exploration of intimate relationships at different stages was at the core of I Shout Love, Away From Her and Take This Waltz, and now Stories We Tell takes this territory to a new level. (cinemareview.com 2017)

Aside from the aesthetics what are the themes that Polley involves in her films?

Representations in Stories We Tell & Documentaries

Documentaries don't have to rely on stereotypes or archetypal representations, they're presenting real people with rounded characters in most cases. But through the lens of any film-maker a bias can be introduced. Kristen Arneson in *Artefacts* said, "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."

Age

How is age represented in the film? Is age mentioned much? Can you remember the ages at which major events happened in the film?

Is this Polley's democratic approach to filmmaking? Are people offered more or less respect due to their age?

Only one character has their age defined throughout the course of the film: Diane. Why?

Gender

Does the film judge Diane by traditional Western standards applied to women? Does she stick to those roles? How much did Michael do around the house compared to Diane?

Joanna: "She did all the cooking, all the cleaning, all the taking care of the kids."

Michael: "I was a good husband in a providing way."

How are the couple represented as having different attitudes to sex? "a night with a dead wombat..."

Despite the non-judgmental attitude of the films towards Diane, the past is shown to have quite profoundly judged her.

Explore in a paragraph of notes for each character (Michael/Diane) how they are presented.

Ethnicity

Did you pick up on any of the introduction of Jewish culture to the film? How are the Jewish cultural practices presented as compared to the non-Jewish cultural practices of the Polley family?

Digital Technology in Film

The impact of digital technologies on film is to be studied alongside the documentary element of the course. The extract below is directly from the A-Level Specification:

The degree of the impact the digital has had on film since the 1990s is a developing debate. Some film commentators argue that, although digital technology could potentially transform cinema, so far films, especially narrative films designed for cinema release, have changed very little from pre-digital times. Others consider that the impact of digital filmmaking is only beginning to emerge, both in high concept Hollywood filmmaking and in much lower budget experimental work.

So, what are the immediate impacts of the digitisation of film? Make notes on the following.

- Weight and size of equipment/portability/subject response
- Special Effects.
- Distribution models.

It might seem that the digital technologies debate is unsuited to *Stories We Tell*. Why?

Apparently forty percent of the film is from the family's old Super 8 movies. Super 8 cameras (Canon 1014 AZ, Canon 1014XLS and Nikon R8) were used in the reconstruction footage. The film took three days to process, a frustrating process that produced impressive results.

The digital camera used (Sony CineAlta HDW-F900R) in the making of the film produces very crisp and clear images. The difference in these two types of image created by the cameras could be representative of something to do with memory. What are your thoughts?

Writing/Discussion task:

Research the cameras mentioned on this page. Look at their specifications and the advantages/disadvantages of using them.

Read the Charles Matthau article on the following pages and summarise the arguments.

Watch *Side by Side* and summarise the findings of the film in a table.

How Tech Has Shaped Film Making: The Film vs. Digital Debate Is Put to Rest

THE DIRECTOR ROBERT Rodriguez is famous for getting his shooting done rather quickly. He has described his process as one long day of work, beginning with shots and moving into editing all within the same day. He likes to be able to review his work as it's produced so that he knows what the final product might look like. Compare that to someone like George Lucas, who spends quite a bit of time and budget in post-production, and it's easy to see that technology has taken film in very different directions. Technology's greatest impact is perhaps felt in new cameras that allow cinematographers to shoot in a higher definition, letting viewers take in more of the amazing work in set design. Technology also drives entire segments of film now, enabling movies that were not possible before. Here are some examples where technology has driven film making.

COSTS

Film is the preferred medium of old school film makers, but it's usually too costly for a studio to authorize. Film carries several disadvantages, that dwarf the authenticity that the film maker is going for. Aside from the expense, film is impossible to reuse. That means a day of shooting must have footage the crew can use, or else every resource consumed that day was a waste. The costs of film don't end the day of shooting either. Cinematographers who use film must develop it, and then there is the costly process of editing the film.

Going digital largely means foregoing the large canisters of film that used to be synonymous with film making. It also means production companies complete their shoot schedules with less waste, keeping the entire project under or close to budget.

EDITING

Post production is another area where digital trumps the usage of film. Adding visual effects to film was often a precise art, where the effect had to blend seamlessly with what was being shot. This was a painstaking process that editors no longer go through. Digital effects are created and added to the shot within the same program or family of programs. This software also allows editors to work on entire sections of a film, easily piecing scenes together after the post production effects are added in. That includes audio, which now has a high definition digital file that ensures the audience will hear every word and action that they see.

The end result is a piece of film that looks cleaner, with effects that blend seamlessly with the movie. The audience usually can't tell when CGI has been used, but it's a powerful tool film makers have increasingly used to set atmosphere.

SHOOTING

Shooting in digital is much easier because you can do more in less time. Multiple cameras can run on the same shot, so you always get the angle you want without having to waste

time on retakes. I like shooting digitally because it makes it easy to shoot multiple takes, and to get multiple angles more economically. A director's bread and butter is pace and performance. I love being able to shoot everything. Even, with the actors' permission, the rehearsals. You never know what pieces you'll be able to use later in editing. Coupled with the new steady cam equipment that film has taken a liking to, the end result is a more intimate shot. The audience feels present in the moment because the lens we are allowed to look through feels authentic. Film makers also spend less time re-shooting the same scene to get the right angle.

DISTRIBUTION

The process of distributing film in digital has not quite hit the apex of what it is capable of, but the indie film maker especially stands to gain. Distribution through YouTube has been the most common form of marketing for quite some time. Studios have released big-budget trailers, while indie film makers have sought funding and interested eyes posting content through various YouTube channels. Of course, the adverse affect is that quality has significantly declined, but that's more a function of volume. YouTube users also crowd source what is popular with a thumbs up, helping others to find new and interesting content without spending too much time digging for it.

Rights to films are already distributed to consumers digitally, but this market has not been fully tapped. There is much debate as to the future of film consumption, but companies seem willing to distribute films online. The 2011 film *Tower Heist* with Ben Stiller was almost released to Comcast customers alongside the theatrical release, but the idea was scrapped after several theaters threatened not to show the film in protest. Although digital promises an exciting new world of distribution, the business of film has yet to catch up with this idea.

PRESERVATION

The preservation of film isn't something we think about as consumers, but it's the very reason we still have re-mastered copies of *Ben Hur* and the *Star Wars* trilogy. Film will crumble and damage over time, and it's extremely flammable too. There are simply too many methods for film to outlive its usefulness. Digital films can be stored on company servers, without taking up too much space. The costs to maintain this infrastructure are also lower than the costs to store and re-master film.

Digital archives are also easy to backup and restore. Pixar had a now famous incident when creating *Toy Story 2*, where one of the animators lost almost the entire film working on it at home thanks to a bad backup. Aside from this small gaffe, the backup system has allowed production companies access to earlier versions of a film, as well as a source to store shots used for dailies and extras.

Without technology, it would be nearly impossible for Hollywood to produce the volume of films that it does. Film might be a nice thought for that vintage feel, but the practicalities of digital have largely put the film versus digital debate to rest.

Charles Matthau, son of Walter Matthau, is a film and television director best known for adapting books into movies.

Filmmaker's Theories

In the exam we need to be able to write about filmmaker's theories in relation to the *Stories We Tell*.

Nick Broomfield

Nick Broomfield is, alongside Michael Moore, arguably the most famous documentarian working today. He has been making documentary films since the 1970s. The film studies specification argues that:

Broomfield, like Michael Moore, has developed a participatory, performative mode of documentary filmmaking. Broomfield is an investigative documentarist with a distinctive interview technique which he uses to expose people's real views... he keeps the filmmaking presence to a minimum, normally with a crew of no more than three.



Broomfield is best known for his films that exemplify this particular approach. Films like 1998's Kurt and Courtney and his Aileen Wuornos (2.45) films. There is an expectation in his films that he is either on camera himself or prompting questions from just off camera. His work has inspired numerous other documentary film makers like Louis Theroux, especially his questioning style of probing and examining his subjects in a calm voice. Broomfield often has minimal technical equipment in an effort to put his subjects at ease.

As time has moved on Broomfield has become less present in his own films. In *Ghosts* (2006) he is completely absent. While in *Whitney: Can I Be Me?* (2017) his voice is only occasionally heard from off-screen, posing questions.

Let's have a look at Louis Theroux interviewing Nick Broomfield.

Writing/Discussion task:

Looking at Broomfield's career phases, can you see similarities between his work and the techniques used in *Stories We Tell*? Is Polley's style closer to Broomfield's early or later career?

On your own and based on what you've seen and read, write down which of the four tendencies and which of the six modes do you think Broomfield most embodies. Why/How?

Filmmaker's Theories

Kim Longinotto

Kim Longinotto (born 1952) is a British documentary filmmaker, well known for making films that highlight the plight of female victims of oppression or discrimination. She has stated that she empathises with:

the outsiders, the people struggling. If women have no rights, if they are completely powerless, then they're the ones that you're going to want to make films about.



Longinotto has also described her 'problem with authority' which also includes a distrust of documentaries that strongly push the spectator towards a specific theory.

Longinotto's work falls squarely into the mode of 'observational', using light cameras and aiming for a greater level of impartiality.

I don't think of films as documents or records of things. I try to make them as like the experience of watching a fiction film as possible, though, of course, nothing is ever set up.

Longinotto differs from Broomfield significantly as she is always absent from the screen. She also forgoes a lot of techniques conventionally associated with documentaries. Her voice over is minimal, no captions and no formal interviews.

I like the way Nick appears in his films, but I don't want you to be thinking about me, or the camera or the filming when you watch my films. I want you to feel that you're there, standing where I am and going through the emotional experience.

Longinotto likes to leave her documentaries open, avoiding simple narrative closure, attempting to raise questions rather than answer them.

[Divorce: Iranian Style](#) [Gaea Girls](#) [Longinotto at Encounters](#)

Writing / Discussion task:

Looking at the work of Kim Longinotto can you see any similarities / differences between her and Sarah Polley.

Watch the Encounters interview and make notes on Longinotto's attitude to film-making and approach to documentary.

Which of the four tendencies do her films seem to embody?

In the Exam

The question for Section B, Documentary Cinema is worth 20 marks. You will be expected to write for about 30 minutes.

In the exam you'll be tested on your knowledge of the following things:

- Core study areas (The key elements of film)
- Critical Debates (Digital Technology in film)
- Filmmakers' theories (Longinotto and Broomfield)

In order to prepare for writing your essay there are a few pieces of research you need to do to help differentiate your answers from the others in your class.

Research/Writing Task:

Find two articles on the burgeoning debate between Digital and Analogue film technologies. Annotate them, looking for key quotes and then summarise them in a few sentences, explaining their perspectives.

Try to sum up Longinotto and Broomfield's attitudes to documentary film in a short paragraph.

You will be expected to blend your knowledge of *Stories We Tell*, theories of other filmmakers and the current critical debates of digital/analogue film as well as referencing the core areas that we've studied.

Important points to remember when you are answering a question:

- Always have a brief introduction connecting the film to the question you are being asked/your central argument.
- You haven't got time for summarising the plot in any real way. But be sure to mention the film, director and year.
- Use the key terms from the question so the examiner knows you are addressing it directly.
- Name those cameras.
- Mention specific scenes, using subject specific terminology.

Planning Task:

Plan responses to the following two questions:

- Apply one filmmaker's theory of documentary film you have studied to your chosen documentary. How far does this increase your understanding of the film?
- 'Portable, digital cameras, digital sound recording equipment and non-linear digital editing have had a very significant impact on documentary film.' How far has digital technology had an impact on your chosen documentary film?

Sample Answers

Further Reading/Watching

Sarah Polley on Q interview: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fqBe1DSY1Vc>