

Believe it – documentaries are in fashion

Despite the title of this piece, documentaries have not just come back into fashion, as they have been thriving on television for years. However, documentaries made for cinema release (which is where the form started – see pages 148–51) have recently made an impact at the box office. I am not sure whether it was the US\$20 million-plus that *Bowling for Columbine* garnered in North America in 2002, winning the Best Documentary Oscar for that year, that kick-started the current cycle, but this decade has seen a relatively large number of high-profile documentaries being produced.

Michael Moore's film on the Columbine massacre took a massive amount at the box office compared with most documentaries, and his follow-up, *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004) is the most financially successful documentary ever produced, breaking US\$200 million worldwide. *9/11* was unique in terms of its political purpose – unseating President Bush – and thrived partly because of the politically unstable times in which it appeared. Most documentaries are deemed a box office success if they reach a few million dollars in revenue.

It is the intention here not to focus on the business of documentaries, but to consider the aesthetics of some of the current crop. One thing that unites films of the genre is the rhetorical position they adopt – that they are representing the truth. Of all film genres, documentary is the one with claims to be closest in its representation of reality. However documentaries must use codes and conventions, what Bill Nichols (1991) called modes, to do this: the expository, interactive, observational and self-reflexive.

Touching the Void (UK, 2003), a recreation of a climber's 'miraculous' escape after being severely injured in the Andes, mixes the 'talking head' interview with the conventions of action cinema. For example, the music alerts us to coming drama (bad weather) and the camera captures the spectacle of the mountain range. Narrative tension is induced by the voice-over: for example one of the climbers states they 'should've brewed up more' tea, suggesting the problems that will arise later. The film also uses actors to reconstruct events, and so falls in part into the 'dramadoc' category. The film's clear preferred meaning, that these guys were heroes (and not stupid idiots for attempting the climb in the first place) has an expository quality.

Capturing the Friedmans (USA, 2003), dealing with a family torn apart by accusations of, and the conviction of the father and a son for, child abuse, uses very different techniques. Its use of numerous 'talking heads' is in contrast to the device in *Touching*, because what the 'characters' say often contradicts other voices. This 'interactive' technique is designed to leave the viewer with the final 'say' on what happened. It is difficult to be sure what actually occurred. It is suggested that the father may have confessed to the abuse, and later committed suicide, only in order to protect his family and provide an insurance payout. The interactive mode is ideal, as any certainty expressed by an expository mode would be spurious. I felt that the film compromised its objectivity by revealing that the father's brother was gay only at the end; while his sexuality is irrelevant I could see no reason for holding this information back as if it were an important revelation. This artifice, for me,

compromised the carefully constructed mosaic of voices that had been heard throughout the film.

The 'observational' mode was recently seen in *Etre et avoir* (France, 2002), with its 'fly on the wall' capturing of life in a rural French school. However, the shot length was rather shorter than 'classic' films of this mode – such as those by Frederick Wiseman – and the characters appeared more aware of the camera than is usual in this form. This punctured somewhat the 'window on the world' rhetoric of the mode.

One of the most controversial of recent documentaries was *The Fog of War: Eleven Lessons from the Life of Robert S. McNamara* (2003), another Oscar winner, directed by Errol Morris. It is structured as a talking-head monologue by the Secretary of State for Defence during the Vietnam War, with occasional questions (presumably asked by Morris). It is an absolutely fascinating retrospective account of McNamara's life, encompassing the fire-bombing of Japan, the blockade of Cuba (when a nuclear war almost happened), the assassination of JFK and the inhumane 'rolling thunder' bombing campaign in Vietnam. The controversy has arisen because McNamara comes across as a sympathetic character, and arguably dissembles about his role in Vietnam. However, while the old man's charisma is undoubtedly seductive, and he refuses to talk about some things, his point that he is judging himself retrospectively suggests that he doesn't necessarily feel he always did the right thing. Don't necessarily believe everything he says, but as an insight into the mind of someone who was one of the most powerful people in the world the film is unmissable.

While documentaries are inevitably realist, the *mise en scène* can be otherwise. *Death in Wisconsin* (UK, 1999) narrates some bizarre events in the state at the end of the nineteenth century. The peculiarity of that world, and its distance from today, is conveyed in part via an expressionist *mise en scène* which emphasises the distorted states of mind of the characters.

Documentaries will continue to thrive in the cinema as long as producers, and distributors, feel they are a worthwhile investment. As a form they are often avoided, because most people use film for entertainment, and documentaries are meant primarily to produce information. However, the commercial prerogative means that this information is often wrapped up in an entertaining way, and so, as in mass circulation newspapers, truth is not necessarily allowed to get in the way of a good story.

Reference

Nichols, Bill (1991) *Representing Reality*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: University of Indiana Press.