



## Six Principal Modes of Documentary Filmmaking

(From: Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010, as summarized by Sarah Childress, a Meridian Stories Innovator and Artist)

### **Expository mode**

The primary purpose of the Expository mode is to make an argument. This is the model that is most often associated with documentary in general. The structure is grounded in a series of assertions backed up by evidence. The assertions are presented through verbal commentary from an invisible voice-over narrator, while images provide the evidence.

Examples: any *Nature* or *American Masters* documentary on PBS, History Channel documentaries, and older theatrical documentaries like *The River*, *Night Mail*, *Spanish Earth*, *Nanook of the North*

### **Observational mode**

This mode uses the observations of an unobtrusive camera to create direct engagement with the everyday life of subjects.

Examples: *Primary*, *Titicut Follies*, *Gimme Shelter*, *The War Room*, *Metallica: Some Kind of Monster*

### **Participatory mode**

This mode emphasizes the interaction between filmmaker and subjects. These films usually take the form of a series of interviews or other forms of even more

direct involvement from conversations to provocations. Archival footage to examine historical issues is also included.

Examples: the films of Werner Herzog, Errol Morris, and Alex Gibney, *Exit through the Gift Shop*, *Man on Wire*, *The Cove*.

### **Poetic mode**

This abstract approach to documentary filmmaking emphasizes visual associations, tonal or rhythmic qualities, description, and form. These films often bear a close resemblance to experimental and avant-garde film.

Examples: *Night and Fog*, *Araya*, *Koyaanisqatsi*, *General Orders No. 9*.

### **Reflexive mode**

This mode, which includes the mockumentary format, calls attention to the assumptions and conventions that govern documentary filmmaking to increase our awareness of how films construct representations of reality.

Examples: *Land Without Bread*, *The Man with a Movie Camera*, *This is Spinal Tap*, *F for Fake*

### **Performative mode**

This final mode highlights the subjective or expressive aspect of the filmmaker's own involvement with a subject to heighten the audience's responsiveness to the subject and to this involvement. These films reject objectivity and favor emotion.

Examples: the films of Michael Moore, *Tongues Untied*, *Chile Obsolete*, *Memory*, *Waltz with Bashir*, TV shows like *Cops*