

**Life does not tell
stories:** structuring
devices in
documentary
filmmaking

“Life does not tell stories. Life is chaotic, fluid, random. It leaves myriads of ends untied, untidily. Writers can extract a story from life only by strict, close selection, and this must mean falsification. Telling stories really is telling lies.”

There is no such thing as Documentary -

Whether the term designates a category of material, a genre, an approach or a set of techniques. This assertion – as old and as fundamental as the antagonism between names and reality – needs incessantly to be restated.

Despite the very visible existence of a Documentary tradition

Trinh T. Minh-ha, 'Documentary Is/Not a Name.' 1990

the documentary modes

observational mode

What is an observational documentary?



Observational documentaries are just as the name suggests – works of film which observe the subject and do not interfere with it. In the purest form, **observational documentaries contain no music, no voiceovers, no interviews and no narration**; they simply let the visuals speak for themselves and allow them to convey the narrative. Often the camera takes a **‘fly-on-the-wall’** perspective, and this **cinéma vérité** approach allows the audience the experience of witnessing the events of the documentary first hand.

Examples of this mode, although often noted in the purest sense, can be seen in much of **David Attenborough’s** work, such as ***Life* (2009)** and ***Frozen Planet* (2011)**, or ***Citizenfour* (2014)** by **Laura Poitras**.

Where did the observational mode come from?



The observational mode of documentaries emerged as a result of the evolution of filming equipment. New 16mm equipment was lighter and allowed for shoulder mounted cameras, meaning that documentarians were no longer forced to use tripods and cumbersome rigs, while advances in sound technology made the recording audio tracks far more versatile and free-form.

This now meant that it was far more practical for smaller and smaller crews to create documentaries, with only two people – a cameraman and a sound engineer – needed on location. This meant that filming became far more discreet, and far better able to observe scenes without interfering with the subject.

reflexive mode

What is a reflexive documentary?



In a reflexive documentary, the narrator/documentarian acknowledges the fact that they are in front of a camera, and providing the narration for a documentary. Often reflexive documentaries are just as much about how the film was made, as it is about the actual subject matter.

Examples of the reflexive mode can be seen at the end of each episode of **David Attenborough's *Frozen Planet*** series, where they revealed how the filmed the episode. **Nick Broomfield** is known best for his reflexive style of documentaries, filming with the smallest crew possible in an effort to make his films more personal.

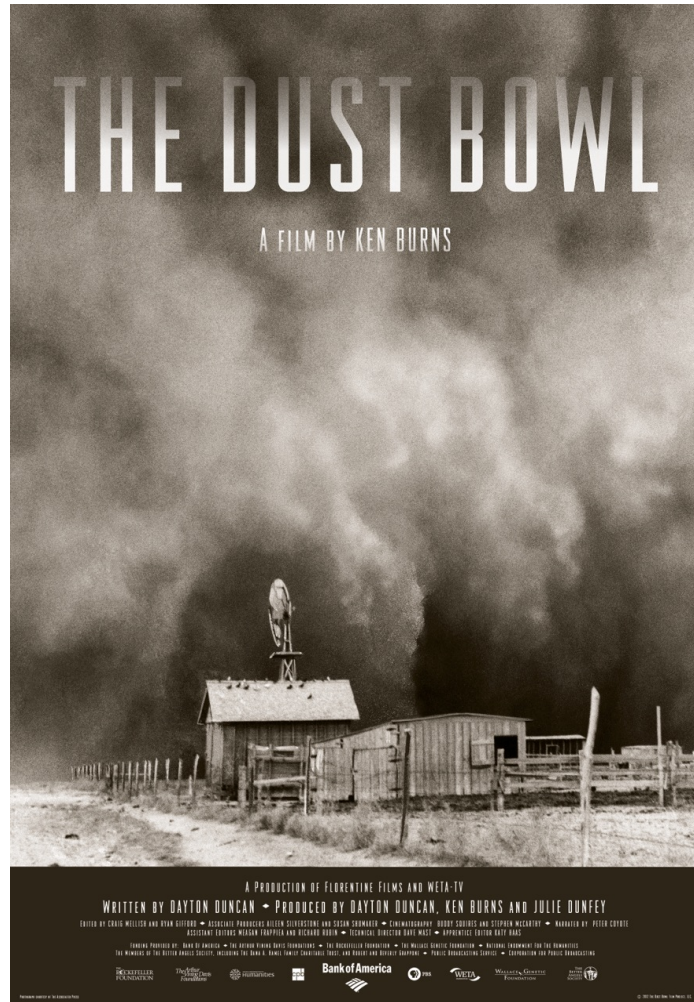
Where did the reflexive mode come from?



Reflexive documentaries were also largely the result of the same technological advances that encourages the observational mode. An early example can be seen in Dziga Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera* from 1929, which features Vertov's family in the process of filming and editing, as Vertov wished to give the audience a better understanding of what went on behind the scenes of a documentary, and as such, *Man with a Movie Camera* became a sort of documentary about documentaries; one of the very first of the reflexive mode.

expository mode

What is an expository documentary?



Once more the clue is in the name, as expository documentaries set out to expose a given person or topic. Some of the main conventions of this mode include; a **‘voice of God’ narrator**; **the use of persuasive techniques to convince the audience of a certain view point**; **rhetorical questions**; and **the mixture of fact and opinion**. This mode of documentary is often particularly appealing to audiences because it is a very engaging mode, with the documentarian often speaking directly to the audience, such as in **Ross Kemp and Louis Theroux documentaries** – both keen examples of the expository (and reflexive) mode.

Ross Kemp's *On Gangs* series is an excellent example of the expository mode, as he sets out to expose to his audience the reality of gang life and culture across the world.

Where did the expository mode come from?



The expository mode is often cited as being the result of a move away from poetic documentaries when documentaries became **“caught up in social propaganda” (John Grierson)**. No longer did documentaries focus on storytelling, but instead on rhetorical content that was supposed to make their audiences think about and form their own opinions on the subject matter. Narration, now one of the staples of documentaries, arguably fought its way to the forefront when expository documentaries were on the rise, as this new mode often required a voiceover to fill in gaps, or pose the questions that the mode has come to be known for.

poetic mode

What is a poetic documentary?



Poetic documentaries conventionally focus less on a particular narrative, but more on an **hidden truth** behind what is being shown. This is achieved through the use of heavy rhetoric, and subjective representations of reality, relying on the audience to connect the dots and work out the true meaning themselves. Poetic documentaries tend to lack character development due to the decreased focus on a narrative when compared to film. The visuals and audio used create an atmosphere to fit with the tone and subject matter of the documentary.

Where did the poetic mode come from?



Poetic documentaries are some of the oldest as they are often unbound by the necessity of being able to move freely around the subject, and instead opt for the use of a mounted camera, giving a very cinematic feel. Arguably, the poetic mode is an evolution of theatrical films, as they too often tell stories, but lack the traditional narrative content found in the cinema.

participatory mode

What is a participatory documentary?



In a participatory documentary **the documentarian will interact with the subject**, often conducting informal interviews throughout the programs duration. The use of handheld cameras is extremely common, offering the maneuverability required to follow a subject around. Other conventions include the use of minimal editing and long takes; synchronous sound; a voiceover by the documentarian, as well as their presence on screen, in the action.

Louis Theroux is well known for his participatory mode, often getting involved in activities in his films in order to be able to present a seemingly neutral stance, as often his films have subtle undertones which persuade his audience one way or another, as seen in ***Louis Theroux and the Nazis***.

Where did the participatory mode come from?

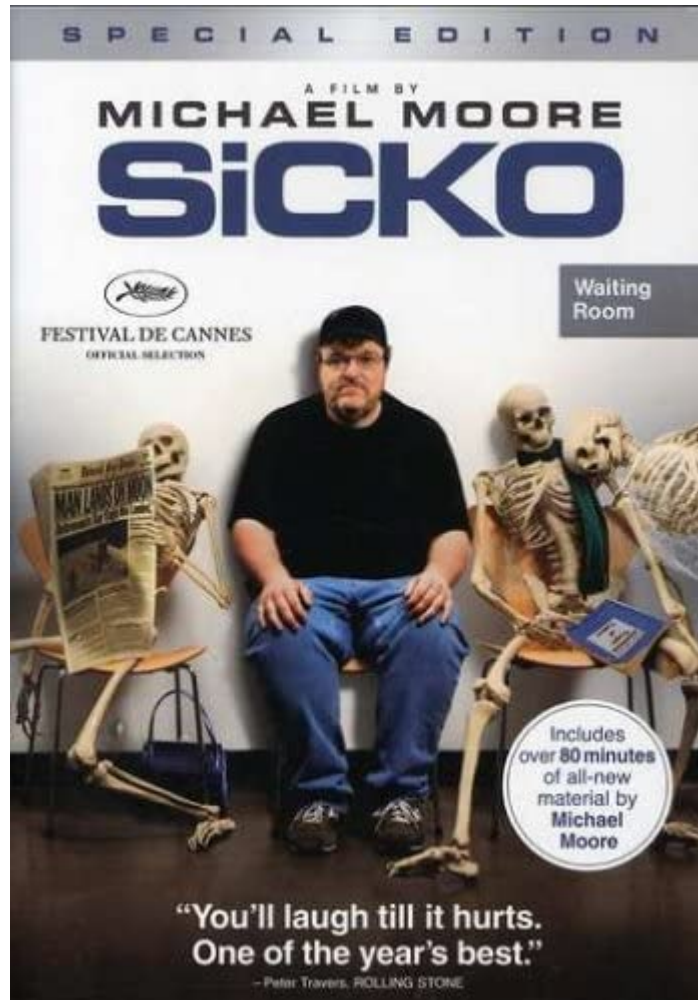


Initially taking an investigative approach to the controversy surrounding Kurt Cobain's death, "Kurt & Courtney" falls into the participatory mode as the filmmaker, Nick Broomfield, becomes more involved in the story.

Once more, the participatory mode was also largely the result of the same technological advances that brought about **the reflexive and the observational mode**, as it shares many similarities with both modes, and is arguably a combination of the two.

performative mode

What is a performative documentary?



Performative documentaries, much like **poetic documentaries**, place an increased importance on subjective experiences and emotional responses to the world. They tend to be very personal to the filmmaker, and as such can be unconventional and cryptic in cases. Often this can lead to the documentary and the experience of its creation itself being the focus of the documentarian as he creates the film, rather than a particular subject or person.

Michael Moore is often considered to be a performative documentarian because of his presence on screen which allows for open discussions about his perspective on the subject of the film, as is conventional of the mode. Because of this, it is easy to confuse the **performative and participatory modes** because of their similarities. The clearest difference is that **participatory documentaries convey truths that could be evident to anyone (facts)**, but **performative documentaries are about the subjective truths (opinions)** that the documentarian uncovers, and may only be significant to themselves.