

# Realism(s)

## Lecture 8: Documentary Realism

1) Documentarism, Old and New

2) *The Human Body* (BBC1, 1998)

3) *Windrush* (BBC2, 1998)

4) The (Problematic) Reality of the Mass Media:

Andrew O'Hagan, "The Tower" (2018)

---

### 1) Documentarism, Old and New

#### Documentary novel:

A form of fiction invented by Edmond and Jules Goncourt (1822-96/1830-70) in the 1860s, setting out to write history 'which might have happened' based on research methods of historians and anthropologists, aiming for the highest possible degree of fidelity to life, to fact (realism > naturalism). In the 20th century this became a form of fiction which is based on documentary evidence in the shape of newspaper articles, legal reports, archives, and recent official papers, sometimes described as 'instant fiction'.

Examples: Theodore Dreiser, *An American Tragedy* (1925)  
Truman Capote, *In Cold Blood* (1966)  
(considered the original 'non-fiction novel')

### Documentary theatre:

A form of drama, related to epic theatre, which is propagandistic and didactic, and may make use of relatively recent history and documentary evidence of the kind provided by newspapers, reports, archives, official histories, diaries and journals.

Examples: Rolf Hochhuth, *The Representative* (1966)  
Heiner Kipphardt, *In the Matter of J. Robert Oppenheimer* (1968)  
Peter Brook, *US* (1969)

See also: Richard Norton-Taylor, *The Colour of Justice* (1999)  
> tribunal play as 'verbatim play' relying entirely on the transcripts of the public inquiry in the wake of the murder of Stephen Lawrence

Most recently: Carol Ann Duffy and Rufus Norris, *My Country: A Work in Progress in the words of people across the UK and Carol Ann Duffy* (2017)

### Documentary film:

Motion picture that shapes and interprets factual material for purposes of education and entertainment. Documentaries have been made in one form or another in nearly every country and have contributed significantly to the development of realism in film [...] Documentaries also became popular in television programming.

Examples: Robert Flaherty, *Nanook of the North* (1922)  
*Man of Aran* (1934)  
John Grierson, *Drifters* (1929), *Night Mail* (1936)

### Documentary film techniques:

- Actuality:** film footage of real life events, places and people, providing a record of real events as they unfold
- Exposition:** occurs at the beginning and introduces themes and structure
- Voice-over:** providing narrative focus, offering explanation, information and opinions
- Interviews:** witnesses or experts are drawn upon to support the documentary's viewpoint or to provide comprehensive coverage of possible attitudes, generally adding a sense of realism
- Archival footage:** functions as source material
- Montage:** usually linked with what characters say, while montage sequences convey ideas through their specific order and patterning
- Reconstructions:** illustrate and re-present factual information established through the documentary mode

### Keynotes of Documentary:

- 'empirical anchorage' (cf. More 2017, 30-35)
- reference to source material to provide documentary evidence
- contemporary or 'factual' reference
- 'objective' bracketing of subjectivity
- spectrum of functions:  
propaganda – education – information – entertainment

(cf. Reinfandt 2014)

## 2) *The Human Body* (BBC 1, 1998)

- seven-part documentary TV series, first shown on BBC One in 1998
- produced by the BBC and The Learning Channel
- presented by Sir Robert Winston, a popular scientist, doctor, and politician (Labour whip in the House of Lords)
- audience share on first showing: 38%
- won three British Academy of Television Awards, four Royal Television Society Awards, a Peabody Award, an International Monitor Award, a Silver Spire at the San Francisco International Film Festival
- DVD (including a 'Making of') released 2001
- German version: *Das Wunderwerk Mensch*

“Life inside the most complex mechanism on earth – our bodies – is explored and explained in this groundbreaking series. The latest imaging techniques allow us to travel through veins, down fallopian tubes and around the brain, to understand how our bodies work. Our minds, spirits and emotions are celebrated too in this compassionate series which charts not only life but death.”

## **Episodes:**

- 1) "Life Story" – exposition
- 2) "An Everyday Miracle" – conception and birth
- 3) "First Steps" – childhood (first four years)
- 4) "Raging Teens" – adolescence and puberty
- 5) "Brain Power" – adult capacities
- 6) "As Time Goes By" – natural progress vs. decline
- 7) "The End of Life – death

Episodes directed by:

Richard Dale, Emma De'ath, Andrew Thompson, Peter Georgi, Christopher Spencer, Liesel Evans, John Groom

[> intro sequence (...2:29)]

[> example of imaging quality: sperm on its way to the egg (magnified 1000x)]

## **Programmatic quote (41:04...):**

The truth is: A knowledge of the science of life is only made complete by a knowledge of those living it. The human body is not just a biological machine. It's much more than that. It's a person. And in this series it is people who will tell us what the body's ever-changing story really means.

## **End quote (45:29...):**

So this is the story of the human body – a tale of fantastic changes and amazing achievements, written over millions of years of evolution and told afresh by each of us during our lifetimes. It surely is the Greatest Story Ever Told, and every one of us has a part in it.

From newborn baby upwards, this line follows the journey we will all make through life. Each person is one year older than the last. All of us have a place somewhere along this line, looking forward, looking back, or perhaps a bit of both.

Seen like this, stripped of the trappings of wealth and status, we have one thing in common, the one place we all inhabit, the one vehicle we all travel in: it's the human body. Seeing your body in ways you've never seen it before, perhaps you will share my sense of wonder at how it shapes us all into who we are.

**Media Contexts (cf. Van Dijk 2005):**

**[↔ the history of objectivity (Daston and Galison 2007, Reinfandt 2011)]**

**A. Medical Imaging Technologies**

- drawing/painting
- photography
- electrocardiography (ECG) and other inscription devices (1872ff.)
- X rays (Wilhelm Röntgen 1895)
- ultrasound
- endoscope
- Computed Tomography (CT) (based on X rays)
- Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI) (based on magnetic fields)
- Positron Emission Photography (PET) (based on injected radioactive isotopes)
- Electron Microscope (EM) (magnifies up to half a million times)

**B. Media Technologies**

- (color) photography
- film
- television
- digital media



**van Dijk 2005:**

- medical vs. media purposes
- seeing vs. curing

**Verdicchio 2010:**

- the popularisation of science
- structure and narrative form

## Recent Developments:

### **2007/2010: *Incredible Human Machine*** (National Geographic Television UK)

“With stunning footage and powerful first-hand accounts, National Geographic takes you on a fantastic journey through an ordinary, yet extraordinary, day in the life of the human body. We reveal its miraculous everyday workings – how we eat, breathe, walk on two feet and even process emotion.

Explore striking feats of medical advancement, from unique people who push the human body to its ultimate limits to real-time views of Aerosmith rocker Steven Tyler’s vocal chords! Through 10,000 blinks of an eye, 20,000 breaths of air, 100,000 beats of the heart, see how surprising and incredible a day in the life of a human really is.”

### **2011: *Inside the Human Body*** (BBC/The Learning Channel)

“Michael Mosley embarks on an astonishing voyage through the world’s most complex organism – you.

*Inside the Human Body* takes us deep under our skin where we are dwarfed by even the smallest cell, where blood vessels become vast cathedrals and the tiniest cluster of cilia becomes an expansive forest.

Our body’s almost infinite ability to adapt and surprise us is illustrated by the stories of remarkable characters whose bodies allow them to do amazing things, live in incredible places and push their physiology to the limits. Spectacular photography shows human behaviour in super slow motion, revealing elements of ourselves that we are completely unaware of.”

[BBC website:

“Using spectacular graphics based on the latest science and stories of remarkable people around the world, Michael Mosley takes us on a fantastic voyage through our inner universe.”]

[> example of imaging quality: sperm on its way to the egg]

### 3) *Windrush* (BBC 2, 1998)

- four-part documentary TV series, first shown on BBC Two in 1998
- produced and directed by David Upshal
- won the 1999 Royal Television Society Award for best documentary series
- Contributors include  
Lenny Henry, Jazzy B, Doreen Lawrence, Valerie Amos, Rosalind Howells, Diane Abbott, Paul Boateng, Ben Bousquet, Carroll Thompson, Charlie Williams, Cy Grant, Professor Stuart Hall, Ken Livingstone, Darcus Howe, Linton Kwesi Johnson, Columbus Deniston, Ulric Cross, Chris Blackwell, and Mike Phillips

The series was broadcast in 1998 to mark the 50th anniversary of the arrival in Britain of the Empire Windrush, the ship which brought the first wave of post-war West Indian immigrants, on 22nd June, 1948, bringing 492 passengers from Jamaica.

The four episodes are:

- 1) Arrival (c.1948 to 1958)
- 2) Intolerance (c.1958 to 1968)
- 3) A New Generation (1968 to 1988 and beyond)
- 4) A Very British Story (the contribution of the black community)

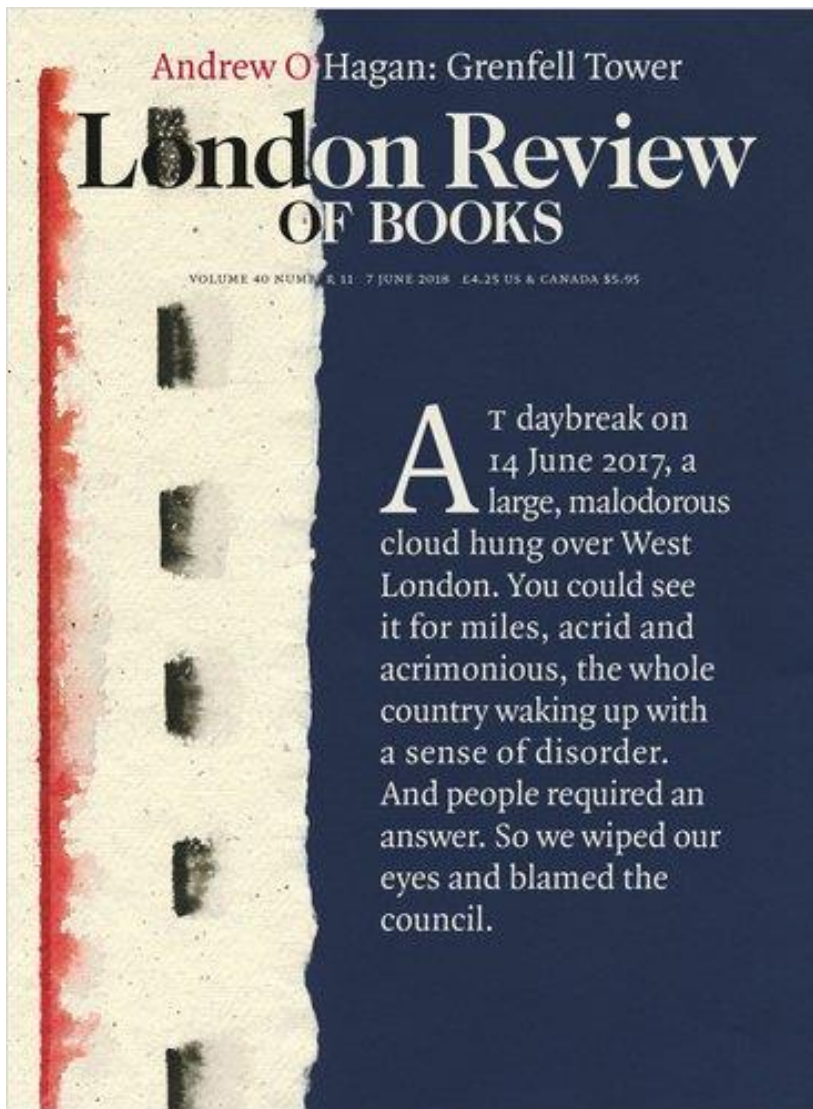
[opening sequence/exposition (...3:32)]

### 4) The (Problematic) Reality of the Mass Media: Andrew O'Hagan, "The Tower" (2018)

**Niklas Luhmann, *The Reality of the Mass Media* (2000 [1996]):**

Whatever we know about our society, or indeed about the world in which we live, we know through the mass media. (1)

*[H]ow* is it possible to accept information about the world and society as information about reality when one knows *how* it is produced? (122)



Digitally enhanced version (including documentary film and audio of the full piece):  
<https://www.lrb.co.uk/v40/n11/andrew-ohagan/the-tower>

Very early in the morning, as the tower still burned, people began mobilising these arguments and creating a high judicial platform for them. We wanted political scalps before the fire was out, even if it meant that the worst failures of the night would take a long time to be recognised. A game of political name-calling and blaming began, which appeared, for the better part of the coming year, to meet the needs of a world that demanded stock villains. It was a sign of the times: not only the fire but our reaction to it was relayed all over the world.



The firefighting operation at Grenfell was a huge and dramatic failure, though nobody wanted to say so. The national government's role was cynical and opportunistic from the start, though everyone missed this in the rush to name local culprits. And journalism, hour by hour and day by day, showed by its feasting on half-baked items that it had lost the power to treat reality fairly. You saw it everywhere. Channel 4 News, the *Guardian*, the *Daily Mail*, Sky News, the *New York Times*: from the middle of that night, they began to turn the fire into the story they wanted it to be. Reality wasn't good enough, the tragedy wasn't bad enough, it had to be augmented, it had to be blown up, facts couldn't be gleaned quickly enough, and stories went without investigation, research, tact or even checking. In a world of perpetual commentary in which everyone and anyone is allowed their own facts, accusation stands as evidence. (16)

## Bibliography Lecture 8:

- Bruzzi, Stella, *New Documentary: A Critical Introduction*. 2nd ed. London/New York: Routledge, 2006.
- Daston, Lorraine & Peter Galison, *Objectivity*. Brooklyn: Zone Books, 2007.
- Dijck, José van, *The Transparent Body: A Cultural Analysis of Medical Imaging*. Seattle/London: U of Washington P, 2005.
- Luhmann, Niklas, *The Reality of the Mass Media*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2000.
- Marcus, Laura, "Cinematic Realism." In: Matthew Beaumont, ed., *A Concise Companion to Realism*. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010: 195-210.
- More, Prachi, *Actors and Networks in the Megacity: A Literary Analysis of Urban Narratives*. Bielefeld: transcript, 2017.
- Nichols, Bill, *Introduction to Documentary*. Bloomington/Indianapolis, IN: Indiana UP, 2001.
- O'Hagan, Andrew, "The Tower." *London Review of Books* 40.11 (June 7, 2018), 3-43.
- Reinfandt, Christoph, "Objektivität, Kontingenz und Theorie in historischer Perspektive." In: Mario Grizelj, Oliver Jahraus, Hrsg., *Theorietheorie: Wider die Theoriemüdigkeit in den Geisteswissenschaften*. München: Fink, 2011: 95-110.
- Reinfandt, Christoph, "Was der Fall ist: Von Tatsachen und Gegebenheiten in den BBC-Dokumentationen *Windrush* (1998) und *The Human Body* (1998). In: Mario Grizelj, Oliver Jahraus, Tanja Prokic, Hrsg., *Vor der Theorie: Immersion – Materialität – Intensität*. Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2014: 269-289.
- Schlote, Christiane & Eckart Voigts-Virchow, eds., *Constructing Media Reality: The New Documentarism*. Thematic Issue of *ZAA – Zeitschrift für Anglistik und Amerikanistik* 56.2 (2008).
- Verdicchio, Dirk, *Das Publikum des Lebens. Zur Soziologie des populären Wissenschaftsfilms*. Bielefeld: transcript, 2010.