 Documentary

**Definitions**

**Documentary** (adj.) Consisting of, concerning, or based on documents.

**Documentary** (adj.) Presenting facts objectively without editorializing or inserting fictional matter, as in a book or film.

**Documentary** (n.) A work, such as a film or television program, presenting political, social, or historical subject matter in a factual and informative manner and often consisting of actual news films or interviews accompanied by narration.

The purpose of a documentary is to "represent events from the real world to inform or teach us about the world" (In Focus); "a television programme which presents facts about people, places and events in an interesting way" (On Target); "a creative description of reality" (On Target).

Documentaries demonstrate a number of generic conventions:

1. Narrative – They may tell or present a ‘story’.
2. Character – They develop characterisations and encourage us to ‘empathise’ with a character by presenting a particular point of view.
3. Selection of detail – They tell a ‘truth’ and not necessarily the ‘truth’ and position the reader to accept it.
4. Attitudes and values – Are clearly communicated through the text
5. Themes/issues – Documentaries are usually about a ‘message’; the reader is positioned to see an issue or topic in a particular way.
6. Codes and conventions of film – The ‘normal’ techniques may be used creatively to ‘engage’ an audience so they will watch a documentary and accept a particular point of view.
7. Authority figures – People we admire, value or accept as authorities are used to bring credibility to the ‘message’ of the text.
8. Reality – Footage which purports to be ‘reality’ is presented to the viewer so they will accept the message as ‘real’ or the ‘truth’.
9. Dramatisations – Footage which is obviously ‘staged’ is presented to the viewer to encourage the viewer to visualise or imagine events/people/places which were not filmed/could not be filmed at the time. Such recreations are effective in engaging the audience.
10. Humour or pathos – Documentaries will use humour or pathos to engage the audience.
11. Music – Music codes are very effectively manipulated in documentaries to ‘set the scene’ or provide the viewer with response cues.
12. Entertaining – Documentaries are primarily designed to entertain/engage an audience.

Having viewed a documentary in class, identify:

1. The ‘story’ being told – whose story is it? What do we know about this person/people?
2. What is the ‘theme’ or message of the documentary? What are we learning from this documentary?
3. What ‘authority figures’ are used? Who are they and why are they ‘important’?
4. What footage was ‘real’ and what was dramatized? How was this done? What effect did this leave on the viewer?
5. How was sound used in this? What did the viewer ‘hear’ and how did this add to the effect of the documentary?
6. How did the documentary ‘entertain’ or engage the viewer?