# How to analyze a documentary

## The documentary as non-fiction

Use the non-fiction communication model (e.g. the classic communication model/Cicero) to get an overview of the documentary.

## Communicative function

What does the film want to do? Inform, discuss, engage, enlighten, intervene, explore, express, disturb and commit - more so than to merely entertain, amuse, distract, conform or confirm?

### Type of documentary

Try to classify the documentary: Is it a classic, expository documentary, an observational, fly-on-the-wall documentary or is it a personal documentary?

## Material

What elements make up the major part of the film: on-location shots or scenes, interviews – with whom: experts, witnesses, victims, perpetrators, authentic and/or historical clips, reconstructions, re-enactments, stock shots?

## Composition

How is the material organised? Does it follow a traditional narrative structure with setup (teaser + elaboration) – conflict (point of no return + conflict escalation + climax) – resolution? Or is it made up of diverse clips in a mosaic-like montage? Is there a lot of cross-cutting back and forth? Are there flash backs/flash forwards or teasers, repetitions?

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It is often useful to try and identify whether the documentary uses predominantly factual or fictional codes. If the documentary has many fictional codes and uses a lot of re-enactment, it might be a docudrama. Here is a short overview of the most typical features of the two film languages or codes:

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| **Factual codes** | Use of film language which strives to be as neutral and objective as possible. Low level of emotional identification On location/authentic settings and props, actual people (or animals) being themselves Eye-level camera, medium shots, diegetic (e.g. real) sound, natural lighting, long takes |
| **Fictional codes** | Use of film language which guides the viewer in a specific direction. High level of emotional identification Staged, re-constructions with actual people or re-enactments with actors High/low angle camera, extreme close-ups, non-diegetic sound (e.g. sad or dramatic music), expressive use of colour and lighting (e.g. high/low-key lighting), extensive cutting |

Non-Fiction and Fiction Codes in Film/TV

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| --- | --- | --- |
|  | **NON-FICTION CODES** | **FICTION CODES** |
| **Intention/purpose** | Inform, document, assess, argue, encourage, debate… | Entertain, express different ways for people to establish personal/social/ cultural identity… |
| **Contract between sender and receiver** | The text is to be perceived as FACTUAL. | The text is to be perceived as FICTITIOUS. |
| **Relation to reality** | Takes its starting point in and is obligated to represent reality.  Metonymic relationship to reality (only shows a part of reality)    Objective style | Inspired by but not obligated to represent reality.  Metaphoric relation to reality (shows an interpretation of reality)  Subjective style |
| **Message** | Often explicit and unambiguous  (Authentic people, environment, events) | Often implied and ambiguous |
| **Dramaturgy** | String-of-pearls model, news triangle.  Does not withhold information | Classic plot structure (Freytag’s triangle), Three-act structure.  Holds back information (builds up suspense) |
| **Narrator** | Narrator is neutral/hidden, simply observes the events  (”a fly on the wall” ) | Often the events are experienced from the point of view of one (or more) of the characters. |
| **Scenography** | Live, authentic recordings. | Everything is choreographed and staged |
| **Camera movements** | All types.  Handheld camera 🡪 authentic effect | All types.  Slowmotion and fastmotion. Handheld camera 🡪 subjective angle, e.g. when showing particular person’s POV |
| **Shots** | Neutral shots, horizontal lines  Wide/medium shots | Diagonal or tilting lines  All types of shots, but frequent use of (extreme) close ups. |
| **Camera angles** | Neutral | High/low angle, bird’s / worm’s view, tilting lines |
| **Light** | Generally high key | Use of low key (contrasts, shadows) |
| **Editing** | Cutting to create continuity  Crosscutting between two persons | Flash back/forward, Suspense cutting  Metaforic cutting (symbols!)  Fade in/out, Dissolve |
| **Sound** | Synchronous sounds (real sounds, speak)  Only production sounds | Asynchronous sounds (music, voice over)    Added sound for special effect. |