

DOCUMENTARY: A CREATIVE TREATMENT OF ACTUALITY

ABRAHAM UMOBUARIE

ABSTRACT

This paper examined documentary as a creative treatment of actuality. Documentary films are those which reproduce life in all its manifestations – the life of a man, animals, nature – without the assistance of professional actors or studios and on condition that the film represents a free artistic creation. The direct implication of this is that the documentary must be true if it must have credibility. Documentary uses special channels to convey its information, which makes it different from other forms of programmes. This depicts its power of actuality. Likewise, there are three major stages that are involved in the planning of a documentary: the pre-production, production and post-production. The paper rounds off with a few recommendations and a conclusion.

INTRODUCTION

There are several options available to a producer to reflect different events; different means of expressing as well as several methods of presenting the subject matter. Boretzky & Kizn¹etsov (1981:20).

As far as the television medium is concerned, there are three forms of presenting a programme. These are: news, drama and documentary. Commentaries and current affairs are directly connected to news; while all drama-related programmes are grouped under drama. Documentary stands out in a class of its own.

Ekwuazi (1996:11) explains that the ultimate aim of any news programme is to convey information while that of drama programme is entertainment. Of the three broad television programme types, only the documentary documents and presents actualities.

Even when we take a trip from television to film, there are only two broad programme types, namely: feature and documentary. Even then, the feature, like its drama counterpart on television, is acted.

WHAT IS DOCUMENTARY?

Grierson, the father of English documentary, defines documentary as a creative work of non-fiction or the “creative treatment of actuality”. Ekwuazi (1996:12). This definition by Grierson has gained a great deal of popularity.

Umobuarie (2003:72) citing the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences says, “Documentary films are defined as those that deal with historical, social, scientific

or economic subjects either photographed or in actual occurrence”. Emphasis is more on factual content than on entertainment. Therefore, documentary is a non-fictional film that reveals actual life situation of any given event with the aid of a narrator. The documentary chronicles real events, persons, settings, issues, e.t.c.

According to Daramola (2001:173), the documentary contains real experiences, real people, and real situations or settings. However, such actualities can be treated creatively by the director of the documentary especially through editing; for example, documentaries as “Squandering of Riches”, “Archbishop Benin Idahosa”, “Sir Gbariel Igbinedion”, “Auchi Polytechnic”, to mention but a few.

The documentary has the ability of interpreting the past, analysing the present or anticipating the future. It dwells on one subject by explaining it extensively and this can be achieved by the director introducing some dramatic angles in the presentation. He can introduce conflict (problem) complications, crisis (climax) and then, a resolution.

The documentary deals with reality and not assumption. It achieves a closer relationship with reality than the fiction film. To prove this fact, John Grierson believes that the materials and the stories taken from the raw can be finer (more real in the philosophical sense) than the acted article. Madsen (1973:317).

Ekwuazi explains the term documentary as a creative treatment of actuality by characterising it into the following patterns:

- Subject matter
- Concept
- Purpose
- Theme
- Technique common to documentary genre

Subject Matter:- The documentary films are concerned with the factual aspect of the lives of men, animals and other living creatures, unleavened by fictional concepts or techniques.

The concept: The documentary is a drama of ideas whose thrust is toward social change, not aesthetic satisfaction, entertainment or even education as it is actually defined.

In Purpose: The documentary is intended to alert the viewer to some aspect of reality that should be its legitimate concern or serious interest and to illuminate a social problem.

The Theme: The classic documentary is concerned with what happens to people. It is an emotional statement of the facts in terms of their human consequences.

In Technique: The documentary film is a motion picture record of real people living, real events, photographed and edited to present the closest possible approximation of their true relationships. This implies that a documentary must be truthful and credible. Its presentations should be based on facts.

CHANNELS OF INFORMATION

This paper identifies some means, referred to as channels of information, through which a documentary producer conveys his information to the audience in order to establish credibility in his documentary. These are discussed below:

- A. **THE VISUAL IMAGE:** These are shots or images, of the subject or action, captured by the camera to illustrate the narrator's commentary. A documentary, rather than tell the audience that a man is a farmer, shows the man working in his farm.
- B. **PHOTOGRAPHS:** These are used when shots of the subject or action are not available.
- C. **SPEECH:** This refers to spoken word by the subject, commentary by the narrator and testimonies by friends and associates, or by witnesses of an action.
- D. **MUSIC:** Documentaries use music to establish moods and set a cultural tone in the film. Music can also establish location and increase the level of empathy with events on the screen.
- E. **SOUND EFFECT:** This is sound other than speech and music. They are sounds created to reflect the actual sounds of an event or action. For example, the sound of a helicopter could be injected into the shot of a helicopter if the original sound of that helicopter could not be achieved; sounds of horses galloping, men screaming and the clanging of weapons against one another could be used when showing a recreated scene of an ancient battle.

TYPES OF DOCUMENTARY

Daramola (2001:173) identifies the following types of documentaries. They are:

- (1) The News documentary

- (2) Historical documentary
- (3) Cultural documentary

News Documentary: The news documentary gives information on development or achievement on recent happenings. The news documentary is usually from occurrences.

Historical Documentary: This deals with past events that are factual; present events are not included in it.

Cultural Documentary: This deals with the way of life of a particular people; and when practiced over time, becomes culture.

STRUCTURE OF A DOCUMENTARY

For a documentary to be very effective the following steps will help:

- (a) **The Beginning:** The beginning of the documentary must be able to capture the audience's attention as quickly as possible. The central question of the documentary can be posed at the beginning and the most dramatic visuals can also be placed at the beginning of the documentary.
- (b) **Middle:** This focuses on the human story – on people and their opinions. At this middle section of the documentary, conflict is introduced and strengthened.
- (c) **End:** This is the last section in the structure of the documentary. In this section, the issue has been fully explained and complications are resolved. The audience is now clear about what the documentary is all about. In this section, there may be a course of action that the audience will take to address the problem.

PLANNING THE DOCUMENTARY

To have a complete documentary production, it has to pass through three major stages. They are:

1. Pre-production
2. Production
3. Post production

1. Pre-production:

This is the planning stage. Planning is a careful thinking of something you want to go into. In documentary, planning is a mental process that involves the following:

- (a) **Proposal Writing:** This proposal states the aim, timing and cost of the documentary and it is usually written to the producer or sponsor.
- (b) **Scripting:** The script is the blue print from which a film is made. It is a worded document, which describes the issues, scene by scene, with details of the accompanying sound track. Therefore, after writing the proposal, scripting is the next thing to be done. In writing the script for the documentary, three broad stages are involved. They are the treatment, the subject research and the shooting script. This will be discussed later in this presentation.
- (c) **Sourcing for Funds:** Finance is needed in any form of production. Therefore, at this stage you source for funds.
- (d) **Hunt for Personnel:** It is also important to source for talents that will be used in the course of the production and personnel like studio managers, camera operators (cinematographers), e.t.c.
- (e) **Sourcing for Equipment/Facilities:** Different equipment like lamps, cameras, microphones, etc., should be put in place before the production starts.

2. Production

This stage is concerned with the scene-by-scene shooting (recording) of the documentary.

3. Post Production

This is where editing takes place. The different takes are edited at this stage.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following can be regarded as problems that should be avoided in a documentary.

- **Planning:** If you fail to plan, you will have planned to fail. Therefore, in the making of a documentary, planning is very important. The talents/personnel, the fund, the equipment and every other thing that is needed should be put in place before the production of the documentary.
- **Visual Evidence:** Documentary deals with life situations. These life situations like natural events, public or private crises, should be presented in a way that will capture the attention of the audience. Therefore, documentaries

should contain accurate visual evidence, which will compliment the narrations.

- **Interview Technique:** In most cases, interviews are not enough to prove reality in documentaries. Interviews may help in defining a point of view but they find it very difficult to put the documentary idea across. This is because interviews do not show the topic; instead, they show people talking about the topic. Therefore, when interview technique is to be used more action should be put into it and photographs can be used to show some of the major aspects.

In a nutshell, making a documentary requires planning the visual evidence that needs to be recorded; realising such visual evidence when it occurs and selecting and organising what has been recorded to present a visual argument to your audience.

CONCLUSION

This paper has established that documentary is one of the ways of presenting information on television or radio. In addition, documentary deals with actuality and not assumption or what is acted. It deals with real life events and people. It brings about social change. In the course of this presentation, we have been able to identify some types of documentary, which include news, cultural and historical.

Documentary, as we have seen, uses special channels to pass its information, which makes it different from other forms of programmes. This depicts its power of actuality. Likewise, we have been able to identify the three major stages that are involved in the planning of a documentary: the pre-production, production and post-production. We have also included tips of what to avoid when producing a good documentary.

REFERENCES

- Boretzky, R & Kuznetsov G. (1981): Journalistic Work and Television. Prague: IOJ.
- Daramola, I. (2001): Introduction to Mass Communication. Lagos: Rothans press Ltd.
- Ekwuazi, H. (1996): The TV/Film Documentary. Jos: National Film Institute.
- Hamper, B. (2008): Making Documentary films and Videos: A Practical guide to Planning, Filming and Editing Documentaries. USA: Duke Publisher.
- Madsen R. (1973): The Impact of Film. New York: Macmillan Publishing Co.
- Umobuarie, A.I. (2003): Scripting for the Screen. Benin City: King David Publishers.