Seeing is believing

A steam train slowly pulls into a station, a boat docks at a port, and workers swarm out of factory gates after a hard day’s work.

These are the subjects of the first moving images, produced by the Lumière Brothers and first shown in a café in Paris over a hundred years ago. Known as ‘actualities’, these short black and white films were shot on location at a single place and had no storyline or political agenda. *(a) What they did was show simple scenes from everyday life. These scenes had a dramatic impact on people who had never witnessed a moving image before. In one famous incident the audience ran out of the theatre as an on-screen train speeded towards them. *(b) Never before had people seen such realistic images; for these first audiences, ‘seeing was believing’. 
Flaherty’s documentary starred locals and looked natural and spontaneous, but the film was very much a romantic interpretation of the Inuit way of life, and included many staged scenes. In one such scene, a walrus is killed with a harpoon rather than a shotgun, although in the 1920s Inuit people no longer hunted with harpoons. These early documentaries were very much an interpretation of reality – (c) what happened was that they presented the film-makers’ idea of life, rather than showing life as it actually was.

Interestingly, this type of ‘adapted reality’ was used in newsreels, too. Much archival war footage from the early twentieth century was staged, with cameramen arriving after a battle, then filming re-enacted scenes.

Gradually, this direct cinema style started to influence other genres, and some mainstream films became more ‘realistic’. In the 1970s, British film-maker Ken Loach used a ‘fly-on-the-wall’ style to make his ‘drama-documentary’ films appear as unscripted and as natural as possible. These hard-hitting stories often dealt with real-life issues, such as homelessness (Cathy Come Home) and unemployment (Riff-Raff), and they had clear social and political messages.

As well as instructing audiences, these new documentaries use musical scores, emotional storytelling and dramatic re-enactments. In fact, in many ways, contemporary documentaries are becoming indistinguishable from mainstream Hollywood films. Super Size Me, March of the Penguins and An Inconvenient Truth all rely on techniques from fiction films to manipulate the audience’s emotions and interest.
Nowadays, the influence of documentary film-makers can be found in many places: in reality TV shows, such as Big Brother, and in mainstream ‘mockumentary’ films, such as The Blair Witch Project. Cheap digital technology, computer-based editing and the internet are making it much easier for anyone to produce a documentary film. As well as watching these films online, ordinary people can now try their hand at creating them. But as documentaries become more like Hollywood movies, and Hollywood movies become more like documentaries, can any of these films truly document reality? Can we still claim that ‘seeing is believing’?

A

This tradition of shaping ‘reality’ continued when, ten years later, a British director John Grierson started to produce documentaries with a similar stylized approach. The Nightmail began as an information film about the mail train from London to Edinburgh, but as it progressed, the film became more poetic and less realistic, concentrating on movement, light, rhythm and sound.

B

It wasn’t until 1922 that documentaries as we know them today started to emerge. An American director called Robert Flaherty produced a feature-length documentary called Nanook of the North. The film introduced audiences to Inuit life in Northwest Alaska, helping to broaden their knowledge of the world. (d) It was this desire to educate and present people with the ‘truth’ that motivated early film-makers, but just how truthful were their documentaries?
C

Despite this manipulation, documentary film-making is becoming more and more popular, and in many ways is one of the most trusted forms of news reporting: ‘I think there is a thirst for a meaningful relationship with reality,’ explains Martijn te Pas at Amsterdam’s International Documentary Film Festival. ‘And documentaries can offer that … People today want more than escapism.’

D

In the 1950s and 1960s there was a backlash against staged reality and re-enacted scenes in a movement called direct cinema. Direct cinema started in the USA, and gave the impression that the events on the screen had been recorded spontaneously and were presented exactly as they happened in real life. Thanks to technological developments, directors had more freedom to follow people during a crisis and capture their personal reactions. *(e)* All they did was use a hand-held camera with synchronized sound.

E

*(f)* Not only do these new documentaries deal with local problems, but they also focus on global issues, like the environment, poverty and hunger. Cheapness is what is helping to push the trend of home-made documentaries, but when directors need money to create more ambitious projects, they turn to crowdfunding – raising money via internet donations.

F

More recently, directors such as the American film-maker Michael Moore have also focused on hard-hitting stories. They’ve taken documentaries to a new level of popularity, although Moore’s films have also been criticized for being ‘docu-ganda’ – films that spread propaganda using a documentary style. Some people think his voice-overs tell audiences how to react to a topic. However, this approach is nothing new in documentaries, and audiences have come to expect it.