

# Docufiction. What the hell?

## Characteristics.

Why characteristics and examples? The problem with definitions: Docudrama, dramadocs, docu-fictions, hybrid films...Those are recent terms.

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Why characteristics and examples? The problem with definitions: Docudrama, dramadocs, docu-fictions, hybrid films...Those are recent terms.

### What can describe the hybrid work in fiction?

At a general level we can say that in fiction what it characterizes the hybrid work is the emphasis on realism, and a feeling of zero-degree style: objectivity, “un-mediated”, observation.

### What can describe the hybrid work in documentary?

In documentary, the hybridity comes from complicating the very notion of realism and for a sort of excessive style: the subjective, the speculative, the constructed.

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## Example.

If we think about the based on real events film. What are their characteristics?

Events taken from real situations. *Here we can say that these films claim a documentary status. At least, because they have to research into real events and people.*

How are these real situations/events/character treated? In which way they are different from a documentary?  
They usually conform to dramatic demands and audience expectations of a fiction film.

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## Some Early Examples.

Lumière and Méliès: two well defined strands?

### Documentary

*Nanook of the North* (Flaherty, 1922). *In the Land of Head Hunters* (Edward S. Curtis, 1914).

### Fiction

*The Birth of a Nation* (D.W. Griffith, 1915). *The Soul of Youth* (Desmond Taylor, 1920)

*Toni* (Jean Renoir, 1935)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RvMyEZnSuyU>

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*Toni* (Jean Renoir, 1935)

Renoir on *Toni*.

Good photography . . . sees the world as it is, selects it, determines what merits being seen and seizes it as if by surprise, without change.... At the time of *Toni* ... my ambition was to integrate the non-natural elements of my film, the elements not dependent on chance encounter, into a style as close as possible to everyday life. The same thing for the sets. There is no studio used in *Toni*. The landscapes, the houses are those we found. The human beings, whether interpreted by professional actors or the inhabitants of Martigues, tried to resemble people in the street.... No stone was left unturned to make our work as close as possible to a documentary. Our ambition was that the public would be able to imagine that an invisible camera had filmed the phases of a conflict without the characters unconsciously swept along by it being aware of its presence.

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General Considerations  
Derek Paget.

**The holy grail of the real.** A fascination with reaching and representing the real. Can the camera give us a privileged access to the real? Technology versus ethical, political and philosophical considerations.

**Facts matter.** Truth is important and relying on facts seem to bring us closer to it. On the other hand, it is our belief that the individual is central to understand larger historical processes. Ex: Neorealism.

**How does it feel?** A focus, almost an obsession about the individual, the personal, the emotional. Dramatic structures and dramatic performances offer possibilities to answer this question.

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## Why to Mix Documentary and Fiction?

In documentary, early filmmakers already felt that documentary could be too “dry” and looked for ways to engage emotionally the audience as a way to convey the message more effectively.

In fiction: Mixing fiction and fact became accepted as a means of heightening realism and increasing social and political relevance. Ex: Invented events and fictional protagonists provided illustrations of real situations and problems.

Sometimes, it is also a question of access, and/or protecting identity of characters. Sometimes, there’s “no other way to tell it”.

Sometimes, documentaries don’t want to conform to document reality and aim to provoke and catalyze situations. They feel that there is reality beyond what is observed and try to bring those dimensions into view.

Sometimes it’s to parody documentary truth claims: mockumentary.

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## Some Remarks.

Steven N. Lipkin argues that docudramas are: ‘rootable’, ‘relatable’ and ‘promotable’:

“Rootable” in the sense that plots are, literally, rooted in current events.

“Relatable” because audiences can empathize with the experiences of protagonist either ordinary like themselves or made to seem ordinary by realist acting.

“Promotable” because events and issues are made accessible through mass media and they are usually cost-effective works.

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## Some Remarks.

Ultimately, the question of whether docudramas are fact or fiction, true or false, signals a cultural fascination with the very concept of truth and lie.

Aesthetic questions: are there certain cinematic approaches that take us closer to the real? Is the real a question of aesthetics, style, or formal approaches? Realism is not reality. Reality is not realism.

Philosophical questions: What is our understanding of the real? Can we ever represent it? Can objectivity ever be separated from subjectivity?

Ethical questions: how do we treat facts in fiction films? How much degree of intervention is allowed in documentary before it stops being such? Are there ethical and political considerations in turning real facts into story formats?

# Neorealism

Sources:

P. Kolker. *The Altering Eye*.

Zavattini: “Some Ideas on the Cinema”

Bert Cardullo. “What is Neorealism?”

# Neorealism

## What is it?

A loose collective movement in Italy whose aim was to change the form and function of commercial cinema. Aim to new approaches to image-making, to cutting, to narrative structure, to audience response. Between (approximately) 1945 and 1955.

They battled against what they saw as a cinema of escape and evasion, uncommitted to exploring the world, seeking instead to palliate its audience, asking them to assent to comedic and melodramatic structures of love and innocence.

Its best known representatives are Roberto Rossellini's *Rome, Open City* (1945), *Paisan* (1946), and *Germany, Year Zero* (1947); Luchino Visconti's *La terra trema* (1947); Vittorio De Sica's *Shoeshine* (1946), *Bicycle Thieves* (1948), *Miracle in Milan* (1950), and *Umberto D.* (1951); Fellini's *I vitelloni* (1953) and possibly *La strada* (1954) and *Nights of Cabiria* (1956).

# Neorealism

## Characteristics.

They chose to dramatize and give structure to postwar events and to a class of people rarely considered worthy of narrative in the cinema.

They invented characters, but allowed them to be played by individuals who were close to those characters in their own lives.

They told a story but at the same time attenuated it, subordinating conventional continuity and character development to the observation of detail.

The neorealists sought a form that would attenuate the structures of fantasy in traditional film. The spectator would be offered small, unelaborated images built from the lives of a certain class of people at a certain moment and in a certain place. These images would, finally, request the viewer to recognize in them not “reality” but an attempt to evoke the concrete, the immediate; they would request an attention and a willingness to trust the image not to betray either its subject or the spectator.

# Neorealism

## What they wished?

If they allowed the movie camera to gaze at the world without interference, the lives of the poor would reveal themselves and their stories would grow from the simple act of observation.

The neorealists would return to zero. They would start with the photographic origins of film, its ability to record images of the world “objectively.”

Some neorealist theory called for doing away with anything that might interfere with the raw material of raw life—even narrative itself (as little extraneous guidance as possible)

Bazin: No more actors, no more story, no more sets, which is to say that in the perfect aesthetic illusion of reality there is no more cinema.”

Rossellini writing in 1953: “The subject of neorealist film is the world; not story or narrative. It contains no preconceived thesis, because ideas are born in the film from the subject. It has no affinity with the superfluous and the merely spectacular, which it refuses, but is attracted to the concrete.”

# Neorealism

## Characteristics. Summary

Shot on location.

Poor working-class subjects played by non-professionals.

Use of environment to define those subjects.

For them situation takes the place of psychology, the type replaces the individual, the ordinary the heroic. What we know about a character is what we see of that character in action in his or her environment; no other motivation is needed: An attitude of unmediated observations of events.

The camera assumes the point of view of interested observer, concerned with the main character, but interested as well in the world that surrounds him.

# Neorealism

## Some limitations.

To remove subjective contemplation and mediation and reduce aesthetic interference were recognized as impossible to follow.

They were committed to making fiction films, not documentaries, despite the impulse toward documentary in their theory and occasionally in their practice. The subjective urge was always present.

The conflict between their desire to create an observed social political reality and their attachment to old forms of sentimental storytelling was never resolved.

The neorealists politicized the image, made it reveal the sufferings of a class; at the same time they insisted that their revelations could not go beyond what was seen by the compassionate eye, which had to remain passive in the face of those sufferings: How does change features, if at all, in their films?

# Zavattini. "Some Ideas on the Cinema"

Before this, if one was thinking over the idea of a film on, say, a strike, one was immediately forced to invent a plot. And the strike itself became only the background to the film. Today, our attitude would be one of 'revelation': we would describe the strike itself, **try to work out the largest possible number of human, moral, social, economic, poetic values from the bare documentary fact.**

While the cinema used to make one situation produce another situation, and another, and another, again and again, and each scene was thought out and immediately related to the next (the natural result of a mistrust of reality), **today, when we have thought out a scene, we feel the need to 'remain' in it, because the single scene itself can contain so many echoes and reverberations, can even contain all the situations we may need.**

Example: In most films, the adventures of two people looking for somewhere to live, for a house, would be shown externally in a few moments of action, but for us it could provide the scenario for a whole film, and we would explore all its echoes, all its implications.

ANALYSIS VERSUS SYNTHESIS.

# Zavattini. "Some Ideas on the Cinema"

If I want to write a scene of two men quarrelling, I will not do so at my desk. I must leave my den and find them. I take these men and make them talk in front of me for one hour or for twenty, depending on necessity. My creative method is first to call on them, then to listen to them, 'choosing' what they say.

I take most of all from nature. I go out into the street, catch words, sentences, discussions. My great aids are memory and the shorthand writer.

Afterwards, I do with the words what I do with the images. I choose, I cut the material I have gathered to give it the right rhythm, to capture the essence, the truth. However great a faith I might have in imagination, in solitude, I have a greater one in reality, in people. I am interested in the drama of things we happen to encounter, not those we plan.

In short, to exercise our own poetic talents on location, we must leave our rooms and go, in body and mind, out to meet other people, to see and understand them. This is a genuine moral necessity for me and, if I lose faith in it, so much the worse for me.

# Zavattini's exercise.

Example for exercise:

A woman goes to a shop to buy a pair of shoes. The shoes cost 7,000 lire. The woman tries to bargain. The scene lasts, perhaps, two minutes. I must make a two-hour film. What do I do?

I analyse the fact in all its constituent elements, in its 'before', in its "after": in its contemporaneity.

The woman is buying the shoes. What is her son doing at the same moment? The shoes cost 7,000 lire. How did the woman happen to have 7,000 lire? How hard did she work for them, what do they represent for her? And the bargaining shopkeeper, who is he? What relationship has developed between these two human beings? What do they mean, what interests are they defending, as they bargain? The shopkeeper also has two sons, who eat and speak: do you want to know what they are saying? Here they are, in front of you.

What are people doing in India that could have some relation to this fact of the shoes?

# Zavattini's exercise.

1. Consider Zavattini's example of how to excavate reality (i.e. the woman buying shoes)
2. Go and explore an everyday moment around you. Something that might look even banal.
3. The goal is to find its connections and to experiment with Zavattini's method for building scenes (i.e. "analytical documentary" approach) Remember: It is more about following "logical" connections than inventing from scratch.