

## ***Documentary Storytelling: Methods and Styles***

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### **Abstract**

This article explores the significance of storytelling and seeks to choose modes of filmmaking to transmit “reality” or to tell a “true” story. However, the storyteller’s intention, perspective, values, and aesthetic style are integral parts of the story. Therefore, documentary storytelling does not refer only, or even primarily, to films that are narrated. Methods and styles are also story-driven. In some cases storytelling can reflect who you really are. The article shows the storytelling methods that storytellers can choose in expressing them to the viewers. The essential key of the component is the aspect of the story, which approach a story in a different way.

The definition of the term “storytelling methods” will be discussed in the first part of the chapter emphasizing the fact and the method of storytelling. In this study, it will be analyzed how storytelling can be used as a tool to expand the storytellers’s point of view and how they choose the storytelling methods. The samples of case studies are *The Look of Silence* (2014), *Citizenfour* (2014), *Tsukiji Wonderland* (2016), *By the river* (2013) and *The Songs of Rice* (2014).

The paper concludes that storytelling is a powerful tool to represents the reality which choices about subject matter, the forms of expression, the point of view, and so on. The future trend of storytelling in documentary film may alter because storytellers have wider opportunities to select "the story" to tell. It causes the variety of forms and styles to choose. In meantime, hybrid documentaries and transmedia will take a big role in documentary storytelling.

Keywords: documentary storytelling, forms and styles, storyteller, documentary modes, storytelling methods, point of view, *The Look of Silence*, *Citizenfour*, *Tsukiji Wonderland*, *By the river*, *The song of rice*

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## **Introduction**

Storytelling is the statement of tacit knowledge from impressive life experience or from learning and working which is accumulated to be good pragmatic skill or from talent to others in order to be adapted with audience's life without wasting time for learning by themselves. Therefore, every story consist paradigm or assumption of "storyteller". Moreover, every human are claimed to be storytellers. In ancient time, storytelling had become rationale for information providing. It was used as teaching tool, although many of stories were based on emotion. (Chareonwongsak, 2004).

Consequently, before telling a story, firstly you must have a story to tell. This article did not focus on how good your story is, but focused on the method of storytelling. Even though you have a poor story, but if you have a fascinating method, it could enhance attractiveness in your story. Meanwhile, if you have a good story, but you choose an unattractive method, your story may be uninteresting.

Recently, I had a chance to join International Documentary Marketplace, which I was chosen to be one of the judges. During the pitching session, I had realized how filmmakers chose their storytelling method (without concern of story or content). It can be represented who the storytellers are and where the storytellers come from. For example, if you are come from a developing country, your film may be related to poverty, racist or social problems. Instead of showing how poor they are or the troubles they have faced, telling the stories of how they overcome all the obstacles and how they can improve their lives. In my perspective, it is an important key to deliver the messages to the audience, which is mode, style or structure that the storytellers use for telling their stories. The filmmaker's point of view is also involved. In other words, what the audience will gain from watching your film, it also comes from how you tell your story too.

Therefore, documentary storytelling does not refer only, or even primarily, to films that are narrated. Methods and styles are also story-driven. This article indicates the significance of storytelling and why do we have to concern about it. By doing this, we will go through definition of documentary, documentary storytelling and followed by storytelling methods. The emphasis on how storytelling can be used as a tool to expand the filmmaker's identity and point of view through the film by reviewing five documentary films, which were directed from several directors.

## **Definition of Documentary**

John Grierson, father of documentary defined documentary as creative treatment of actuality without acting and script writing as novel. The story and situations should derive from the reality and real situations in order to make the film more philosophic and realistic than fiction stories. That is to say documentary is the actuality presentation. At the same time, documentary should be filled with creative. Film is the art of presentation as painting or sculpture. Filmmaker must be on duty of actuality presentation, which transmitted through creativity. (Kosalwat, n.d.)

Documentary must find the method to create the emotion at that time to be most realistic. The objective of documentary production is not to explain the story to the audience, in additional, the storyteller must mainly intent to indicate behavior of

actions, which will impact emotion of audience as soon as they see. It could be emotion of anger, hate, love, and fascination in short term or long term. Therefore, storyteller must focus on individual perspective and transmit in individual condition, process, situation, which is actually true. Moreover, the translation should be creative distinctively. (Tamprowat, n.d.).

Pinitka (n.d.) stated that 2 significant features of documentary are:

1. It must mostly maintain originality about showing existing life and nature. No matter it is a documentary of immorality, beauty or interest, main point of this kind of film will signify a new path of discovery or open up the window to search for something that the audience has never seen or understood before.
2. It leads to the changes, renovation and education. The important role is to show the admiration or dissatisfaction to indicate goodness and badness. Storyteller must listen to the judgment or opinion of the audience about production. Sometimes, storyteller must make the audience understand the problems and complexes to show complicated condition or result of conflict about human's need and desire. For this mentioned feature, if the storyteller has not done sufficient research or tries to cheat on the audience such as presenting only one point of view, it will lose the important objective of presentation to the audience. Documentary is not propaganda or presentation of specific point of view.

### **Documentary Storytelling**

"Film is not a visual medium, it is a story medium" Ronald Blumer quoted (Curran Bernard, 2011)

Documentary Storytelling begins in the last years of the nineteenth century with the first films ever projected, and it has many faces. It can be a trip to exotic lands and lifestyles as was *Nanook of the North* (1922). It can be an artful piece of propaganda was *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929) made by Dziga Vertov, who ardently proclaimed that fiction cinema was poisonous and dying and that documentary was the future – a propaganda both for a political regime and for film style or *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004), Moore's personal view of how the terrorist attacks in the US were used by George Bush to pursue illegal wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. (Aufderheide, 2007)

Documentary must always tell stories (whether or not those stories are also narrated is an entirely different issue), no matter how good your technical skills, or characters, or storyboards, or research, your film is nothing but a collection of these elements unless they are underpinned by good storytelling. A story is the device that describes the arrangement. The story may begin as an idea, hypothesis, or series of questions or events. It becomes more focused throughout the filmmaking process, until the finished film has a compelling beginning, an unexpected middle, and a satisfying end. (Curran Bernard, 2011) As we can say the better you understand your story the creative and reality in your film will be stronger.

At its most basic, a story has compelling characters, rising tension, and conflict that reaches some sort of resolution. It engages the audience on an emotional and intellectual level, motivating viewers to want to know what happens next. Therefore,

characters or main subjects are important element that can tell story (can be animals, objects or events). However, the characters could not be perfect teller without circumstances (included person, animal, object, feeling or idea) that relate to the characters and reflect the whole story.

While we have a story to tell, next step that we have to consider is how to tell the story. What is the best way to tell? What is style? What is structure of story? Which modes are fit in with the story?

## **Storytelling Methods**

Perhaps this is obvious, documentary film represents “reality” or tells a “true”, not set up, but the film will do better if it has some kind of structure. Although there is a place for unstructured, non-narrative films, they are niche, and not the focus of this article. A beginning, middle and end is often incorporated into what is called a three-act structure, which is common device used in storytelling.

In essence, Act One sets up the story. The characters are introduced, as is the conflict. Conflict is important for two reasons; it is interesting and keeping us engaged and allow us to ask questions, which we hope will be answered in the rest of the film. For example, Morgan Spurlock’s *Super Size Me* (2004) introduces him and the main premise of the film in the first act. He is going to do nothing but eat McDonald’s food for a month. We see him get his health checked, and set up the rules that he has to live by for the next 30 days. And so the conflict is established. Will his health deteriorate? What will happen to him? These are questions that keep us engaged throughout the film.

In Act Two, which is usually the longest part of the film, the conflict that has been established deepens, and further obstacles to achieving the end goal are often introduced. Morgan Spurlock becomes increasingly ill, to the point that his doctors are pleading with him to stop his crazy McDonald’s-only diet immediately.

Act Three, which is usually the shortest, focuses on resolution of the conflict. Morgan lives through his ordeal and we are left seeing the negative effect of McDonald’s. (Glynne, 2012)

In addition, apart from the three-act structure, American film scholar Bill Nichols has classified documentary films by describing them in terms of styles or modes to expand the storytelling strategies. (Nichols, 2010) According to Curran Bernard (2011) claimed that there are many ways to tell a quality documentary story. Story does not have to fall into three-act structure, and it definitely does not mean creating artificial tension that is imposed from without. Story comes organically from material and how you structure it.

The following summarizes features for each of six Nichols’s modes:

1. *Poetic Mode* - Poetic documentaries are more subjective and approach something from a more artistic and creative angle. They rely on things like color, mood and tones, textures, sounds and rhythmic qualities.
2. *Expository Mode* - These documentaries tend to have a voice of God or narrator directing the audience, they tend to constructs a specific argument or a point of view



for the audience so it leaves little room for an audience to come to their own conclusion about what they are seeing. Nature documentaries and the news are very much based on this way.

3. *Observational Mode* - Is best described as a “window on the world”. The filmmaker observing truth by letting the camera captures its subjects uninterrupted. Handheld cameras technic is often used for this type of documentary, which has a shaky quality to it and makes the footage look raw and like it has just happened - nothing has been staged. Direct Cinema and Cinéma vérité from the 1950/60's are prime examples of this type of documentary.

4. *Participatory Mode* - Opposite to the observational style the participatory normally includes the director or filmmaker in the documentary and they will play quite an integral part by maybe following someone around, asking questions and almost become a part of the subject life for the duration of the documentary. Rather than not influencing or getting involved with the subject they will directly engage with them.

5. *Reflexive Mode* - Reflexive Documentaries are similar to Participatory in that they often include the filmmaker within the film. However, unlike Participatory, they make no attempts to explore an outside subject. Rather, they focus solely on themselves and the act of them making the film. In other word, reflexive mode is not about the relationship with the filmmaker and the subject, but rather the filmmaker and the audience.

6. *Performative Mode* - The filmmaker is deeply involved and this type of documentary is usually subjective the filmmaker and the film might depict their personal journey. This has sometimes been called the “Michael Moore” style, as he often uses his own personal stories as a way to construct social truths (without having to argue the validity of their experiences).

As we mentioned in the beginning, filmmaker’s point of view is one of the most important issues in telling story but often remains unquestioned in film. In fact, point of view is the main and continuously dynamic tool of structuring the narrative.

The point of view exists because the storyteller has a purpose for telling the tale and is clear about his/her relationship to the story and its characters. Diagrams below are symbolic of how a point of view works, and some points are linked to six Nichols’s modes. (Rabiger, 2009)

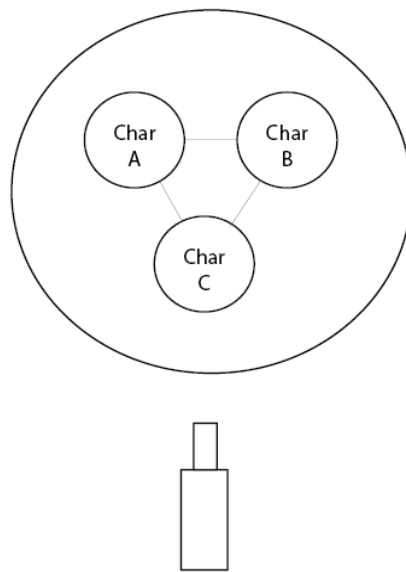


Figure 1: Diagram representing direct or observational cinema, in which the subject and audience become unaware of the camera's presence.

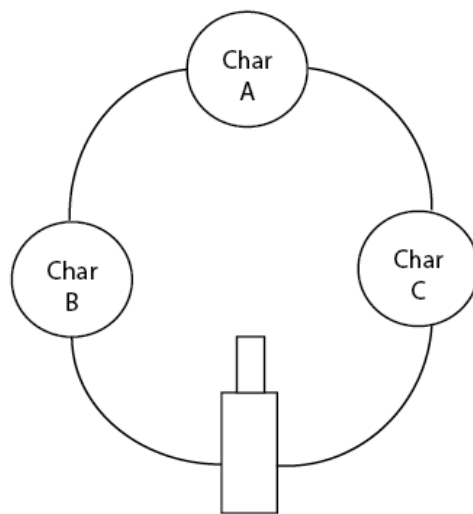


Figure 2: Diagram representing participatory mode, in which the filmmaker and crew becomes part of the events being recorded

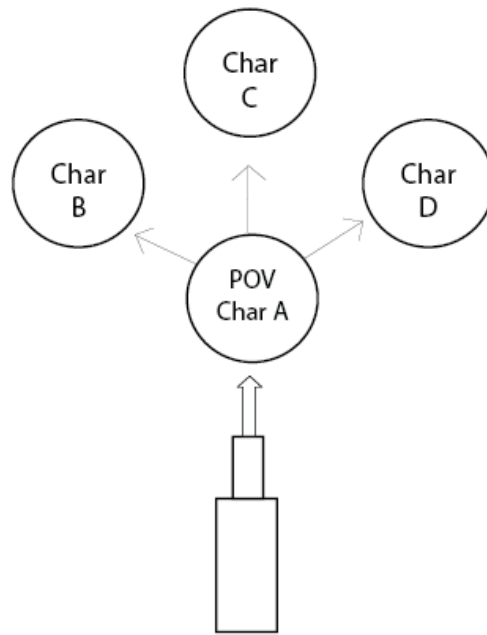


Figure 3: Diagram representing a single point of view (seeing through a character in the film)

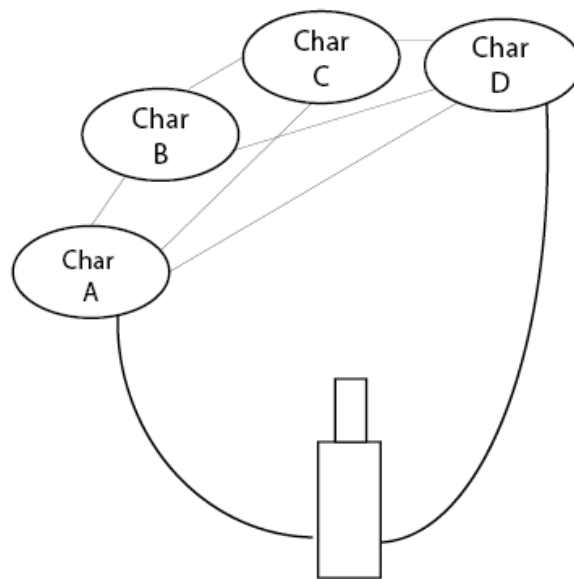


Figure 4: Diagram representing the multiple points of view. We may see the viewpoint of more than one character, no one character is more important than the other.

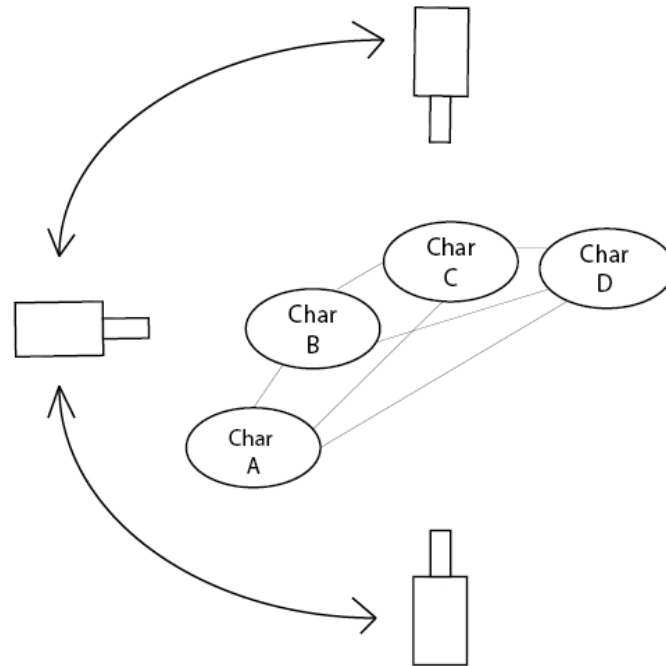


Figure 5: Diagram representing omniscient point of view, in which the camera move freely in time and space, means that the story is told from an all-seeing God-like. POV comes from the storyteller, not particular character.

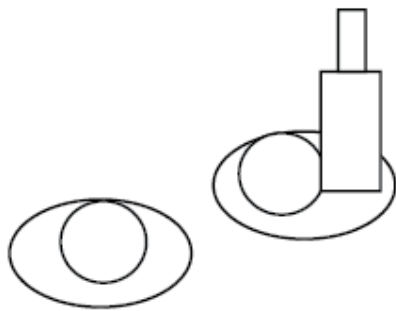


Figure 6: Diagram representing the personal point of view, in which the author/storyteller, who sometimes narrates the film. The director can alternatively supply filmmaking skills for someone in front of the camera, or the director is behind the camera but can step forward into the visible world of the film.

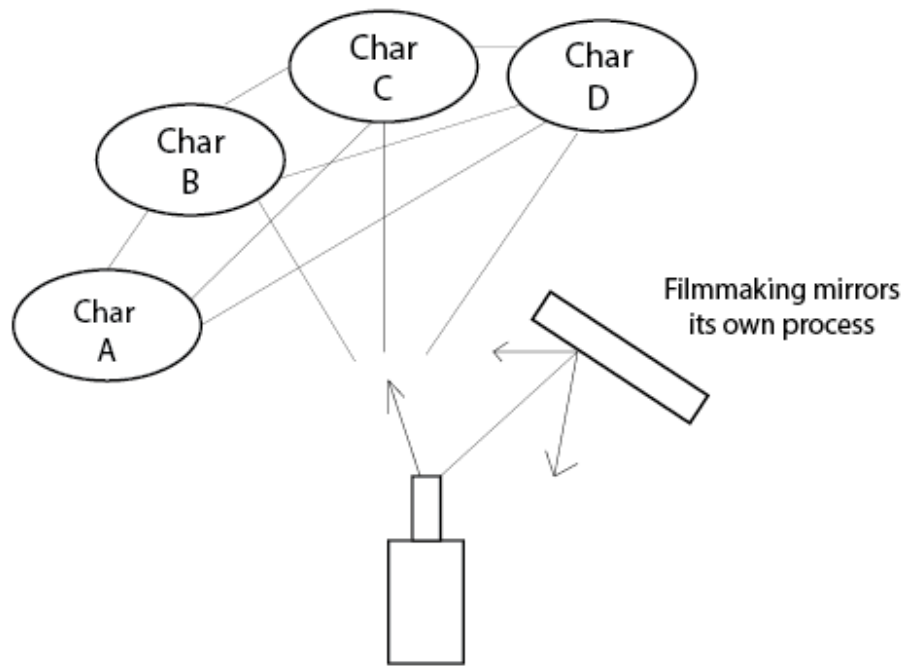


Figure 7: Diagram representing the reflexive point of view, one able to share salient aspects of the filmmaking process with the audience.

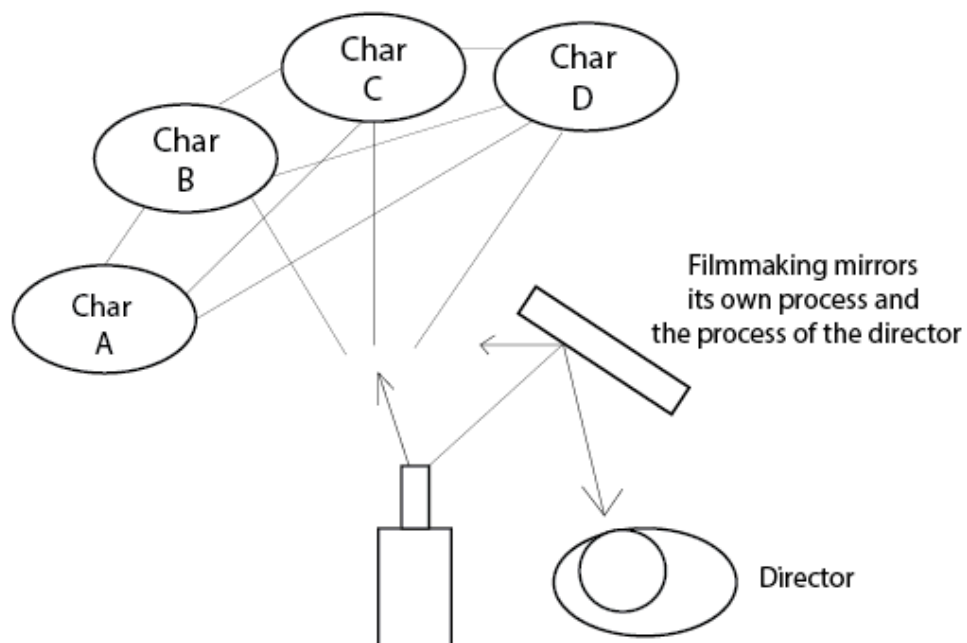


Figure 8: Diagram representing the self- reflexive point of view, which not only reflects on its own process but also incorporates its authors' thoughts, doubts, and self-examination as well.

## Case Studies

### *The Look of Silence* (2014)

In Indonesia around 1965-1966, there was genocide of the people who joined Indonesian Communist Party (PKI). The government was the commander behind. More than a million of people were killed ruthlessly. Joshua Oppenheimer, a documentary director of *The Act of Killing* (2012) and *The Look of Silence* (2014), which is continued documentary.



Figure 9: Sample scenes in *The Look of Silence* (2014)

Joshua changed the method of storytelling in *The Look of Silence* (2014) to be more guessable. But it is still powerful as the former one. This documentary followed Adi Rukun, one of the victim who was born after his brother was killed for couple days. Presently, he is an ophthalmologist at the age of 40. He has no memory about this tragedy. But he was inspired to seek for the truth after his mother first told the story about his brother's death. He acted as a volunteer optometrist in a community in order to meet selected patients, who are the killers in the tragedy.

Of course, most of Adi's questions received no answer. The killers avoid telling about the past occurrence. While there is an obvious answer, the documentary drags the audience to be shocked with Anwar Congo's face of pride. He is one of the killers who reveal the details of execution, choosing the victims and beliefs in superstition that they will not be insane if they drink the victim's blood. Besides the pride of savage bravery, this documentary discloses the cracks that the killers have been concealed for a long time. Oppenheimer was questioned about his moral. Being a documentary director, he accepted that he intended to "push" Adi to face the killer's leader who is an important character in this documentary. It makes the audience was shocking by a method of Oppenheimer's storytelling.

### *Citizenfour* (2014)

The distinctive point of *Citizenfour* is the storytelling of "insiders". Laura Poitras, a director of this documentary did not waste her time for interviewing others. But she tells a story based on her own experienced. The documentary director woke the audience to be awake since the opening of the story by inspiring letters that stimulates the attractiveness and introduces herself that she is one of the people that the state has kept their eyes on because she is a censorious documentary director. (She was famous

from Oscar Documentary nominee for the documentary *My Country, My Country* is a documentary that tells a story of Iraq's possession by United States of America). The storytelling method that Poitras had chosen for impact the audience was the e-mail conversation between Poitras and Snowden who used that assumed name as "Citizenfour". On the computer screen, it has something strange because they were using scout protector e-mail for their conversation. The graphic made us see how our daily e-mail can be scouted.

The main situation of *Citizenfour* happened at a Mira Hotel in Hongkong for 8 days which was full of beautiful paradox. The first conflict was the status of "confidential mission" which Glenn Greenwald (an American lawyer and journalist), Poitras and Snowden had made an appointment, but Snowden's location cannot be leaked. If his location was exposed, he will be killed immediately. The conflict is the confidential mission which was recorded "obviously" through film camera. The audience has the privilege to see the situation by themselves while the whole world (at that time) did not know the name and location of scaremonger. The next conflict is while everything has already happened, but the documentary could make the story in the past to be "fresh" as if it's live.

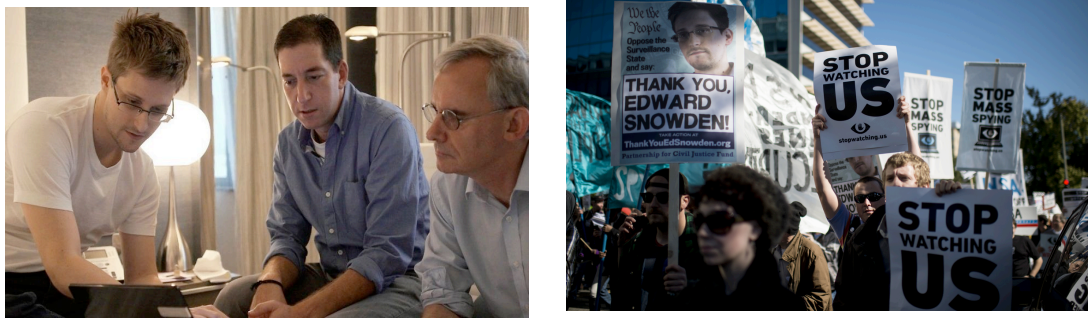


Figure 10: Sample scenes in *Citizenfour* (2014)

The next conflict is Snowden's emphasis that the issue is influencing to "everyone" not "someone". Finally, the documentary and method of Snowden makes this reconnaissance mainly as his matter. This documentary seems to be the drawing of human in 21<sup>st</sup> century. Snowden becomes both an international hero and criminal. Among the stressful topic, the director still intend to present the charm and loveliness of Snowden such as his combing hair or a role play with magic cloth like Harry Potter (Snowden also looks like Harry Potter). Although, it is a documentary, but there is combination with costume arrangement to be like superhero film. I think Hollywood has no need to make a film about this situation anymore, because this documentary consists entertainment in itself.

In the middle of this documentary, it's strong in topic and technique. The thing that makes it better is the feature of documentary, which records the unexpected accident. There is a scene of stressful confidential conversation. Suddenly, there was a fire alarm at that hotel. They looked at each other, laughed up their sleeves and started to be scared that it was truly fire or it was governmental detection. At this point, it expressed emotion of humour and excitement from the truth that most of us are in the world of panopticon from the government all the time. In the same time, the documentary's camera did the opposite role, because it revealed the space that

government cannot see. The camera also took a role as reversed panopticon to the government.

*Tsukiji Wonderland (2016)*



Figure 11: Sample scene in Tsukiji Wonderland (2016)

Tsukiji Wonderland (2016) is a history of fish market. Tsukiji fish market is the biggest seafood market in Japan. It is the center that everything about seafood could be found. Tsukiji Wonderland is one sample that documentary is not always necessary to narrate in the equivocated form or strange from the “tradition” of original narration that tell the story as news report which requires the insertion of beautiful pictures, talking head interview and describing sound.

Furthermore, another attractiveness of Tsukiji Wonderland is a core of storytelling by explanation of Theodore C. Bestor, a lecturer of Harvard University who wrote “Tsukiji: The Fish Market at the Center of the World” in the view of anthropology. It shows the audience that this fish market in Tokyo that interesting connection with people and relationship between agents who are both rivals and friends with Japanese restaurant’s owners. It presents from fish shops to fish buyers for minor restaurants. There is insertion of warm scene between members of family who came to buy fishes at the market. It indicates the culture of fish consumption that Japanese are proud of and willing to forward to the next generations.

Tsukiji Wonderland presents the pride of Japanese in the era of fewer cooks at home. The documentary questions how can Japanese people transfer the food culture to the next generations. On the other hand, the presentation of tangible culture, culture in daily life of most people (such as shopping in the market, consuming fishes) makes the documentary more attractive. It invites new generations to be interested in this fish market.

*By the river (2013)*

By the river is a documentary which directing method is letting the subject to tell the stories that happen in Klity Lang Village naturally. There are new techniques and camera angles for presentation to make the audience absorb the documentary at their best. By the river tells the stories of a teacher who is diligent in teaching community’s students to read and write in Thai and a man who always dived in community’s main



river to find fishes. One day he seamlessly disappeared. It seems like his and her stories were not important.



Figure 12: Sample scenes in *By the river* (2013)

Among happiness in the deep forest, at the present, the villagers of Klity Lang Village, Kanchanaburi Province still fishing, taking a bath and doing the laundry in the river. Even the river is contaminated of lead. It's the truth that the villagers have been fighting for more than 16 years until they win the case and received the compensation for million. But it does not make the river uncontaminated. This documentary has an interesting method of storytelling, shooting and editing. It is different from general documentaries, which are normally boring, serious and full of heavy information. But this documentary is presented simply with Karen's life. It is beyond the point of view that villagers are victims or view of villagers' battle for their rights. But this documentary makes the audience "feel" the complexity of being human.

#### *The song of rice (2014)*



Figure 13: Sample scenes in *The song of rice* (2014)

The song of rice is a documentary, which is driven by beautiful and unseen visual such as scene of Papaya Salad Competition that does not have only young ladies in Thai dress, but there are grand mothers who play hula hoop and scene of sky rocket lighting, which we do not see only spinning of big fireworks into the sky. Though we can see the villagers who looked up to the sky attentively as they were spelled to stay still. We can also see the buffaloes racing closely like we can touch the mud and ceremony of supernatural rice cooking that we almost smell it and the closed up shot of sticky rice which makes this documentary more charming and interesting.

Film score is one of the highlights of this documentary. They are using local musical instruments to set the folk environment. In the scenes with no movie score, there are recorded live singing songs of villagers such as the scene that an aunt sings local song, which she was cooking. Although, we can or cannot understand, it makes us understand the feeling of the singer.

For the audience who is not used to this kind of documentary, they may feel like “lost”, because this documentary does not go in a clear direction. It is not arranged as it should be. It is not following one of farmers’ lives and there is letters to indicate the name and location of the tradition. There is only the credit at the end of documentary that tells the location. But this may be the intention of director and charm of this documentary to make the audience see the beauty of local tradition, homogeneity, heterogeneity of traditions in many parts, the difficulty and sincerity of farmers without framing by location, description or film script.

## **Conclusion**

As we have seen, the genre of documentary is defined by the tension between the claim to truthfulness and the need to select and represent the reality one wants to share. Documentaries are a set of choices – about subject matter, about the forms of expression, about the point of view, about the story structure and about the target audience. (Aufderheide, 2007). According to Rabiger (2016), the source of the Storyteller’s viewpoint is never very evident because it is hidden behind the choices that express it. These aesthetic and stylistic choices regarding performance, location, tone, sound, and pace serve as proxies for the Storyteller’s POV on the content of the narrative. And though all films have directors, their authorship is necessarily more collective and collaborative than individual, like music from a conductor.

One thing that makes documentary different from other genres is “diversity” in storytelling selection to express the thought to be interesting, attractive or sometimes push the audience to make changes to the society or at least create questions for cumulative thinking. The future trend of storytelling in documentary film may alter because the demand for documentary storytelling is increasing and storytellers have opportunities to select "the story" to tell. It causes the variety of forms and styles to choose. The Act of Killing (2012) is a good example of how to approach a story in a different way. There are also loads of hybrid documentaries with fictional parts and a lot of documentary is connected with transmedia projects, which gives the film a longer life, more attractive and builds an audience on the net as well.

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