Multi-Layered Structure of Documentary Narration and The Blurring Lines

Nihan Gider Isikman, Baskent University, Turkey

The Asian Conference on Film & Documentary 2016
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

"Reality" has always been on the focus within the documentary narration and in order to come closer to reality, search for the new techniques and forms has continued throughout the history of documentary cinema. Reality, within the framework of multi-layered structure of the documentary narration, consists of a reference to the documentary. So, documentaries should be considered as a dynamic field, where a number of look or perspectives intersect. This intersection point, creating a complex and multi-dimensional object, allows exploring and understanding different identities of them all, the documentarist, the subject and the audience. As the narrative styles of documentaries are transforming continuously with the effects of social, cultural, political and technological changes, the aim of this work is to crystallize the narrative layers of documentarist, subject and audience through the exemplification and analysis of one of the most recent and strong films. "*Wedding: A Film*" (Dir. Mohammadreza Farzad, 2015) is a poetic film essay about the director himself, on the verge of divorce, deciding to re-watch his wedding footages with the possible mission of tracing back the break up to the happy ceremony. He begins to make a film about the poetics of wedding films, with his ex-wife as the editor, to revise and re-edit their broken marriage. With the analysis of this film, it will be possible to see that as it is blurring who the filmmaker, subject or the audience is, the film reaches a sincerer point in the search of reality in the documentary narration.

Keywords: Documentary Narration, Narrative Forms, Reality, Self-Representation

iafor

The International Academic Forum
www.iafor.org

Introduction

According to Protagoras " Man is the measure of all things…The wind is cold to the one who feels cold, but not cold to the one who does not feel cold… Two contrary statements can be uttered on every subject." (as cited in Kranz, 1994, p.194). Therefore, one of the two statements is true or false in accordance with its compliance with the reality. Reality, in its general sense as a philosophical concept, means something that exists in thought or something that exists contrary to the things which were thought, which means something existing out of what was formerly thought (Akarsu, 1975). Image, the core means of expression of cinema, is regarded as a reality which is perceived without requiring words. The difference between verbal and visual expression is that image makes the illusion more effectual due to the presence of the natural power of reality and evidentiality in it. "We are all used to making judgment on 'the real' forms of objects and we do it so unthinkingly that we start to believe we can really see the real forms. In practice, however, when we want to draw a painting, as we all should learn, a specific thing appears in different ways to all points of views."   (Russell, 200, p.12). Hence, what seems is not real. A motion picture generates a representation of the reality like other expressions and mass communication tools do. All motion pictures are edited, therefore they hold a qualification that cannot reflect the reality faithfully.

"Exaggeration is inevitable in art" suggests Dostoyevski (as cited in Jakobson, 1995, p.84-93). To him, it is necessary to deform the earlier appearance of the object in order to reveal it just like the pieces to be examined under the microscope are stained. Thus, the object is given a different color so that it would be more sensitive, visible and real. Cinema has been regarded as a mechanical tool that regenerates the reality since its early years that start with actuality films. What is accomplished by the act of cinema is uttering a word, narrating a story or sharing a message either it is a nonfiction or a fiction; namely it could be either a documentary filmed in real time and life, or shooting in a fictional universe that is created. Whereas Christian Metz, (1982, p.44) suggests that every film is fiction, Bill Nichols (2001, p.1) suggests that every film is a documentary. In this regard, it is possible to handle every shot as a fiction. While each shot takes sections from time and space, it conveys visuals and/or sounds of everything, such as the people, the use of place, events and things resulting from the presence of camera there at that moment. Therefore, it is clear that there are certain recces, decisions taken behind every shot, such as technical choices made, and the items that are chosen to be in the representation of that social-historical place.

Roy Armes defines cinema's approach to the reality in three ways. The first cinematic approach is the one that is based upon the reality, the second is the one that imitates the reality and the last is the one that questions the reality. What the filmmaker does in the first approach is to display the subject, people and objects in their own natural environments and the filmmaker demonstrates the world as he/she sees it. Fiction is in the least level. The second approach attempts to achieve generating an imitation of life and reality instead of one-to-one relation with the reality as in the first approach. Therefore, the level of fiction is higher. The third approach questions the ostensible reality's meaning that is somewhere deeper. While the second and third approaches can be seen at the fictional cinema, the first one corresponds to the approach of the documentaries (Armes, 1974, p.10).

The Documentary Reality; Whose Reality Is It?

The key features of documentaries that differ from other types of films, especially fictional films, can be handled under five basic categories. These are; their subjects, objectives, points of view and their approaches, structures and features of production, and finally what they have to offer to the audience. In terms of their subjects, it can be concluded that documentary films have abandoned the general things concerning people, especially individual acts, relations and emotions to the fictional films. Therefore, within the framework of the subjects, points of view and approaches that the documentary films handle, their objectives come to the forefront as forming an attitude in the audience by means of recording and conveying what is in front of the camera in order to impress the audience. At that point, they undertake a social responsibility, which requires the structure of the documentary films depend upon what already exists rather than forming the content or constituting it. Within this structural scope, production features that contain real people, and real time and place shots, and natural lighting, editing far from transforming the meaning becomes something inevitable. In this regard of main features, what it has to present to the audience is a social experience that extends to getting into action (Ellis, 2005, p.1-3).

Bill Nichols (1991, p.167) defines the relation between the documentary and reality in terms of not only a form but also a professional code, an ethics and a ritual. Thus, documentary and reality relation makes the understanding of documentary ethics significant. The audience's pre-acceptance that the documentary narrates the reality makes the ethical approach in documentary a must. While John Grierson defines the documentary as "the creative production of the reality" (as cited in Renov, 1993, p.33), Patricia Aufderheide (2007, p.2) suggests that documentaries are windows opening to the reality from the eyes of the documentarist using real life as an ingredient. Within the scope of the multidimensionality of reality in documentaries, it can also be suggested that the real world is a reference for the documentaries. As the first phase of reality, it is exposed to the mediation of the documentarist. Which culture's with what characteristics will be presented in what types of correlations are all within the initiative of the documentarist. As for the second phase, the mediation which is caused by how the people that are the subjects of the documentary see themselves, and how they would like to appear in the film, should be considered. Thirdly, the audience gives meaning to the reality that is presented again in the film according to their references in their own lives. Three different worlds of the documentarist, subject and the audience emerge as three different dimensions in the documentary film reality.

The documentarist and his/her documentary are subjective and the documentarist expresses his/her own reality. The world and how it will be presented depends directly upon how the documentarist feels it. His/her perception covers the things he/she sees and what he/she sees as significant. The documentarist approaches his/her subject as a material to analyze and gives the meaning to it by the help of the things it contains within himself/herself. Although the process looks like the information is being transferred or translocated from the people who are the subjects in the film towards the audience, a documentary film, as a product, is also a tool that asks the questions who the documentarist is and what she/he believes, and gives answers.

To the documentarist, there are two different realities in question; the first is what there is in the visor and the second is the images in the film. During the shooting, the documentarist breathes the same air with his/her subject and is surrounded by the same objects and sounds with them. Their expectations are the same – a door's being opened, an unexpected arrival or a farewell, the nightfall. In such moments, the reality of the subject and that of the documentarist are woven tightly with each other. This reality affects the visuals in the film but it is however different than that as it is edited and fictionalized with other images.

The witnessing of the person behind the camera to the moment, the representation of the time and space that are formed cannot be thought unattached from the audience watching the record. Upon the reception of the audience, it gains a continuity along with the time and space in which he/she lives. On the one hand, during the production process, a film is made thinking within the perspective of its own epoch's conditions, therefore it is necessary to analyze and evaluate the films reception taking these factors into consideration as well. Furthermore, the interpretation of the reality that is formed by means of these features also starts its evolution along with the scope of the conditions of the time and space, and keeps on evolving endlessly from one individual to another, from one period of time to another in such a way that it can gain various other meanings and prominence in one's life (Öncel, 2005, p.81).

When we attempt to adapt Barthes' (1977, p.19) comment on photograph to the documentary, a documentary is not only something to be seen and perceived but also something to be read; the audience who consume it associate it with their own backgrounds. Each individual watches the film with his/her own personal, cultural and political background and fields of interest, and what the individual understands from the film can be something totally else than the message the documentarist primarily plans to convey. While mentioning the position of the audience who are not only consumers but also producers, it is also necessary to think of the conditions, in which the watching is fulfilled, can shape their opinions. During the production process of the film, however its own epoch and related political, economic, social, scientific, intellectual, cultural, legal, administrative, artistic and technological conditions and rules affect the structure that is formed, the meanings gained from the film by watching it are similarly affected.

While discussing the mediation of the people who are the subjects of the film, the multidimensional structure, in which the person who self-exists, the person who is structuralized due to his/her relation with the documentarist, and the person who is structuralized due to his/her relation with the audience, should also be taken into consideration (MacDougall, 1999, p.249). The presence of the documentarist and camera raise people's self-awareness, by way of which they become alienated to themselves and one of the fractures in reality emerges. The individual hides his/her own reality, and along with the social, personal, psychological factors and so forth, he/she presents a different reality which he/she is expected or which he/she thinks he/she is expected. Apart from the relation of the person, who is the subject of the documentary, with the documentarist, what sort of a relation he/she establishes with the audience is also efficacious upon the multidimensional structure. The closer the world of the person in the documentary to that of the audience's, the higher rate of perception is observed depending on the level of the affiliation.

Reality Through An Open Subjectivity

Michael Rabiger suggests that "While defining documentary, it is not possible to set certain rules, but it is possible to mention a search on where you will draw the line within the scope of your common understanding with your audience." (as cited in Aufderheide, 2007, p.3).   The first-person narration style can be evaluated as the result of these searches. Just like literature, painting and performing arts, narrating oneself or narrating the world from the point of his/her own self dates back to art forms of the remote past. Specifically speaking of the examples in various art forms, it can be suggested that the reality which the autobiographic narrations reveal is an intrinsic reality rather than an extrinsic one; therefore, thinking in terms of cinema, it is expressive that Lebow (2012, p.2) claims all films are in the style of the first-person narration. Because, in the world of images, people gain their identities by means of not only what they do but also how they display themselves and the world, as Renov (2008, p.48) also states. When the construction of identity is considered as an overall addition of reflection of social relations, and variable, multiple identities clashing with one other, it can be claimed that the "I" in the first-person narration actually reflects a "We", which in fact confirms that every film can be regarded as the first-person narration.

When the first-person documentaries, as providing the formation of the people that are the subjects of the film and their representation is within their own control, are handled from the point of the audience, the relation between the documentary and reality is drawn into a less problematic area because it is known that real people narrate their own stories with their own interpretation rather than someone else doing it on behalf of them. However, it will still be incomplete to interpret these as an ideal method from the point of presentation, because it should always be kept in mind that the documentarist might awaringly or unawaringly apply self-censorship on his self-presentation. Thus, the essential thing is the narrator's associating the audience with his/her witnessing in person, not the first-person's participation in the narration. In general, an argument is not directly put forward, but the audience is expected to realize the narrator's reality and embrace his/hers with those of theirs. As Aufderheide (1997, p.16) also emphasizes as the borders among the private and public spheres are becoming ambiguous, individual experiences gain a social context.

Essay films as another result of the searches in the documentary narration should also be examined that Alter (2007, p.52) defines that if in art, the audio-visual essay emerges from an attempt to fuse the genre of the documentary with avant-garde or experimental film, in cinema the audio-visual essay develops from the attempt to combine the documentary and the fictional or feature film genres. So as a hybrid form that crosses boundaries and rests somewhere in between fiction and nonfiction cinema "an essay is neither fiction nor fact, but a personal investigation involving both the passion and intellect of the author." (Giannetti, 1975, p.26).

As a style, the essay film, which allows the imagination and creativity live at their peak with all the artistic potential it bears, can be traced back to Dziga Vertov's *Man With A Movie Camera* (1929) and can date back to 1920's in the history of the cinema (Alter, 2007, p.49). To Vertov (2007, p.82), we have low vision and can see little. Therefore, humans invented the microscope to see the objects that cannot be viewed by the naked eye, and the telescope to see further and discover unknown worlds. As

for the camera, it was invented to infiltrate more deeply into the visible world and to save and analyze the visual phenomena. Thus, the Kino-Glaz (Cine-Eye) takes the benefits of any shooting techniques possible: Fast or slow motion, extreme close shot, reverse motion, animation, camera moves, zoom in or out unexpectedly, use of the hidden camera and so forth. Vertov sees them not as visual effects but as normal techniques to utilise fully. To exemplify this, he interprets the slow motion as an opportunity "which can see the invisible, make the ambiguous clearer, which can make a scene look like it was shot without the cast, make the unreal real, in other words *kinopravda* (in this case, *the reality* that can only be reached by the slow motion with cinematic tools).

An analysis of the film *Wedding: A Film* (Dir. Mohammadreza Farzad, 2015)*,* which was defined as an essay film by its own director, within the scope of reflectivity and subjectivity as the basic features of essay films and as a first-person documentary, makes it possible to see that as it is blurring who is the filmmaker, subject or the audience, film becomes to a sincerer point in the search of reality in documentary narration.

Wedding; So Personal, Too Common

Thanks to the technological advancements in the audio-visual recording and processing equipment after the 1970's, more easily affordable and accessible cameras have become a part of daily lives. A privilege, once belonging only to some specific people in terms of expertness earlier; the audio-visual recording is so common and a mostly used tool for documentation purposes in social life, family life and private sphere today. While the borders among the studying, entertaining, working or resting are getting vaguer with internet, everyone becomes not only a consumer but also a content provider with the use of smartphones, tablets, pcs that are always on and online. A birthday party, the moment a gift box being opened or a family dinner can be viewed by the rest of the world. The driving motivational force in these records is the fact that those moments can never be repeated or witnessed again in course of time. In this sense, wedding ceremonies are such a special and worldwide event as well. Handling the social forms of the video, Roy Armes (1988, p.100) emphasizes that a wedding ceremony that is not recorded or viewed is poorly regarded as a real wedding. These videos as important memory records for wedding owners, also serve as significant documents of the wedding rituals of the culture it belongs. Therefore, even if it is an amateur shooting, in terms of a historical study, the audial visual information it bears cannot be ignored even it might not be accepted as the reality or the history itself.

"Wedding: A Film" (Dir. Mohammadreza Farzad, 2015), which bases on the marriage, a universal concept, upon such an audio-visual material, is a personal, poetic essay, in which Farzad tries to understand the institution and concept of marriage. Farzad does a survey playing his own wedding video over and over again looking for early signs of unhappiness in his marriage and his divorce. He looks at other people's wedding videos to investigate whether a happy wedding means, and is, synonymous with a happy marriage. The hunt for answers goes from the personal and empties into the issues of marriage function in society.

The rich material, which contains different footages both from the director's own wedding and other weddings, documents the Iranian wedding rituals such as the henna night, honey eating, wedding cake and rings. Being not only a cultural documentation, the recordings have a deeper meaning, which emerges when the director asks such questions as; "Why are we getting married in front of others? Why do we need the witnesses and signatures? Why are we recording our wedding but not our divorce?". The camera witnesses the moments just like the guests do and forms a memory. While watching the video of his wedding ceremony with his ex-wife as the editor, Farzad underlines that he remembers nothing about his wedding ceremony and that video is the only thing left from that day.

Along with the use of the first-person narration, the editing of the film carries the beauty and intelligence of words parallel with the visuals used. The collage of personal archives, found footage, scenes from fiction films, shootings of the fictive bride and groom, newsreels of the royal wedding or from the wedding of Queen Farah Pahlavi produces juxtaposition between the past tense of archival images and the present tense of the commentary. Besides, agreeing with Vertov, who benefits from all sorts of effects that a camera and edit has to offer, and sees camera as a tool, which is used to infiltrate more deeply into the visible world and save images of it to analyze, Farzad slows, pauses, rewinds and replays the scene of himself leaving the florist one after another, and he watches and makes his wife watch it on and on. Here the film becomes a physical and metaphoric interface on which the director himself as the commentator engages a radical shift in the expressions of the self. Within its whole reflectivity and subjectivity, neither fiction nor fact, the film turns out to become a personal investigation involving both the passion and intellect of the director. Beyond its story, the director questions the documentary form of the film within this subjectivity, and he also questions the production of the film by going out of the production at times. In his commentary, he expresses that he is well-aware that he might be applying self-censorship as the film has become too personal and he cannot collect his thoughts or feel comfortable. He discusses the self-censorship and self-presentation in the first-person documentaries, which can be applied by the documentarist himself/herself intentionally or unintentionally, in person. Farzad uses the term *image repertoire* by Barthes in order to explain what he tries to grasp in the way he looks at himself. According to Barthes (1996, p.27), the "I", who is in front of the four image repertoires and the lens, is at the same time; what I think I am, what I want others to think I am, what the photographer thinks I am and what I use to reveal the art of the photographer.

Farzad, as the authorial figure, is very direct, for instance by making himself visible and using his voice. This subjective position of the director, who is also the subject of the film and the audience, makes the three different dimensions of the documentary film reality clearly visible along with Barthes' (1977, p.19) aforementioned opinion, which brings self-background of the audience to the fore. Each spectator, as an individual gets into a dialogical relationship with the director and becomes active, intellectually and emotionally, and interact with the film as a narration using both visual and verbal language. Questions that are directly addressed to the spectator within the text of the film are also attempts to establish this dialogue, such as; "Am I taking revenge on my ex-wife by making her watch the video again and again?", "What am I looking for in this film?", or just after showing the Hollywood style video productions for couples, he asks "Do marriages evolve into a film production as

well?" The audience, who take an active position in the relation established by means of the questions asked them, gain a self-searching authorial presence.

Conclusion

A must of the ethics in editing a documentary, namely in re-interpreting the reality and presenting it again, is that the documentarist should approach his/her subject with objectivity; or as in the essay film and the first-person documentary, he/she should make his stand and subjectivity clear. Not until the documentarist states his/her subjectivity explicitly, can the documentaries reach beyond answering the questions of who, what, when, where and why, and convey not only the information but also the comment of the documentarist. If it is a film with a singular message that is being made and this is openly expressed to the audience, then it is an ethical approach that is shown. As it blurres with the narrative style of essay films and the first-person documentaries, the filmmaker, subject or the audience, the film reaches a much sincerer point in the search of the reality in documentaries.

In order to draw the relation of documentary and reality into a less problematic ground and show an ethical approach, the documentarist has three questions to ask himself/herself. The first one is what his/her film is about, the second one is why he/she wants to do it, in other words; what is it that takes his/her attention in that specific project, and lastly; does he/she have any thoughts which might even slightly influence his/her objectivity while processing the subject. Nothing is absolutely objective, however, the documentarist can make a more realistic film and show an ethical approach only if he/she undertakes the responsibility of the point of view that is adopted in handling the subject (Swindells, 2007, p.433).

When the variability of the reality and objectives and functions of the documentary are considered, the documentarist and audience should accept that a documentary, as being something further than just "a source of information", is actually a step forward in the path of the search for the reality, which leads to "questioning and investigating, and the information". Considering the analysis of the documentaries as important efforts to resist the disappearance of individual experiences, as seen in the example, the individual experiences should be transferred so that they can gain publicity. Experiences can be free from individualism only after joining the social life, and thus it is possible that they can touch the different lives. Every new documentary inspires new films and makes the society think about the different meanings of the life experiences by making the individuals take a look at their own families and reveal their secrets. Hearing unique individuals' little stories that remained within the family can start something be discussed in the real sense. The cinema is becoming a more effectual tool with its search in its narration and its ability to make the small voices be perceptible.

References

Akarsu, B. (1975). *Felsefe Terimleri Sözlüğü*. Ankara: Türk Dil Kurumu Yayınları.

Alter, N. M. (2007). Translating The Essay into Film and Installation. *Journal of Visual Culture*, *6*(1), p.44-57.

Armes, R. (1974). *Film and Reality, A Historical Survey*, Middlesex: Penguin Books.

Armes, R. (1998). *On Video*. London: Routledge.

Aufderheide, P. (1997). "Public Intimacy: The Development of First-person Documentary". *Afterimage*, 25 (1).

Aufderheide, P. (2007). *Documentary Film, A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford University Press.

Barthes, R. (1977). "The Photographic Message" in *Image-Music-Text*, Translated by S. Heath, Glasgow: Fontana.

Barthes, R. (1996). *Camera Lucida: Fotoğraf Üzerine Düşünceler*. Translated by Reha Akçakaya, İstanbul: Altıkırkbeş.

Ellis, J. C., B. A. McLane. (2005). *A New History of Documentary Film*. Continuum International Publishing Group.

Giannetti, L. D. (1975). *Godard and Others: Essays on Film Form*, Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press.

Jakobson, R. (1995). "Sanatta Gerçekçilik Üstüne" in *Yazın Kuramı, Rus Biçimcilerinin Metinleri*, Tzvetan Todorov (Ed.), Translated by Mehmet Rifat, Sema Rifat, İstanbul: Yapı Kredi Yayınları, p.84-93.

Kranz, W.(1994). *Antik Felsefe*. Translated by Suad Y. Baydur, İstanbul: Sosyal Yay., 1994.

Lebow, A. (2012). *The Cinema of Me: The Self and Subjectivity in First Person Documentary*. Columbia University Press.

MacDougall, D. (1999). *Transcultural Cinema*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

Metz, C. (1982). *Psychoanalysis and Cinema*, London:The Mc Millan Press.

Nichols, B. (1991). *Representing Reality; Issues and Concepts in Documentary*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Nichols, B. (2001). *Introduction to Documentary*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Öcel, N. (2005). *Belgesel Film Üstüne Yazılar*. Ankara: Babil Yay.

Renov, M. (1993). *Theorizing Documentary*. Routledge.

Renov, M. (2008). "First-person Films. Some Theses on Self-inscription." in *Rethinking Documentary: New Perspectives, New Practices*, Thomas Austin, Wilma de Jong(Ed.) Maidenhead/New York: McGraw Hill, p.39-50.

Russell, B. (2000). *Felsefe Sorunları*. Translated by Vehbi Hacıkadiroğlu, İstanbul: Kabalcı Yay.

Swindells, J. (2007). "Ruhun Peşinde" in *Belgesel Film Yapım Sanatı*, Michael Tobias (Ed.), İstanbul: Kolaj Kitaplığı, p.427-434.

Vertov, D.(2007). *Sine-Göz*, Translated by A. Ergenç, İstanbul: Agora Kitaplığı.