



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol. 10. Issue.3. 2023 (July-Sept.)

INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA
2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

THE ART OF WRITING DOCUMENTARY FILM REVIEW: CONFLUENCE OF CINEMA
AND CRITIQUE

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Article information

Received:18/6/2023

Accepted:27/7/2023

Published online:02/8/2023

doi: [10.33329/ijelr.10.3.39](https://doi.org/10.33329/ijelr.10.3.39)

ABSTRACT

As a potent medium for exploring real-world issues, documentary films shed light on untold stories and fosters meaningful conversations about contemporary society. As the genre gains prominence, their reviews become vital for filmmakers, audiences and broader cultural discourse. Writing an impactful and compelling documentary review is vital as it acts as a mediator between the filmmaker and audiences. It shapes public perception and encourages a broader appreciation for the power of documentary storytelling. By undertaking rigorous cinematic analysis and contextual interpretation, the documentary film review contributes to the continual growth of documentaries as a unique cinematic art form. This paper will provide a detailed overview of the mechanics of crafting an informative documentary film review that will resonate with readers and contribute to the broader conversation about documentary filmmaking.

Keywords: Documentary film review, cinematic analysis, public perception

INTRODUCTION

The documentary film genre has long been lauded for its ability to provide unique insights into diverse aspects of the human experience, exposing societal issues, capturing historical events, and shedding light on untold narratives. Lewis (2014) remarks "Documentaries are defined in part by their mode or style or form of presentation, not only or not necessarily by their representation of an absolute fact or truth. Audiences are of course free to consider and evaluate a documentary's truth claim, its formal and philosophical relationship to some objective reality or realism." The art of film review is a critical practice that navigates the complexities between subjectivity and objectivity while analysing a non-fiction cinema. Understanding the delicate balance between subjectivity and objectivity is crucial for documentary film reviewers. While subjectivity allows critics to infuse their personal experiences and emotions into their analysis, objectivity demands adherence to factual accuracy and impartiality. It is fundamental to the appreciation and understanding of documentary films. Film reviews lay the foundation for the exploration of documentaries, highlighting the relevance of this art form in the context of contemporary filmmaking. It emphasizes their transformative power in shaping public discourse and fostering empathy. Documentary film reviews act as guides for audiences seeking meaningful cinematic experiences. Critics are the intermediaries between filmmakers and viewers, offering nuanced insights that enhance appreciation, understanding, and engagement with the documentary genre. They also serve as

gatekeepers, influencing the film's reception and its impact on social and cultural spheres. successful documentary film review goes beyond the mere restating of events and delves into the filmmaker's intentions and thematic explorations. Critics must identify the underlying message and evaluate how effectively it is conveyed to the audience. The reviewer should dissect a film's structure, narration, and storytelling to uncover its deeper meanings. Documentary films are often catalysts for social and political change. Reviews by providing constructive analysis, play an influential role in amplifying the impact of such films. By drawing attention to pressing issues and promoting dialogue, reviewers become instrumental in fostering a more informed and socially aware public. While reviewing documentaries that address sensitive or distressing subject matter, reviewers need to tread carefully, considering ethical implications in their critique.

Documentaries mostly address pressing contemporary issues, and understanding the broader context in which they were made enhances the reviewer's grasp of the film's relevance and impact. When it comes to writing about documentary films, Nichols (2017) points out that "Recognizing the filmmaker's background and intentions provides essential insights into their artistic choices and motivations. The first step for writing any essay is preparation. Seeing Nanook is the most obvious preparation, but seeing it more than once is also important. On first viewing, we become immersed in the viewing experience. We may ask ourselves some questions about what we are seeing, but on a second viewing, this process of asking and thinking about what we see becomes more central. We might ask, for example, why Flaherty begins the way he does. What does this set up for the rest of the film? Why does he end as he does? How does this relate to the beginning? What kind of relationship is there among Flaherty, the camera, and Nanook? How are scenes edited? What scenes stood out, and why? How is one scene joined to another? What does the narrative structure of the film revolve around? How does Flaherty represent people from another culture? How does he characterize them or convey a sense of their individuality?"

A well-crafted review entails a comprehensive analysis of various facets, including the film's structure, narrative arc, pacing, editing, cinematography, sound design, and use of archival material. Reviewers must also assess the effectiveness of interviews and on-location footage in conveying the film's message and engaging the audience emotionally.

KEY QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER BEFORE WRITING A DOCUMENTARY FILM REVIEW

Before writing a documentary film review, a reviewer should seek answer to several key questions for delivering a comprehensive and insightful analysis. These questions address various aspects of the documentary and help the reviewer approach the review with a well-rounded perspective. some essential questions for the reviewer to deliberate upon are:

- What is the dominant theme or subject of the documentary?
- What is the filmmaker's main purpose of making this documentary?
- How does the documentary approach its subject matter - is it investigative, observational, participatory, or poetic in style?
- What are the main storytelling techniques and narrative structure employed in the documentary?
- In what way does the documentary employ visuals, interviews, sound effects, archival footage and editing to convey its message?
- Is the documentary objective in its approach or does it have a subjective standpoint?
- What is the socio-cultural context of the documentary?
- what methods does the documentary engage to evoke emotional responses in the audience?
- Is the information provided in the documentary factual and well-researched?
- What is the documentary's storytelling methods and how effectively it has been executed?
- How does the documentary contribute to the understanding of the social issue it investigates?
- Are there any ethical considerations to be taken into account when reviewing the documentary?

By answering these questions, the reviewer can provide a nuanced analysis to readers and potential viewers.

THE SPECIFICS OF WRITING A DOCUMENTARY FILM REVIEW

Writing a documentary film review requires a thoughtful and systematic approach to effectively convey the film's merits, impact, and significance to the audience. Villarejo (2007) states that "Film is structured like a language. Or is it? Composed of fundamental units, called shots, films rely upon edits to join shots together into larger strings called sequences (a series of shots united in time and space), just as words become sentences. Many films depend for their intelligibility upon rules or cinematic conventions, a form of film grammar that has evolved over time." A well-crafted review should provide a comprehensive analysis of the documentary's storytelling, technical aspects, and thematic content, while also offering critical insights and evaluations. Corrigan (2015) recommends that "When viewing experimental or documentary cinema, begin with some basic questions: If the film does not seem organized as a story, what seems to be the model for its organization: A dream? An argument? A news report? Or some other form? How does that model suggest a way to understand the film? What are the formal features or organizations that stand out? A series of contrasts? Repetitions? Disconnected fragments? Or some other pattern? Why is that pattern important to the meaning of the film?"

The essentials of writing a documentary film review are:

Introduction:

- Start the review with a short and engaging introduction that provides essential information about the documentary, such as the title, director, release date, and subject matter.
- Set the tone and context for the review by providing a brief overview of the documentary's central theme and purpose.
- Include any relevant background information about the filmmaker or socio-cultural context of the subject matter.

Summary of the Documentary:

- Provide a succinct but informative summary of the documentary's storyline or central narrative arc. Avoid spoilers that might ruin the viewing experience for potential audiences.
- Highlight pivotal moments that shape the documentary's message or impact.

Evaluation of the Storytelling:

- Analyse the documentary's storytelling techniques, such as the use of raw footage, interviews, voiceovers, and archival footage.
- Evaluate the effectiveness of the narrative structure, including the pace, transitions, and coherence of the storytelling.
- Comment on how the documentary engages the audience emotionally and intellectually, and whether it effectively conveys its intended message.

Technical Aspects:

- Assess the technical elements of the documentary, including cinematography, editing, sound design, and music.
- Discuss how these technical aspects contribute to the documentary's overall impact and effectiveness in conveying the story.
- Pay attention to any innovative or unique techniques used by the filmmaker.

Thematic Content and Social Impact:

- Dive into the thematic content of the documentary and the issues it addresses. Consider the documentary's stance on the subject matter and its implications.
- Assess the documentary's ability to provoke thought, challenge preconceptions, and inspire action or change.
- Discuss the relevance of the documentary's themes in the context of contemporary societal issues.

Comparison and Context:

- Compare the documentary to other works within the same genre or on similar subjects. Highlight what sets it apart and makes it stand out.
- Provide context by discussing how the documentary fits into the broader landscape of documentary filmmaking or the filmmaker's body of work.

Ethical Considerations:

- Acknowledge any ethical concerns that arise from the documentary's content, especially when dealing with real-life subjects or sensitive issues.
- Comment on how the filmmaker navigates these ethical challenges and whether they succeed in maintaining integrity and respect for the subjects portrayed.

Personal Reflection and Subjectivity:

- While maintaining a balanced perspective, include personal reflections and emotional responses to the documentary.
- Be aware of biases and how they may influence the review.

Conclusion:

- Summarize the key points of the review, reiterating the documentary's strengths and weaknesses.
- Offer a final assessment of the documentary's overall impact and significance.
- Conclude with a recommendation for the target audience and the final thoughts on the film.

SENTENCE STRUCTURE

Writing a documentary film review requires solid sentence structures that effectively convey your analysis and evaluation of the film. Incorporating a variety of sentence types make the writing engaging for the reader. The sentence structures that can be used with great effect in writing documentary film reviews are:

Simple Sentences:

- These sentences consist of one independent clause and are straightforward in their presentation.
- Example: "The documentary explores the challenges faced by the endangered species in their natural habitat."

Compound Sentences:

- Compound sentences combine two independent clauses with a coordinating conjunction (e.g., and, but,).
- Example: "The filmmaker presents an intimate portrait of the protagonist's life, and the documentary highlights the complexities of her struggle."

Complex Sentences:

- Complex sentences contain one independent clause and at least one dependent clause.
- Example: "By juxtaposing historical footage with modern-day interviews, the documentary demonstrates the enduring impact of the civil rights movement."

Compound-Complex Sentences:

- These sentences include at least two independent clauses and one or more dependent clauses.
- Example: "While the documentary sheds light on pressing environmental issues, it also raises questions about humanity's responsibility in preserving the planet."

Parallel Structure:

- -Use parallel structure to create balance and rhythm in your writing.

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- Example: "The documentary not only informs but also challenges viewers to reconsider their preconceptions."

Rhetorical Questions:

- Pose rhetorical questions to engage readers and encourage them to contemplate the film's themes.
- Example: "Can one documentary truly encapsulate the complexities of a global humanitarian crisis?"

Emphatic Sentences:

- Use emphasis through word placement or repetition to highlight key points.
- Example: "Remarkable cinematography captures the raw beauty of nature, making this documentary visually stunning."

Appositive Phrases:

- Add descriptive information through appositive phrases, which provide extra details about a subject.
- Example: "The protagonist, an intrepid journalist, embarks on a daring investigation into the corrupt political system."

Participial Phrases:

- Introduce additional information through participial phrases that describe actions or characteristics.
- Example: "Presented with heart wrenching testimonials, viewers are compelled to reflect on the documentary's powerful message."

Quotations and Dialogue:

- Incorporate direct quotations and dialogue from the documentary to reinforce the points.
- Example: "As the interviewee passionately states, 'We must unite to protect our planet for future generations.'"

Maintaining clarity, coherence, and conciseness in sentence structures ensure that review is easy to read and understand. Varying sentence types and employing appropriate rhetorical devices can enhance the flow and impact of the documentary film review.

RHETORICAL APPEALS

In writing a documentary film review, the use of rhetorical appeals, also known as persuasive appeals, can enhance the effectiveness of the critique and engage the reader on an emotional and intellectual level. Corrigan (2015) remarks "Perhaps more than most other arts and entertainments, the movies frequently elicit a strong emotional or intellectual reaction. Often, however, the reason for our particular reaction to a movie remains unclear until we have had the opportunity to think carefully about and articulate what stimulated it." Rhetorical appeals aim to persuade the audience by appealing to their emotions, logic, or ethics. The three primary rhetorical appeals and how they can be utilised in a documentary film review are:

Ethos (Ethical Appeal):

- Ethos seeks to establish the credibility and authority of the reviewer.
- Ethos is used to demonstrate expertise or knowledge in documentary filmmaking, the subject matter, or film criticism in general. This helps establish the credibility of the reviewer.
- Mention the filmmaker's background, awards, or previous successful works to showcase their credibility and expertise in creating compelling documentaries.
- For example, "As a seasoned documentary filmmaker with a background in environmental studies, the director's commitment to authenticity and accuracy is evident throughout the film."

Pathos (Emotional Appeal):

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- Pathos aims to evoke emotions in the audience to create a personal connection with the subject matter and the film.
 - Descriptive language and vivid imagery is used to evoke emotions and convey the emotional impact of the documentary.
 - Share personal emotional responses to the film, highlighting moments that elicited strong feelings.
 - For example, "The heartrending testimonials of the survivors left a lasting impact, as they bore witness to the indomitable human spirit in the face of tragedy."

Logos (Logical Appeal):

- Logos appeals to reason and logic, using evidence and logical arguments to support the evaluation of the documentary.
- Present a well-structured and organized review, providing specific examples and evidence from the film.
- Analyse the documentary's factual accuracy, the strength of its arguments, and the effectiveness of its storytelling techniques.
- For example, "The use of statistical data and expert interviews bolstered the documentary's arguments, effectively presenting a comprehensive and well-reasoned examination of the topic."

By incorporating these rhetorical appeals in the documentary film review, compelling and persuasive critique can be created that engages readers on multiple levels. A balance has to be maintained between these appeals, as an excessive use of one appeal may overpower the others and compromise the overall impact of the review. A thoughtful combination of ethos, pathos, and logos will contribute to a convincing analysis of the documentary's merits and impact.

CONCLUSION

Writing a documentary film review is an engaging and stimulating process that allows you to share your understandings and opinions about a particular documentary. It is a style that amalgamates critical examination, insightful observations, and an exploration of the art of filmmaking. By incorporating a mix of analysis, critique, and thoughtful reflection, a review not only captures the documentary's essence but also encourages the readers to experience the film for themselves. Through a systematic approach, from providing a concise introduction to the documentary and summarizing its content to delving into the filmmaker's style and evaluating the technical aspects, the review can offer readers an informative perspective. By adhering to objectivity, providing evidence to support claims and maintaining a polished writing style, reviewers can effectively convey the emotional impact and societal significance of the documentary, leaving their audience with a comprehensive understanding and a compelling reason to engage with the film.

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