

https://dspace.org/

# Truth, lies and fiction: exploring the boundaries of documentary

**Koba, Siyabonga**

**2011-09-23**
http://hdl.handle.net/10539/10447

Downloaded from a DSpace repository. https://dspace.org/

# TRUTH, LIES AND FICTION: EXPLORING THE BOUNDARIES OF DOCUMENTARY

Siyabonga Koba

0408011A

A thesis submitted to The Faculty of Arts, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, in fulfilment for the degree of Masters of Arts in Film and Television.

Johannesburg 2010

## Abstract

Like all filmic modes documentaries are ideological artistic constructions and according to Bill Nichols (2001: 38) they carry more influence than fiction because we assume that documentary sounds and images are authentic. According to John Ellis (2005: 1) documentaries work because they generate in us a belief of truth that what we see on the screen can be trusted. Through its ability to elicit trust from its audiences, the documentary has set itself apart from the fiction which has also been termed "fabrication" (Renov, 1993: 7). Unlike fiction, the documentary does not stage, fabricate or create life but simply represents it (Nichols, 2001: 20). Fiction therefore becomes the antithesis of documentary and documentary becomes the antithesis of the fiction and all that it is known for: fabrication and falsification. Carroll Noel agrees that (1996: 255) the fiction/nonfiction dichotomy is used to "commend or disparage items as true or false." Drawing from the complimentary film component as a case study and a framework of theoretical ideas, this paper suggests that without such perceived conditions of difference and associations of truth the documentary film by itself might be no more truthful than fiction. What separates these two forms is the way we look at them.

**Declaration**

I declare that this thesis is my own unaided work. It is submitted for the degree of Master of Arts to the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted before for any other degree or examination to any other university.

_____

_____day of _____2010

DEDICATION

To the great woman whose sweat and sleepless nights have brought me to where I am. Words will never be enough. Ndiyakuthanda mama wam. I would also like to thank my supervisor Mncedisi Mashigoane for his commitment to helping me in this research. Thank you for your time, patience and for the trust you showed by lending me your own personal books when our library was not enough.

# PREFACE

Derek Paget (in Rosenthal and Corner, 2005: 435) points out that documentary production has become a dangerous task not just because it raises a number of ethical, aesthetic, representational, anthropological and scholarly questions but also legal ones. Paget explains legaling as "the term that has come to designate the process of legal checking of programmes before and during their making." Participants can and have been known to sometimes sue the people who shoot them if they feel their rights have been violated. Broadcasting commissions have been known to charge exorbitant amounts of money to television stations that make and broadcast documentaries that seem to 'deceive' viewers. Brian Winston's book titled *Lies, Dammend Lies and Documentary* (2000) is about one of such cases that took place in Britain in the year 1997.

According to Ellis and McLane (2005: 326) more documentaries today are being produced than at any other point in our history. With the rapid level of knowledge production and existential inquiry that seem to typify the twenty-first century, the documentary has become a very relevant tool of exploring ourselves and the world around us. There is therefore no better time in our history to be asking ourselves about the documentary project than at the present.

**TABLE OF CONTENTS**


1. Introduction Pages 7-10
2. What is documentary Pages 11-18
3. Documentary and Fiction Pages 19-30
4. Film findings and conclusions Pages 31-36
5. References Pages 37-38
6. Filmography Page 39
7. Appendix- Treatment Page 40-43

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Much has already been written about the malleable, flexible nature documentary. This paper is not about the reflexivity of documentary. It is also not about the subjectivity of documentary nor is it about its tendency and ability to blur boundaries with fiction. This paper is not about modal contamination or bias or the ideology of the documentary film makers, although all these aspects will be incorporated. This paper is about two things. Firstly it is about the deeply rooted perceptions and assumptions of viewers which lend power and status to the documentary mode and which also keep it thriving. Secondly, this paper is about my own personal feelings and opinions about the documentary.

There seems to be, in this representational system called documentary, an evident, inescapable paradox at play. For though much recent writings have revealed and exposed the dimensions of bias, reflexivity, fluidity, ideology, subjectivity and contamination that form part of documentary, evidence all around us shows that documentary production around the world continues to proliferate and prosper and although most viewers might admit without hesitation that documentary is a construction made by people with their own agenda, they will at the same time attest it is a better vehicle for expressing truthful ideas and information than fiction. This is the lore, these are the widely accepted beliefs this paper aims to probe and examine in detail.

I have always been fascinated by an artistic medium that had the ability to shape people's minds, opinions and behaviours about important life issues; a medium that called people's minds, attention and sometimes their hearts to listen voice with the command of urgent intelligent suasion; a medium crowned with the emblem of knowledge and truth. Documentary to me was this medium. So potent like Erril Morris's *Thin Blue Line* that it could help set free prisoners wrongly accused and so compelling like John Pilger's *Year Zero: The Silent Death of Cambodia* that it could help save a nation. Even more fascinating was the fact that the usage and application of documentary's potent force was not so unreachable but lay at the hands of artists, creatives and ordinary people, not scientist or academics.

In this paper, I do not use the phrase "power of documentary" carelessly or naively. In the year 2007 I personally saw the power of documentary when a Christian friend of mine developed a faith crisis after watching the documentary *The Fifth Estate: Benny Hinn* (2006), a film which casts doubt on the miracles performed by renowned Christian healer Benny Hinn. It was only after I sat down with him as a film scholar and told him about questionable shots and discrepancies of the film that he began to feel better. I realised that day that there *is* indeed a belief in many people in society that documentary is truth. This belief is the power of documentary not afforded by fiction.

Leslie Woodhead (in Rosenthal and Corner, 2005: 480) affirms that documentary has the power to change societies. Being oftentimes the only filmic mode brought into classrooms to educate, documentaries are also known to stand alongside teachers. Predicated around the factual event, the documentary is often accompanied by notions of truth and credibility which elevate its status above the fiction film and other filmic modalities. In this paper I point out that facts and truth do not speak but the people who purport to represent them do. Trinh T. Minh-ha (1990: 76) contends that truth "is produced, induced and extended according to the regime in power." While also introducing the practical component of my research *Pieces of My Country* (2009) this chapter also lays down the foundation for my proceeding discoveries and arguments.

According to Michael Renov (1993: 6) the documentary form has availed itself to every narrative device known to fiction while the reverse is equally true of fiction. Carl Plantinga (1997: 16) also points out that "we may find nothing intrinsic in a film or a book that marks it as fiction or non-fiction." When watching the film *The War Game* (1965) for example one could very easily mistake the film for a fiction film until one finds out that it is actually a documentary film. This not only exposes documentary conventions, (commonly seen as distinct and unique) as widespread and common but also as Renov (1993: 2) points out, that documentary is no less a construction than fiction. It also affirms that the line between filmic modes is a very thin one and that most times that line exists in our minds (when we find out more information about the film) and not on the actual film texts themselves.

However, as much as documentary theorists and film scholars agree that documentary resembles fiction in many ways (performance, narrative construction, narration, ideology, diegetic/extra-diegetic sounds, sound effects, structure), many also agree that documentary is not fiction. Bill Nichols (2001: 198) for example calls it "a fiction unlike any other." Carroll

Noel (1996: 237) says declaring all films fiction is to say that the category of fiction is useless. Stella Bruzzi (2000: 4) asserts that even viewers know how to distinguish a documentary film from fiction. According to Bruzzi (2000: 4) viewers do not need signposts to indicate that what they are watching is a "negotiation between reality and representation." In this regard, I do not fully agree with Bruzzi. Rather, I argue, viewers associate the documentary with a set of visual codes and use such codes to identify or suppose a documentary film even though the same codes can also be used by fiction. Linda Williams (in Rosenthal and Corner, 2005: 61) says that documentary and fiction constantly borrow from each other such that no constructive device can be said to belong exclusively to either fiction or documentary. Attempts to identify the documentary by any set of visual codes may therefore not be helpful.

Documentary may not be fiction but with the kind of representational controversies and hybrid transfusions it makes, "signposts" might be exactly what are needed to make this fact clear. The relationship between reality, representation and the viewing experience in documentary is therefore not always as simple or straightforward as Bruzzi claims. It is no wonder then that documentarist Leslie Woodhead says it has become very important to him to constantly guide the audience through signposts so they may not confuse the film for what it is not (Woodhead as cited in Rosenthal and Corner, 2005: 482). It is highly possible therefore for a fiction film to be easily mistaken for a documentary film and for a documentary film to be viewed and perceived as something else.

This reality, I believe, is something that tends to elude our attention because we take it for granted that we know what a documentary looks like or should look like. As stated by Nichols (1991: x) the faith of viewers on documentary is exemplified in the fact that viewers, after having watched an interesting documentary, only talk about the subject matter and not about the actual documentary presentation, a sign that they believe in the legitimacy of the images. This affirms what I had earlier said that viewers readily make assumptions about the truthfulness of documentary images.

Using my own film *Pieces of My Country* as a case study, this paper seeks to test and explore the breaking point of documentary's believability during the deliberate integration and interplay of documentary principles with fictional visual conventions. The next chapter "What is Documentary?" simply underlines the theoretical bases by addressing the basic question of definition and meaning of documentary. This chapter is pivotal to this research as

it demonstrates the lack of a consensus to an encompassing documentary definition that reflects acceptable universal industry practice.

The third chapter “Documentary and Fiction” elaborates more on the production processes of the film while it points out in detail the widely accepted assumptions under which the form of documentary receives better acclaim than the fiction. I am also aware that *Pieces of My Country* might be viewed by some as a mockumentary and that is why this chapter explains why the film passes well as a documentary and not as a mockumentary.

The fourth and final chapter “Film Findings and Conclusion” is both the concluding chapter and a presentation on how the film as an experiment helped shed some light on key questions raised during the course of this research.

*Pieces of My Country* is an eighteen minute film that juxtaposes the good realities of South Africa next to the ugly ones in order to offer a strong social critique through irony and humour. The film adopts fairy-tale and fictional conventions such as cartoon images, children’s music, child narration, extra-diegetic sounds, staged, scripted and improvised interviews. Unexpected, playful narrative twists have a comic effect yet serve to bring attention to the film’s construction.

All these stylistic choices and narrative techniques of the film are nonetheless anchored in the immediate realities and issues of South Africa. The light-hearted style of the film acts as a vehicle to carry opinions and facts that are not so fictional or light-hearted. Though the film is about South Africa, its production is informed by a framework of theoretical ideas, questions, and propositions around the nature of the documentary form. This paper therefore alternates between the body of such ideas and theories and the ways in which the film *Pieces of My Country* explores and interrogates such theories at an empirical level.

## 2. WHAT IS DOCUMENTARY

"Categories are fundamental to thought, perception, action and speech [...] With an unclear understanding of the categories we use, we risk confusion of thought and talking at cross-purposes. To reject categorization is to reject communication, understanding, and meaningful experience" (Plantinga, 1997: 5).

Since all arguments in this paper centre around the basic nature of the documentary form, it is important to review the relevant scholarly definitions and industry ideas around its true meaning. Jill Godmilow says "everybody thinks they know what the term documentary means, because everybody has seen some television programs labelled documentary either televisual "white papers," that is, so called objective journalistic presentations of social problems, or history programs that chronicle certain social movements, or portraits of famous artists or historical figures and the like. Unconsciously embedded in these forms called documentary is the conceit of the 'real'" (Godmilow and Shapiro, 2008: 80).

"Conceit" is a pertinent word to describe the imagined yet rife presumptions that bolster the documentary's image over the fiction's. A comment that was made by one of the examiners of this paper pertaining *Pieces of My Country* was that the film did not explore enough documentary techniques to qualify being named a documentary. This statement presupposes that documentary has a claim to unique film techniques which help define or distinguish it from other modes and that a film must look and sound a particular way before qualifying for the documentary title. This whole research is dedicated to unmasking and challenging such kinds of "conceit." To successfully debunk all these superstitions and conjectures I believe reliance must be to a careful, empirical examination and analysis of the canon of writings that outline the documentary rather than to sheer tradition. Once we establish the true definition of the documentary form, we will be able to understand the acceptable perimeters (if any exist) within which all technical experimentation should take place.

So what is documentary? Philip Rosen (in Renov 1993: 65) agrees that "notions of document and documentary have a genealogy that could be sketched with reference to the concept of historicity." According to Rosen the noun 'document' did not enter the English language until about 1450 AD. This makes it approximately five hundred and sixty years old now. However, the word 'documentary' first appeared in the nineteenth century and was primarily used as an adjective instead of a noun. At this time in history, the word was used to refer to

documentation and evidence (in Renov, 1993: 66). Ellis and McLane (2005:3) add that the word was also used to mean "a lesson; admonition, a warning."

It is only in the late twentieth century edition of the Oxford English Dictionary that the word 'documentary' makes its first appearance as a noun denoting film usage: "Factual, realistic, applied esp. to a film or literary work. Based on real events or circumstances, and intended primarily for instruction or record purposes" (Rosen as cited in Renov, 1993: 66). According to Ellis and McLane (2005: 3), the term document comes from the Latin root *docere* meaning to teach. Rosen traces the term to its Latin and Old French roots which are now obsolete. According to Rosen one of these root terms "has to do with teaching and/or warning, and the other with evidence or proof" (Rosen as cited in Renov 1993: 65). The documentary film is therefore by definition caught within the rhetoric of objectivity and truth. "For scholars, documents are "primary sources" of information; for lawyers "documentary evidence" is opposed to hearsay or opinion" (Ellis and McLane, 2005: 3).

According to Ellis and McLane (2005: 1) the documentary can be distinguished from fiction by five distinct characteristics. These are (1) subjects (2) purposes, viewpoints or approaches (3) forms (4) production methods and techniques and (5) experience offered to viewers.

(1) **Subjects**: Ellis and McLane (2005: 2) explain that documentaries are primarily about topics broader than individual concerns, feelings, relationships and actions. They normally involve "public matters rather than private ones. People and places in them are actual and usually contemporary."

(2) **Purposes**: Documentaries are not made with the intention to entertain or to make audiences feel good. Their goal is to inform by passing on information with the hope that viewers will make better life choices (Ellis and McLane, 2005: 2).

(3) **Forms:** Rather than "creating content" documentaries extract and arrange its material from existing life experiences. Though any film will have a structure, documentaries "do not employ plot or character development as means of organization as do fiction film makers" (Ellis and McLane, 2005: 2).

(4) **Production method and technique**: It is not just a matter of "what" is used in documentary that matters but also the modus operandi or the "how" of capturing the footage that is also taken into account. Basic realistic elements such as shooting on locating instead of shooting in studio, using natural lighting instead of artificial light and using non-actors rather

than professional ones are all examples of documentary's production methods (Ellis and McLane, 2005: 2).

(5) **Audience response:** Ellis and McLane (2005: 3) emphasize that documentaries offer audiences more than just an "aesthetic experience" but also "an effect on attitudes, possibly leading to action." Audiences of documentary do not respond so much to the artist or the maker of the film as they do to its subject matter (Ellis and McLane, 2005: 3).

These characteristics are all in agreement with those values first championed by John Grierson who is also known as the father of the documentary mode as he was the first to theorise and give life to the documentary form (Ellis and McLane, 2005: 353). According to Grierson's manifesto, the documentary would act as a tool of exposing and critiquing social problems and injustices while propagating awareness and social change (Grierson, 1966: 82). He believed that "The sense of social responsibility makes our realist documentary a troubled art" (Grierson, 1966: 84). This is what Ellis and McLane (2005: 71) call social engineering and is embodied in their second documentary characteristic mentioned above.

Grierson (1966: 84) equated the phrase "art for art sake" to "aesthetic decadence." For him the documentary would be an art but one which, first and foremost, would have a social obligation and could therefore not afford the pursuit of sheer entertainment. Grierson (1966: 84) asserted that "the realist documentary, with its streets and cities and slums and markets and exchanges and factories has given itself the job of making poetry where no poet has gone before it, and where no ends, sufficient for the purposes of art, are easily observed." Ellis and McLane (2005: 3) in their fifth characteristic add that documentary offers "professional skill than personal style; communication rather than expression."

Grierson (1966: 80) denounced the use of professional actors and the use of the studio in favour of the non-actor and the real location. "We believe that the original (or native) scene and the original (or native) actor are better guides to a screen interpretation of the modern world. In their fourth characteristic, 'production method and technique' Ellis and McLane (2005: 3) state: "One basic requirement of documentary is the use on non-actors. The other basic requirement is shooting on location."

The Griersonian documentary would be to the service of the community and the whole of society not for any single individual "individualism is a yahoo tradition largely responsible for our present anarchy" (Grierson, 1966: 82). Documentary therefore became a "cross

section of reality which would reveal the essentially co-operative or mass nature of society" (Grierson, 1966: 82). Ellis and McLane (2005: 2) express the same sentiment in their first characteristic 'Subjects' in which 'public matters' become the central focus of representation as opposed to private, personal ones.

Grierson (1966: 84) believed that the camera could capture actuality ("the living scene") creatively yet objectively. Even though "creativity" implies a personal tempering or special re-arrangement of material, for Grierson, it would simply ensure the innovative presentation of carefully selected "slices of life." He therefore defined documentary as "the creative treatment of actuality" (Grierson, 1966: 13). Brian Winston (in Bruzzi, 2000: 5) however, contends that "the supposition that any "actuality" is left after "creative treatment" can now be seen as being at best naïve and at worst a mark of duplicity."

Other definitions which re-iterate the Griersonian outlook of documentary's creative yet objective actuality include Angus Spottiswoode's definition (in Plantinga 1997: 13) who says documentary is "in subject and approach a dramatised (creative) presentation of man's relation to his institutional life, whether industrial, social or political; and in technique, a subordination of form to content." Douglas Gomery and Robert C. Allan (in Dirk Eitzen, 1995: 81) call it "the communication, not of imagined things, but of real things only." Michael Rabiger (2004: 3) calls it "that rare medium in which the common person takes on large, important issues and shakes up society." Richard Meran Barsam (in Dirk Eitzen, 1995: 81) points to the documentary as "a film with a message" while Michael Renov (1993: 13) simply calls it a "film of fact."

Brian Winston (in Renov, 1993: 37) asserts that the camera has the status of a scientific instrument alongside the thermometer, telescope, barometer and hygrometer. Winston gives two main reasons for this. The first one is "the long history of pictorial representation as mode of scientific evidence" and the second reason is the "tendency of modern science to produce data via instruments of inscription whose operation are analogous to the camera" (Winston as cited in Renov, 1993: 37).

Winston refers us to the sociologist Bruno Latour who equates inscription devices to scientific instruments: "For Latour, the work of science is to create setups, arrays which produce inscriptions which can be used in texts and scientific papers" (Winston as cited in Renov, 1993: 37). Winston explains that the texts re-produced by the scientific instrument are the visible inscriptions which accompany the instrument (in Renov 1993: 41). Because

the scientific instrument, by itself, cannot interpret the visual data it produces, it has to be accompanied by the scientist who offers verbal commentary. So therefore, Winston explains, when we are confronted with a scientific instrument, we are attending an "audiovisual spectacle" (Winston as cited in Renov, 1993: 41). Using this analogy, Winston (in Renov, 1993: 42) arrives at the conclusion that the documentary is also this kind of audiovisual scientific spectacle, making use of the (visual) text re-producing scientific (camera) instrument and accompanied by the (audio) filmmaker interpreter who makes commentary.

This view of documentary as a science also seems to be supported by Nichols (2001: 39) who explains documentary as "a discourse of sobriety in our society" offering "ways of speaking directly about social and historical reality such as science, economics, medicine, military strategy, foreign policy and educational policy."

However, in drawing a distinction between fiction and documentary films, Nichols (2001: 1) calls fiction "stories of wish-fulfilment" and documentary "stories of social representation." Here the line between re-presentation and re-production indicates a break and change from the science position. As Nichols (2001: 20) himself points out, to re-present reality is not the same as to re-produce it "documentary is not a re-production of reality but a re-presentation of it. It stands for a particular view of the world." Using lawyers as an example, (Nichols, 2001: 4) adds that to represent is to make a persuasive case or argument on behalf of someone else. This realisation that documentaries make personal arguments through human voices and opinions completely deviates from the initial Griersonian view of documentary as pieces of actuality and reveals them as personal subjective ideological constructions.

Renov (1993: 22) says that one of the distinctive features of this mode is that the sign (speaking in terms of semiotics) is similar to the referent and is an indexical one, pointing to real people and events instead of imagined ones. Renov (1993: 8) shows that reality as the signified is the ultimate goal and reach of the documentary project. The problem with attempting to capture reality though, says Renov (1993: 8), is that reality cannot speak for itself. The documentary must therefore make use of a "speaking subject" in order to represent what cannot speak for itself. Any voice, however, immediately implies subjectivity, bias and an ideology.

Documentaries that do not have commentary, however, or even interviews beg the question of a "speaking voice." How do these speak to us? Can we really say that they harbour specific subjectivities and personal views of their makers? According to Nichols (2001: 43) the

"documentary voice" does not necessarily refer to commentary or interviews but "the means by which the documentary's particular perspective becomes known to us." The point here is that any documentary, through its specific selection and organisation of its material, presents a particular worldview. "The logic organizing a documentary film supports an underlying argument, assertion or claim about the historical world" (Nichols, 2001: 43).

Trinh T. Minh-Ha (1990: 88) also says that "a documentary film is shot with three cameras: 1) The camera in the technical sense; 2) the film maker's mind; and 3) the generic patterns of the documentary film." This deduction suggests that vectors of selectivity, subjectivity and common procedures come together to produce a documentary, not necessarily reality or what is often termed as 'the truth.'

It therefore becomes apparent that documentaries do not reproduce the historical world but rather people's claims, arguments and assertions about it. Nichols (2001: 39) asks "If we cannot take its images (documentary) as visible evidence of the nature of a particular part of the historical world, of what can we take them?"

Bruzzi (2000: 4) calls documentaries "performative acts predicated upon dialectical relationship between aspiration and potential tension." She identifies three levels at which documentaries are performative. The first level is one where subjects in front of the camera, being cognisant of being filmed, perform for the camera. The second level is one where the film maker himself stands in front of the camera to address it. This is typical of documentary auteur film makers such as Nick Broomfield and Michael Moore to whom Bruzzi refers. The final level of performativity is at the editing stage where shots and music are carefully selected to offer a specific intentional reading. Bruzzi's therefore negates Ellis and McLane's assertion that documentary does not offer "personal style" more than it offers "professional skill." The case of auteur film makers such as Nick Broomfield and Michael Moore certainly demonstrates so.

Documentary film maker Jill Godmilow acknowledges that most documentaries are misleading in so much as they allege a privileged position of "truth-tellers" in order to win the trust of their viewers (Godmilow and Shapiro, 1997: 87). To Godmilow, the very term 'documentary' hides the deliberate mediation that constitutes every documentary film while masking the intentions of the artists (Godmilow and Shapiro, 1997: 83). Godmilow asserts that what nonfiction films have in common is not so much their ability to educate, but rather their ability to edify. She therefore uses the term "edifiers" or "films of edification" instead of

the term ‘documentary’ (Godmilow and Shapiro, 1997: 81). According to Godmilow, the importance of this mode lies at its ability to share ideas. She rejects all notions of the documentary as a noble truthful, objective representation. She expresses disproval at the “truth claims” made by documentaries and says that documentary film makers must “acknowledge their interpretative intentions” (Godmilow and Shapiro, 1997: 81).

Dirk Eitzen (1995: 86) however disagrees with Godmilow and says that truth claims are never encoded in the text of any documentary. Rather, he says, documentaries, because of a set of visual codes, are *perceived* to make truth claims. Using the film *No Lies* (1974) as example, Eitzen points to the fact that this film, which uses documentary techniques, is in fact fiction and yet was received by viewers as a documentary film and presumed true. Therefore, the main factor for Eitzen (1995: 88) is that documentary films are those films which are presumed true. From this, Eitzen (1995: 89) formulates a new definition of the documentary as “any film, video, or TV program that could, in principle, be perceived to lie.” According to Eitzen (1995: 98) this question of whether a film can lie or not only applies to documentary films and not to fiction because fiction is never assumed to be telling the truth in the first place.

Nichols (2001: 23) says that documentary cannot be defined from any single domain but from an inventory of its various institutions that make it possible for their production to occur. He therefore defines it as “what the organisations and institutions that produce them make.” By these organisations and institutions Nichols (2001: 23) lists the companies that commission them, the practitioners that produce them, the texts (discourse of conventions and expectations) and audiences that watch them.

Nichols’ statement highlights the documentary’s loose meaning and definition and seems to suggest that documentary means something different to different structures and people. John Ellis (2005: 1) says “Documentary is a slippery genre to define; classifications can be out of date before the printer’s ink has dried” while Jelle Mast (2009: 233) calls documentary “an open concept.” It seems that the sum of what we get from all these authors and practitioners is that there is no fully encompassing, objective definition of documentary. This realization opens up the door to a very wide range of very amorphous works that seem to resist the concept of documentary as fixed, stable category.

In many ways *Pieces of My Country* is one of such works. The film interweaves documentary practice and fictional conventions together. The film is made up of real interviews that are

placed alongside scripted, improvised and staged ones. Some of the scripted interviews are quite easy to detect but most are not such that it become impossible to know which characters in the film are real and which ones are not. *Pieces of My Country* surely does not fit neatly into the category of a conventional documentary but considering that this chapter has shown that documentary as a whole is a problematic and uneasy category, perhaps we should even really question the notion of a 'conventional' documentary. After all, even the earliest documentary *Nanook of the North* (1922) made extensive use of artifice such as re-enactments and reconstructed performance (Ellis and McLane, 2005: 30).

The impossibility of a documentary tradition making use of a designated set of techniques is expressed by Nichols' stratification of documentary into six modes. Nichols' (2001) modes (expository, poetic, reflexive, observatory, participatory and perfomative) all espouse a predominance of different strands of techniques and principles. Bruzzi (2000: 4) however contends that even Nichols' family tree cannot begin to do justice to the range of techniques displayed by the documentary. Nichols (2001: 15) therefore consents that documentary is a film form that "adopts no fixed inventory of techniques." The idea therefore of a documentary culture that houses a distinct set of categorical techniques is just one of the myths behind the documentary.

## 3. DOCUMENTARY AND FICTION

"Those things, those perceptions are real that guide our (re)actions" (Torben Grodal as cited in Jerslev, 2002: 83).

In film studies theory there are very clearly demarcated lines that differentiate between fiction film and the documentary mode. Jelle Mast (2009: 233) calls fiction and documentary "the most fundamental aesthetic dichotomy" in film and television. According to Nichols (1991: 112) "We enter a fictional world through the agency of narration, that process whereby a narrative unfolds in time, allowing us to construct the story it proposes. We enter the world in documentary through the agency of representation or exposition, that process whereby a documentary addresses some aspect of the world, allowing us to reconstruct the argument it proposes." Even though fiction and documentary are two distinct designations, Nichols (2008: 38) admits that the boundary that separates fiction and documentary is a 'fuzzy' and concedes that "Documentary and fiction, social actor and social other, knowledge and doubt, concept and experience share boundaries that inescapably blur" (Nichols, 1994: 1). Renov (1993: 3) points out that "documentary shares the status of all discursive forms with regard to its tropic or figurative character and employs many of the methods and devices of its fictional counterpart."

In the previous chapters I have simply indicated that viewers refer to specific visual codes as means of distinguishing fiction from documentary. This section identifies in detail the nature of such codes and the specific assumptions that seem to distinguish the documentary from the fiction, infusing it with the acclaim of truth. In this section, I show that such visual codes and assumptions are on their own not enough to separate documentary from fiction. Using *Pieces of My Country*, I demonstrate that documentary film functions in every way that the fiction does and that fiction not only appropriates documentary codes but can also perform the same function.

*Pieces of My Country* is a film I made with the desire to both test and challenge documentary perceptions of authenticity. I wanted to make a film that fulfilled the documentary ardour of informing yet one that worked through fictional techniques; a film functioning like a documentary yet appearing and sounding fictional. Part of achieving this meant making use of convincing acting, an appropriate (comical) script and (at one instance) costume design.

I wanted to shoot a film that depicted prevalent serious issues in a playful and fun manner. My aim was to infuse a kind of reflexivity and formal hybridisation that is not commonly associated with the documentary mode in order to collapse perceptions of credibility based on serious enquiry. Cartoons, performance, staging, irony and improvisation were some of the elements I deliberately employed in the making of the film. *Pieces of My Country* acts as the domain on which fiction and documentary intersect and is a demonstration of what the documentary project can do through fiction principles.

**Is It Real?**

Documentary's "intellectual right of way" (Renov, 1993: 1) and "moral superiority" (Nichols, 1991: 108) over the fiction film has mainly been due to its acclaimed disavowal and purported break from fiction conventions. Nichols (1991: 108) says "Documentary has set itself apart, historically, from the fiction film. Fiction was what deceived and distracted. Fiction ignored the world as it was in favour of fantasy and illusion."

Unlike fiction, the documentary form commands influence and belief by not associating itself with illusion but with reality. Renov (1993: 2) says that "every documentary claims for itself an anchorage in history; the referent of the nonfiction sign is meant to be a piece of the (real) world." Philip Rosen (in Renov, 1993: 235) refers to documentary as "an arena of meaning centering on the authority of the real." This last statement highlights the fact that authority and status in documentary is accrued by means of deploying the "real" image. Documentary therefore generates impressions of authenticity and believability through the iconography of the real.

While we may reject the concept of an objective reality knowable outside human experience, Bruzzi (2000: 3) asserts that "Sometimes it seems necessary to remind writers on documentary that reality does exist and it can be represented without such a representation either invalidating or having to be synonymous with the reality that preceded it."

*Pieces of My Country* experiments and toys with the concept of the real image. In order to function like a documentary *Pieces of My Country* engages with social issues such as poverty, crime, politics and xenophobia. The film therefore makes use of relevant gritty images that typify the documentary. I visited two poverty stricken places in the Eastern Cape. One place was in the city and the other in the rural areas. The situation and harsh condition of these places is definitely real as Bruzzi above points out that reality exists. This reality on the

other hand is deliberately mediated and creatively appropriated for the sake of the film. One interview is scripted and the other was an unexpected yet successful improvisation.




**3.1** An angry, vivacious rural mother perfomed by a seventeen year old high school girl brings a comical twist to the real situation faced by the people of this village.

The first interview was shot at my remote home rural area called Skhobeni in the small town of Idutywa. Here the villagers lived in mud-rondavels (traditional rural huts) that kept collapsing due to their weak structure. Although the people had been promised houses by their local municipality, years had gone by without that promised being fulfilled. Due to my intentions for the film, I knew that I had to be creative with how I shot and represented the situation. Using actual people was definitely out of the question. I asked my seventeen year old cousin to act as a mother and owner of one of the collapsed structures. I handed her the script and the suitable costume to help her appear as a forty year old rural woman. This way I would steer the film towards the kind of playfulness and performance I needed to challenge the notion of credibility and truth in documentary.

However, dramatisations, reconstructions and re-enactments pose no threat to the legitimacy and credibility of the documentary. In fact Grierson (1966: 76) argued that dramatisation was what made documentary a “higher category.” He called newsreels and lecture films “lower category” films because they lacked creativity by not dramatising. Philip Rosen says documentary is “a dramatisation of reality” (Rosen as cited in Renov, 1993: 76) and Spottiswoode (in Plantinga 1997: 13) refers to it as a dramatised presentation of man’s life. Acting or dramatisation is therefore an intrinsic part of the documentary mode, used to illustrate and demonstrate real issues.

In its creative, interactive alloy of different filmic techniques, *Pieces of My Country* nonetheless depicts current social realities of South Africa. It does not in any way concoct facts but rather playfully represents them through various (even made up) characters and other visual tools. This is the main reason I do not refer to *Pieces of My country* as a mock documentary. According to Mast (2009: 234) a mock-documentary "projects an imaginary world while taking an ambiguous stance towards the depicted events." *Pieces of My Country* does not in any way project an imaginary world. Mast (2009: 4) also calls mock documentaries "fake documentaries" and "fictions that look and sound like documentaries" and Nichols (2001: 20) refers to them as pseudo documentaries. *Pieces of My Country* on the other hand is no fiction film and would rather fit quite the opposite description given by Mast: a documentary that sounds and works like a fiction film.

*Pieces of My Country* however may have some resemblance with the way the mock documentary functions. Jane Roscoe and Craig Hight (in Rosenthal and Corner, 2005) identify three degrees of mock documentary in relation to the intentions of the film maker, the text's appropriation of documentary codes and the role constructed for the audience by the film. The first degree is that of 'Parody' in which "texts feature the consistent and sustained appropriation of documentary codes and conventions in the creation of a fictional milieu" (Roscoe and Hight as cited in Rosenthal and Corner, 2005: 233). The milieu depicted in *Pieces of My Country* on the other hand is by no means a fictional creation. The film is shot on location (on various places in South Africa). The film does not seek to manipulate such a fact but uses the characters in the film to highlight it.

The second degree mentioned by Hight and Roscoe is that of 'Critique' in which texts use the documentary form "to engage in a parody or satire of an aspect of popular culture" (Hight and Roscoe as cited in Rosenthal and Corner, 2005: 238). Although this is largely true of *Pieces of My Country* the film mostly aims to pose questions about the nature of the documentary form. The third degree 'deconstruction' is one which seems to fit *Pieces of My Country* best. According to Hight and Roscoe this degree engages "in a sustained critique of the set of assumptions and expectations which support the classic mode of documentary" (Hight and Roscoe as cited in Rosenthal and Corner, 2005: 237). Hight and Roscoe however encourage viewers to acknowledge that all these degrees exist within the fictional nature of mockumentary (in Rosenthal and Corner, 2005: 233). This means these are fictional films which make use of documentary techniques. As I have already explained, *Pieces of My Country* uses actors and a script to dramatise real factual issues for my personal interpretation

and not to create a completely fictional milieu. In addition, this use of acting is only done with just a few of the characters shown. Majority of the people in the film actually represent themselves. I still maintain therefore that the film is a documentary not a mockumentary.

My intention with the film was to present the reality and facts of the rural situation through a rather upfront, angry yet comical character. I wanted to bring some humour to the situation. Renov (1993: 13) says that if documentary is to be viewed as a (scientific) discourse of facts then we have to accept that it too has to employ the interpretation of those facts and observations as all sciences do. Interpretation of reality and facts is a personal arena which opens up an array of personal ways of representation. Humour was very important to me in the film not only as a way of marking *Pieces of My Country* as a documentary of playful interrogation but also as a way of depicting South Africa as a country that harbours a lot of comical ironies.







**3.2** Though living in a shack, this woman actually has electricity and a job but during the shoot she playfully and unexpectedly acted jobless and without electricity. This unexpected twist surprisingly worked out perfectly for the film. She becomes a representation of many of the poor people in her community who *are* jobless and without electricity and also serves to authenticate the poverty statistics in the film.

Peter Watkin's famous film *War Game* (1965) is an example of a documentary film that comprises only of sheer fictional dramatisation. This film is not based on any real events, present or historical, but like fiction is based on hypothetical speculation about what *could* happen if England were to be attacked by nuclear weapons (emphasis mine). "Watkins was presenting a personal vision based on well-researched facts" (Rosenthal and Corner, 2005: 110). The film is very meticulous in setting up such a cataclysmic prospect and one would have perhaps made the mistake of thinking that only a fiction film would be capable orchestrating such an illusionary vision "carefully prepared civil defence plans prove futile and useless: children are blinded, firestorms rage, and the dead lie in the streets. After a

while, there are hunger riots, police are assaulted and food thievers are shot by execution squads. It seems in fact as if civilisation is disintegrating" (Rosenthal and Corner, 2005: 110). Of course the film relies purely on actors, set design and "the smoothest of Hollywood set lighting" to achieve its verisimilitude (Rosenthal and Corner, 2005: 110).

Peter Watkins's film demonstrates that the documentary, like fiction, is capable of constructing visual imaginary worlds. However, it seems that documentary, unlike fiction, produces such illusions only for the sake of sharing ideas or researched information anchored in the real world. From this we can therefore deduce that documentary is not defined by the imagery or footage of actual (real) people but by the presentation of information, facts and ideas (even if such information is presented in the most fictional of ways).

Animation documentaries are examples of non-fiction films that represent actual events and the phenomenal world using symbolic images instead of the imagery of reality. *Pieces of My County* opens with a cartoon image of a little girl running up a hill. This picture is accompanied by children's music and a little girl's fairy tale narration "Once upon a time in a land far away." This opening and the rest of this dreamy sequence frames the film and seek to locate it in the domain of fictional fairy-tale.

## Is It About Information?

Drawing on the concept of epistephilia (the desire to know), Nichols (2001: 40) explains that people watch documentary because they receive information which satisfies their hunger to learn. Godmilow says that documentaries are not projects that are to the service of reality or truth but projects that are to the service of ideas (Godmilow and Shapiro, 1997: 81).







**3.3** Such didactic notes are placed throughout the film's different segments. *Pieces of My Country* makes use of documentary's epistemic agenda. Is this what defines a documentary?

This proves that documentary is free to use all fictional strategic devices for the presentation of facts. In fact Renov (1993: 6) reveals that "the recourse to history demonstrates that the documentary *has* availed itself to nearly every constructive device known to fiction and *has* employed virtually every register and cinematic syntax in the process" (emphasis mine).

Defining the documentary purely by its ability to shed information and ideas, however, seems to preclude the fact that fiction can also portray facts and information. Noel (1996: 78) insists that people can learn from fiction just as much as they learn from documentary. Films like *Lumumba* (2000), *The Last King of Scotland* (2006) and *Lorenzo'Oil* (1992) are all works of fiction that depict actual historical events and draw from real people's lives. These films share in the documentary endeavour of depicting facts from the real world.

*Lorenzo's Oil* (1992) for an example is an impressive, well researched documenting account of the disease adrenoleukodystrophy and the specific scientific, medical details of this disease and how this disease gradually progresses in the body of a child. Johannes Riis (in Jerslev, 2002: 110) explains that "even if we define the intention of non-fiction as seeking truth, it is misleading to say the opposite is the case with fiction. Fiction films do not necessarily intend to be untruthful." It is therefore not accurate to sentence fiction to lies and fabrication while judging documentary purely as authentic and truthful. Neither of these polar descriptive extremes communicates and encompasses the full character of both fiction and documentary and what they can do. As Linda Williams (in Rosenthal and Corner, 2005: 72) says: "The choice is not between two entirely separate regimes of truth and fiction […] documentary can and should use all strategies of fictional construction to get at relative truths.

Sometimes works of fiction, like documentary make use of real people. In the film *City of God* (2002) for example most of the actors in the film are not professional actors but the real residents of Cidade de Deus, the actual setting of the film (a place that actually exists). Other examples of fiction films based on educational researched historical information and facts are *Burnt by The Sun* (1994) and of course Oliver Stone's controversial *JFK* (1991). We cannot therefore distinguish the documentary mode from fiction by its ability to shed facts, information or ideas for to do so would be to claim that fiction does not.

**No Entertainment?**

*Pieces of my Country* constantly shifts between the dimensions of the real and fantasy by creating a world of ambiguity where 'realness' cannot be guaranteed. In the film, cartoon landscapes are transformed into actual ones, suggesting the existence of the imagined or fictional in the actual. Humorous scripted interviews of seemingly ordinary citizens are placed next to interviews of actual people such that realness and reality are constantly challenged and elusive concepts. Humour is an important strategic agent of the film. Most of the people in the film are actual people who represent their true opinions however some are random strangers I practically 'grabbed' and carefully directed for the film while others are professional actors. The performances serve to add comical value to the film. *Pieces of My Country* therefore has a playful quality and entertainment value.



**3.4** Guessing games: who is real/who is acting? So as not to deceive, the film candidly informs the viewer at the beginning that some characters in the film are professional actors however it remains to the viewer to guess which ones.

However, Ellis and McLane (2005: 2) say the documentary differs from the fiction in that it does not entertain. John Corner (in Jerslev, 2002: 146) disagrees with this distinction. Corner identifies three classical functions of the documentary. These are (1) publicity project of modern civics, (2) documentary as journalistic inquiry and (3) documentary as radical interrogation and alternative perspective (in Jerslev, 2002: 146). Corner however, later includes to these three functions, a fourth one which he says "has been added by a process of

steady development" (Corner as cited in Jerslev, 2002: 146). This fourth one is 'Documentary as diversion.'

Corner explains the first function, 'publicity project of modern civics,' as a nationalist project that aims to promote citizenship and the rights of citizens in the context of democratic societies and hence tends to be funded directly by government. In industrial and social organizations, this mode acts as the voice of people who might be potentially exploited. As corner points out, this is the documentary in its "classic, modernist realist phase" and the kind that was conceptualized by Grierson (Corner as cited in Jerslev, 2002: 147).

The second function 'Documentary as journalistic inquiry and exposition' mobilizes tools of 'reportage' through in-camera presentations, commentary voice over and interviews. Here the function of the documentary is fundamentally to report (in Jerslev 2002: 147).

'Documentary as radical interrogation and alternative perspective' questions, critiques and suggests solutions to issues in circulation. This mode makes use of formal experimentation not normally deployed by many broadcast forms. Corner explains that the position taken by these films is not 'official' and does not necessarily exemplify journalism (in Jerslev, 2002: 147).

The last function, 'documentary as diversion,' is according to Corner "popular factual entertainment" (Corner as cited in Jerslev, 2002: 148). Corner acknowledges the novelty of this form which he says seeks "its pact with the popular." Here we encounter the humour through "anecdotal knowledge," "the high intensity incident" and the "gossipy first person account" (Corner as cited in Jerslev, 2002: 148). Corner therefore identifies this documentary with the Reality TV programme "We are presently seeing a range of documentary style projects that have strong successful connections with the format of the traditional game show" (Corner as cited in Jerslev, 2002: 148). Looking at this last function of documentary as mentioned by Corner, it would be incorrect to say that documentary does not entertain.

## Truth Claims?

Plantinga (1997: 17) says that documentary and fiction films both project a state of affairs for viewers. Plantinga (1997: 17) asserts that the difference between the two modes is that fiction projects a particular state of affairs and simply asks the viewer to consider or ponder on them while the documentary film takes an assertive stance towards the state of affairs it projects. In

other words the documentary *claims* that the events actually happened while the fiction does not. Renov (1993: 55) says that "every documentary issues a "truth claim" of sort, positing a relationship to history which exceeds the analogical status of its fictional counterpart."

Noel (1996: 78) explains this further and says in classical film theory, fiction films are seen as creating and projecting, not just an imagined world, but an illusion of that world. This illusion is not the same kind that manifests in altered states of minds or clinical mental conditions like delirium but speaks to a particular psychological state of mind that a person reaches when watching a fiction film. This illusion is one Johannes Rii (in Jerslev, 2002: 103) calls an "aesthetic illusion" rather than an "epistemic" one. According to Noel there is an obvious paradox in the holistic process and way audiences experience fiction films. This 'paradox of fiction' is in three propositions which, when combined, reveal a contradiction:

1. We are genuinely moved by fiction
2. We know that that which is portrayed in fictions is not actual
3. We are genuinely moved only by what we believe is actual

In elaborating on Noel's theory of this paradox, Rii makes an example of this experience by using a murder scene in Hitchcock's *Dial M for Murder*. In this film a woman enters her house thinking that she is alone when in actual fact she is not. After picking up the phone to make a call, a hand from behind her enters the frame. As she constantly says "hello", tapping the phone and trying to get a signal, the hand remains behind her (in Jerslev, 2002: 103). According to this theory we are moved to feel anxious for the woman yet our suspense and anticipation around the events portrayed in the film is not triggered by the actuality of these events but by the persuasion of the projected filmic illusion.

The film skilfully and convincingly crafts and projects a world that is able to 'seduce' us into believing it without claiming that such events shown happened in the real world. According to Plantinga (1997: 17) this is what sets documentary apart from fiction: the documentary issues a truth claim that the events shown or the status of affairs projected actually happened in the real world but the fiction film simply projects them skilfully and convincingly.

In short documentary films are those that seek to harness their edited material to cognitively generate in us a realisation of truth between the events shown and the real world while fiction films are those that invite us to suspend our disbelief for the sake of those events so as to entice our senses to partake in the skilful craft of the created illusion. Documentaries claim

there is truth connecting the image and the phenomenal but fiction does not. Plantinga (1997: 38) further elaborates that such non-fiction claims can "be housed in the most subjective stylistically expressive documentaries."

Eitzen (1995: 86) however disagrees with this view and argues that truth claims and an assertive stance "cannot be put into a text by the producer, once for all time. It is not something that is built into texts at all." Eitzen (1995: 86) makes a practical example using the documentary film *High School* (1968) and elucidates that there is nothing about the opening of this film that sets it apart from similar looking low budget fiction films. Furthermore, Eitzen (1995: 86), also points out that it is not only documentaries that take assertive stances but fiction films too "The "Wake up! Wake up!" at the end of *School Daze* (1988) is at the same time a call to action in the historical world and an assertion that states of affairs portrayed earlier in the film are similar to states of affairs in the historical world." Torben Grodal (in Jerslev, 2002: 83) agrees that all filmic presentations make assertions of existence "Any framing or presentation is in principle an assertion." Documentary films therefore, according to Eitzen (1995: 95) do not make truth claims. Rather, they are *perceived* as making truth claims (emphasis not mine). It cannot be conclusively said therefore that an assertive stance or truth claims are what set the documentary mode from its fiction counterpart.

**Unique Visual Codes?**

Eitzen (1995: 95) explains that what differentiates the documentary form from the fiction film is the way we see it. Eitzen (1995: 95) speaks of visual devices that prompt viewers to frame films as 'documentary' or 'fiction' and calls these 'situational cues.' He calls the first kind of situational cues meta-textual cues which are "explicit verbal labels, like explanatory title sequences and program notes in TV Guide" (Eitzen,1995: 95). Most of us have seen such explanatory notes that aim to convince and assure us about the truthfulness of "the events we are about to see." Textual cues which are the second kind "consists of any of a host of things in or around a text that trigger viewers' knowledge about the real world and about discourses aimed at illuminating it, like recognizably "authentic" film footage" (Eitzen,1995: 95). Other examples of textual cues mentioned by Eitzen (1995: 91) are a hand held camera, direct camera address, bad lighting, bad sound and factual narration. These are the visual codes that that help viewers frame a film as a documentary film.

However, as Eitzen (1995: 92) has already pointed out, such devices are not limited to documentary only. In fact, Mast (2009: 233) says "no particular formal or thematic features exist that are the sole province of either 'documentary' or 'fiction.'" This means if we cannot rely on any textual cues to distinguish the documentary from the fiction we need another more reliable kind of cue or framing stratagem.

Eitzen (1995: 95) refers to Noel who explains the principle of indexing in film "Producers, writers, directors, distributors, and exhibitors index their films […] We don't characteristically go to films about which we must guess whether they are fiction or nonfiction. They are generally indexed one way or the other." Plantinga (1997: 15) explains that indexing is a specific way of categorising or labelling a film for the public through magazines, newspapers, billboards, DVD covers.

Even though one could mistake *The Blair Witch Project* (1999) and *No Lies* (1974) as documentary films when watching them, one is also able to access the TV guide and discover that such films are, in fact, works of fiction. This in turn enables the viewer to watch the film differently, bringing to the viewing experience a set of expectations and attitudes 'befitting' a fiction film. Mast (2009: 235) highlights "a fake documentary unmarked, and so unrecognised is a documentary." Ultimately what separates the documentary from the fiction is not how each of these look and sound but the labels assigned to each so as to guide our perceptions accordingly. This means that at a visual and perceptual level (without the labels, cues and signposts) the documentary and the fiction cannot be distinguished from each other. Nichols (2001: 35) asserts that "the sense that a film is a documentary lies in the mind of the beholder."

Though I call *Pieces of My Country* a documentary, the film text itself is meant to generate a set of ambivalent perceptions, leaving the viewer in a place where he has to choose how to view the film. As mentioned earlier, the film offers presentation of ideas, facts, information and interpretation through classical fictional tools of cartoons, performance, construction and parody. One may therefore ask whether or not truth is not at all compromised by such an approach. Errol Morris (in Rosenthal and Corner, 2005: 64) states that "There is no reason why documentaries can't be as personal as fiction films making and bearing the imprint of those who made them. Truth isn't guaranteed by style or expression. It isn't guaranteed by anything."

## 4. FILM FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION

As the final chapter this section summarises the core arguments made throughout this paper. In assessing the success of the film as a documentary that deliberately toys with hybridisation this section also looks at how *Pieces of My Country* was received by viewers. In the previous chapters we established through a number of documentary examples and documentary theorists that the documentary form can make use of techniques normally associated with the fiction form. *Pieces of My Country* is a film made with such a realisation in mind and with the aim of testing how much formal transfusions the documentary film can take before it lose believability and its associations with truth.

The film underwent a number of five semi-formal screenings at the Wits TV edit suits where it was watched by lectures including my supervisor, the head of the Television department, senior and junior Television students all at different times. It also had a numerous number of informal viewings (about eleven) by many of my friends, colleagues and acquaintance who had never studied Film and Television.

The semi-formal screenings were followed by short discussion sessions that were more intensive and rigorous than the informal sessions had. Viewers had many comments and questions which required responses from me. Most of these were quite positive and uplifting and most of them found the film light-hearted and enjoyable to watch. The head of the TV division was very impressed with the execution of the theoretical concept and was able to even identify one of the themes the film was exploring: real and unreal (please read visual treatment). She dubbed it as "a real Masters level kind of work." There were also a number of very useful suggestions particularly from my supervisor. Some of these suggestions, unfortunately, could not be applied since doing so would mean re-shooting when I had already finished gathering the footage and had no more time and money.

Some of the most commonly asked questions about the film were: "Whose view of South Africa is this?", "Why did you not chose to have a more overt personal position?", "Why did you use a child's voice over?", "Where did you source your the visual material?" "Why do you have such few white people and where are the Indians, Coloured and other South African races?"

Most of the informal sessions with friends and acquaintances were held at my place and were a little bit different from the academic ones. The viewers wanted to chat while watching and after the screening viewers only had words of praise and a few questions and no suggestions or much commentary to give (apart from stating what they enjoyed). At these sessions I came to accept that I would simply explain how the film was made (make sure to point out that many scenes were acted out and others were deliberately improvised). In many instances I even elaborated in detain which specific scenes were a construction. After explaining, I wanted to find out if they felt the film according their own opinion and impression could be called a documentary. All of them said yes. I also want to mention that most of the actors who acted in the film who experienced how the film was made also said the film was a documentary when they had seen it.

In both kinds of screenings, I made sure to furnish the viewers with the relevant information about how the film was made and what it tried to accomplish. When every question had been asked and answered and the viewers had sufficient information about the film, I asked the viewers one question: "Would you call this film a documentary?" All of the viewers from the informal screenings said yes while only a few viewers of the semi-formal screenings were either not sure or said no. Since I was not testing then viewers's knowledge of documentary but the impressions generated by the film and the general hybridisation that viewers are willing to put up with, I did not ask the viewers why they thought what they thought.

According to Plantinga (1997: 38) there is no reason documentary films cannot be as expressive as fiction films. He maintains that what distinguishes documentary from fiction is not the level of its own generic purity or lack of formal or structural manipulation "if we see non-fiction film as fundamentally a genre of rhetoric rather than one of imitation (pretence), then whether its representations are embodied in a stylistically spare and 'objective' discourse or an expressive and 'subjective' discourse is irrelevant to its status as non-fiction" (Plantinga, 1997: 38). Eitzen (1997: 98) also affirms: "One could still maintain that "to work like" a documentary and to be a documentary are two different things. There are, after all, films that we call fiction, like *JFK*, that are widely supposed to make truth claims, and films that we call documentaries, like Robert Flaherty's *Louisiana Story* (1950), that unfold just like fiction."

The question therefore is beyond whether or not the documentary should or should not incorporate fictional administration. The controversy, perhaps, might not lie on the perennial

debate about how much documentaries can 'transgress boundaries' by intermingling with techniques of other representational modes. If we establish that documentary can and indeed, should make use of all fictional devices, then the question changes to: what perceptions must the documentary impress upon its viewers in order to retain the integrity and title of documentary *despite* its deliberate indulgence in fiction-like expressions?

The question of impressions and perceptions generated is a very important one here. Rii says that fiction and documentary texts have the persuasive power to overwhelm us and convince us in a particular way. This means that a film has the power, through the impressions it generates, to persuade or to dissuade its viewers as a documentary or as a fiction film (in Jerslev, 2002: 72). After the many screenings that *Pieces of My Country* had, it became obvious that it managed to persuade viewers as a documentary film. Even though the film has very obviously scripted and fictional moments, incorporating deliberate elements of formal subterfuge, most people who viewed the film read it as a documentary film. Most were even aware which citizens' comments were actually scripted yet this knowledge did not deter such a reading. Despite the fact that the dreamy, fairytale-like, comical constructions attempt to locate the film within the realm of fiction, the valuable and serious information that the film offers about South Africa seems to ground it onto the domain of the real world. Other factors such as gritty images of poverty, accounts and images of graphic violent incidents and relevant statistical information seemed to strengthen the perception that the film truly is a documentary. In this case it becomes apparent that people may not be bothered by elements of fiction in documentary as long as a number of traditional (Griersonian) documentary visual conventions dominate the presentation.

Since the film had a comical touch to it, it became evident that the viewers actually enjoyed this amalgamation of fiction and documentary assemblage. Examples of moments that really moved viewers to laughter were the juxtaposed contradictory voices of citizens, the montage of citizens in agreement about crime as the major challenge of the country ending with a shot of a baby who is noted as agreeing with everyone else, the angry rural mother who yells to her child to wait for her TV interview, the irony of the patriotic narration laid over images of a thief grabbing a woman's handbag, the (fake) end credits that acknowledge "Jesus", "Mom" and "granny for baking the scones." Obviously, such moments in the film and many others did not in any way discourage viewers from reading the film as a documentary because other more serious issues seemed to dominate the film.




**4.1** Memorable Moments

As mentioned earlier, there are some documentaries unlike *Pieces of My Country* that when infusing formal hybridity lose credibility as documentaries altogether. On this matter, Plantinga (1997: 15) explains that there are some categories, like Queen of England, that refer to specific places, people, items and natural phenomenon. Such names bear no ambiguity of meaning. There are others, however, like documentary, which seem to pose a challenge for a single unified understanding and meaning. Plantinga (1997: 15) asserts however, that such a challenge does not make the category of documentary itself useless.

Plantinga (1997: 14) adds that not all non-fiction films fit neatly into the category of documentary. There are prototypes, which posses all the properties central to the category and there are members which posses just a few of them. Instead of thinking about documentary as a term with an essence, he says, it is best to see it as an open ended concept with "braid of family resemblances." In experimenting and exploring with different modal techniques, *Pieces of My Country* might not necessarily have ended up a fiction film or a lie but might have simply found itself one of the peripheral members of the documentary category.

This raises the question of indexing. *Pieces of my Country* has been indexed as a documentary so perhaps it really does not matter how people would have responded to it. The film would still have remained a documentary no matter how people would have felt about it. Noel (1996: 78) also agrees that the task of deciding which category a film fits into is not in the hands of the viewers. Noel explains that all films, even those that seem hard to classify, are 'indexed' by producers, directors, distributers, exhibitors such that by the time they reach the audience they have already been categorized. Plantinga (1997: 16) agrees with Noel and says indexing is a social phenomenon and that people in society have a general agreement and understanding about what documentary is. According to Plantinga (1997: 16), to define documentary, one has to simply look at the films that have been indexed as documentary in any given culture.

Eitzen (1995: 96) however disagrees with Plantinga and Noel. He notes that not all works are simply indexed as 'fiction' or as 'documentary.' Some works are very difficult to pin down to a specific category. "Texts like *Daughter Rite* (1980) and *No Lies* (1974), and even well-known and popular texts like *JFK* (1991) and episodes of *A Current Affair* (1986), are not neatly indexed in one way or the other. They are ambiguously indexed or indexed in a way that allows them to be read as either documentary or fiction or intermittently as one then the other."

Rii further adds that, "The way in which we experience a film is not determined by the way it is categorized" (Rii as cited in Jerslev, 2002: 111). Therefore Noel and Plantinga's position precludes the viewer from making individual meaning of the text. Furthermore, Eitzen (1995: 95) argues that if we are to discover the diverse ways in which people receive and make sense of documentaries as distinct texts from others then it is important to pay attention to individual idiosyncratic readings. This helps explain why films, though indexed a particular way, end up being received by audiences differently from how they were indexed. The film *American Family* (1973) for example was indexed as a Reality TV programme but it now finds itself being called a documentary series that challenged boundaries between Reality TV and documentary (Andrejevic, 2004: 71). From this we can gather that it is not just the producers, directors and distributors who determine which texts are seen as documentaries but the consensus of the audience as well. Plantinga (1997: 16) also agrees that "the distinction between fiction and nonfiction is not based solely on intrinsic textual properties but also on the extrinsic textual context of production, distribution and reception." The

viewers are therefore the final litmus test that proves the success or failure of any production. This therefore means that the success of *Pieces of My Country* as a documentary does not lie in the fact that it has been indexed as a documentary but rather in the fact of the audience's consensus that it was indeed perceived and received as one.

Finally, Noels (1996: 255) says that indexing a film as a documentary does not necessarily declare it as true but that it should be assessed against the standards of truthfulness. He further adds that "when measured against such standards, a film that has been indexed a nonfiction may turn out to be false" (Noel, 1996: 255). Eitzen's (1995: 89) definition of documentary as "any film, video, or TV program that could, in principle, be perceived to lie" tells us that between the forms of fiction and documentary it is the latter form that is capable of lying since it always seeks to align itself to notions of truth. Fiction films on the other hand are incapable of lying since they never attempt to evoke the belief that the events they depict have any truthful bearing to reality.

## 5. REFERENCES

Andrejevic M. 2004: *Reality TV: The Work Of Being Watched.* USA: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers.

Bondebjerg I. 2002. 'The Mediation of Everyday Life, Genre, Discourse and Spectacle in Reality TV.' IN: Jerslev A. 2002. *Reality And Realism In Film And Media*. Copenhague: Museum Tusculanum Press.

Bruzzi, S. 2000. *New Documentary*. New York: Routledge.

Corner J. 2001. 'Documentary Values.' IN: Jerslev A. 2002. *Reality And Realism In Film And Media*. Copenhague: Museum Tusculanum Press.

Eitzen D. 1995. *When Is Documentary: Documentary As A Mode of Reception*, Cinema Journal. Vol 35. No. 1. viewed 03/11/2008, http://www.jstor.org/stable/1225809.

Ellis J. and McLane B. 2005. *A New History of Documentary Film*, New York, The Continuum International Publishing Group.

Ellis J. 2005. *Documentary And Truth On Television: The Crisis of 1999*. http://digirep.rhul.ac.uk/items/d7bfe9ce-3b8c-2a84-2104-64d9da32c254/1/DOCUMENTARY__TRUTH_corner_subm_4_Aug_03.pdf

Godmilow J. and Shapiro A. 1997. *How Real Is The Reality In Documentary*. History and Theory. Vol. 36. No. 4. viewed 03/11/2008, http://www.jstor.org/stable/2505576.

Grierson J. 1966. *Grierson On Documentary*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Grodal T. 2002. 'The Experience of Realism in Audio Visual Representation.' IN: Jerslev A. 2002. *Reality And Realism In Film And Media*. Copenhague: Museum Tusculanum Press.

Mast J. 2009. *New Directions In Hybrid Popular Television: A Reassessment Of Television Mock Documentary*. Media, Culture and Society Vol. 31 No. 2: 231-250. http://mcs.sagepub.com.

Nichols. B. 1991. *Representing Reality: Issues And Concepts In Documentary*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press

Nichols. B. 1994. *Blurred Boundaries: Questions of Meaning In Contemporary Culture*. USA: Library of Congress

Nichols B. 2001. *Introduction To Documentary*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Noel C. 1996. *Theorising The Moving Image*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Paget D. 1998. 'Dramadoc/docudrama: The Law and Regulation.' IN: Rosenthal A and Corner J. 2005. *New Challenges For Documentary*. Manchester: University of California Press.

Plantinga C. 1997. *Rhetoric And Representation In Non Fiction Film*. United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press.

Renov M. 1993. *Theorizing Documentary*. New York: Routledge.

Riis J. 1998. 'Is a Realist Film Style Aimed at Providing an Illusion?' IN: Jerslev A. 2002. *Reality And Realism In Film And Media*. Copenhague: Museum Tusculanum Press.

Roscoe J. and Hight C. 2005. 'Building a Mockumentary Schema.' IN: Rosenthal A and Corner J. 2005. *New Challenges For Documentary*. Manchester: University of California Press.

Rosen P. 1993. 'Document and Documentary: On the Persistence of Historical Concepts.' IN: Renov M. 1993. *Theorizing Documentary*. New York: Routledge.

Trinh T. Minh-Ha. 1990. *Documentary Is Not A Name,'* October, Vol. 52. viewed on 03/11/2008, http://0-www.jstor.org.innopac.wits.ac.za/stable/pdfplus/778886.pdf\

Winston B. 1993. 'The Documentary Film As Scientific Inscription.' IN: Renov M. 1993. *Theorizing Documentary*. New York: Routledge.

Winston B. 2000. *Lies, Damned Lies And Documentary*, London: British Film Institute.

Williams L. 1993. 'Mirrors Without Memories: Truth, History, And The New Documentary.' IN: Rosenthal A and Corner J. 2005. *New Challenges For Documentary*. Manchester: University of California Press.

Woodhead L. 1981. 'Dramatised Documentary.' IN: Rosenthal A and Corner J. 2005. *New Challenges For Documentary*. Manchester: University of California Press.

## 6. FILMOGRAPHY

*American Family:* (1973). A and S Raymond. Video Verite.

*Burnt In The Sun:* (1994). Nikita Milkhalkov. Sony Pictures Classic

*Dial M For Murder:* (1954). Alfred Hitchock. Warner Bros.

*Far From Poland:* (1984) Jill Godmilow. Women Make Movies.

*High School:* (1968) Frederick Wiseman. United States National Film Registry.

*JKF:* (1991) Oliver Stone. Warner Bros.

*Nanook of The North:* (1922). Robert J. Flaherty.

*No Lies:* (1974) Mitchell Block. Direct Cinema Lts.

*School Daze:* (1988) Pike Lee. Columbia Pictures.

*The Blair Witch Project:* (1999) Daniel Myrick and Eduardi Sanchez. Artisan Entertainment.

*The Fifth Estate: Benny Hinn* (2007) CBC Television.

*The War Game:* (1965) Peter Watkins. BBC.

*Thin Blue Line:* (1988) Errol Morris. Miramax Films

*Year Zero: The Silent Death of Cambodia* (1979) John Pilger. ATV Network Limited.

## VISUAL TREATMENT OF *PIECES OF MY COUNTRY*

The film opens with a cartoon image of a little girl excitedly running up a hill to see what lies beneath the other side. On arriving to the top, the girl's gaze directs us, through her Point Of View (POV) shot, to a green beautiful field with a stream running through it. This cartoon shot is transformed and juxtaposed next to a real image of a vast dry terrain of land which is neither green nor has a stream running through. The cartoon little girl appears again later in the film and represents the journey through the country and the film.

The cartoon image represents that which is innocent, jubilant and praiseworthy. It aims to suggest a fairy-tale world of bliss and contentment. This is visually strengthened by the child's voice over "once upon a time in a land far far away" which helps create the impression of a fairy-tale universe. The brown, parched landscape on the other hand symbolises all that is real, unpleasant and dishonouring. The juxtaposition of the fairytale world next to the open dry land expresses the presence of two antithetical features in one space. The whole film therefore implies that South Africa is both a country of dreams and nightmares, contentment and dissatisfaction, beauty and ugliness. This opening serves to create relevant symbolism for the recurring theme of the film which I term "The Dialectic Of Opposites."

This dialectic is evidenced in the celebratory sequence "A rainbow beauty" where we see both the geographic and cultural attractions of the country. Intercut between these beautiful images (such as The Cape Point, Robben Island and the Drakensberg Mountains), are South Africans expressing their pride about their country. Such voices of pride and patriotism, however, are also intercut next to the sceptical, cynical and pessimistic ones, creating a sense of conflict.

Conflict in the film is also created through the use of irony where a character says something and the visuals show the exact opposite of what has been said. In the sequence "Africa's best" for example one of the characters says that South Africa is a great country because there is free education and free services but immediately after this character says this, the film cuts to a situation of people who are shown to be living in shacks and have no electricity. Later on in the same sequence a character says that South Africa is the best country in the world and after this we cut to a rural character who still fetches water from the river, has no electricity and is living in a mud house. Throughout the film, such negative scenarios are

followed by good text information of the country's recognised achievements, strengthening the sense of conflict through irony.

On exploring dialectical opposites, the film does not just examine the theme of "dreams and nightmares" but also the theme of "agreement and disagreement." The characters in the film are the tool by which this is accomplished. The views of the characters are edited in such a way as to show the lack of a unified consensus about the country. They are also edited in a way as to show those things that there is agreement about. In the opening sequence, for example, most characters confess to being proudly South African. This creates a sense of agreement and sends the message that most people in South Africa feel positive about their country. This agreement however is broken by the last character who clearly states that he is not proudly South African. This deviation does not just add a tinge of comic relief but becomes a statement that not everyone in the country is happy.

By bringing out the moments of agreement and disagreement amongst the characters the film tacitly states that South Africa is a country of many conflicting ideas yet agreement also exists. A very clear moment of agreement in the film is in the sequence "An African hub of romance" where all the characters express their concern about crime. By just showing one character after another simply saying the word "crime", this moment is edited in such a way as to make the agreement unequivocal, making their concern of crime a valid one. This shows that many people in the country consider crime as a major problem.

The tone of the film is predominantly light but varies from sequence to sequence according to the subject explored. Using music and actors, the film is able to portray serious subjects in a very light manner. We see this in the portrayal of the rural woman with a fallen mud house. This woman is in fact an actor enacting an character who is angry about her desperate situation. The vocal tone, costume and script of this character have been exaggerated to provide comic appeal to the situation. Through her unapologetically indignant voice, direct questioning of the filmmaker and demanding that her children not to disturb her while she's on TV, the woman proves herself a character who does not share in the same concerns about social charm or decorum as everyone else. Humour is part of the film's strategic device which adds to the light tone of the film. Irony is not just used to create conflict and to point out contradictions but is also used to add comic relief. One such moment is in the "Rainbow beauty" where a racist character is inserted in between positive, passionate characters who are all saying good things about their country.

The tone of the film moves with the structure of the film in its five sequences from very light to very serious at the end. The whole film moves in stages of contraction and release where the tone contracts in seriousness and releases in lightness. The first sequence which also acts as an opening sequence gloriously revels the praise of South Africa and underlines the patriotisms of its citizens. This is the lightest sequence in the film. This sequence is strategic in introducing the tone of the film.

The second sequence titled "A rainbow beauty" is a celebratory journey through the cultures and land attractions of the country. Here the diverse, conflicting views of the characters start to emerge and we start to experience a sense of fragmentation and disagreement in voice of the characters.

The third sequence titled "Africa's best" exposes the harsh realities of poverty and unemployment. This sequence juxtaposes the fact of the country's economic strength in the continent to the gross reality of poverty that nonetheless haunts the country. The irony used in this sequence does not have a comic effect but serves to expose and reveal contradictions: the ugly and the beautiful living next to each other.

The fourth sequence titled "The African hub of romance" is a playful celebration of the country's democracy (the only kind in Africa) that allows people of same sex orientation to love and marry. The beginning of this sequence is very light and almost sensual in nature as it shows multiple fictitious and real couples passionately kissing. This couple's sequence provides the most engaging exchange of views between the couples and brings the most condensed moments of agreement and disagreement in the whole film. The tone of this sequence however changes very quickly from light and fun to very dark and worrying as it explores serious issues such as crime, child abuse and HIV infection. It problematizes the notion of being proudly South African.

The last sequence titled "A hostile Land" explores xenophobia in South Africa and the spate of xenophobic attacks that took place two years ago. In this sequence we get to hear about the country through the voices of foreigners as they relate their experiences during the season of the attacks. The ending of this sequence shows an image of the flag of South Africa dripping in blood and suggests that South Africa is guilty of the blood of innocent lives. The tone of this sequence is very serious.

Between the last two sequences which both end on very serious notes is a fake ending which serves two purposes. The first purpose is to provide comic relief between the two serious sequences. The scrolling titles of this ending are unconventional and unexpected. They read: “Thanks To” ,“Jesus”, “My Mom” , and “My granny for baking the scones.” The second function of this ending is to appreciate more beautiful South African attractions (such as Kysna, the Kimberly hole) while the titles scroll up.

“Under The Dialectic of Opposites” the theme of fiction and reality, real and unreal is another theme explored by the film. The most obvious way the film explores this is through the cartoon girl who appears at the beginning and the middle of the film. Another way the film makes of is by including characters who are not part of the film itself such that there is no separating the real and the unreal. The film does this in two instances. The first instance is the agreement montage sequence of crime where the characters all agree that crime is a major problem in the country. Most of the characters there are characters of the film but there is one who is not: Mangosuthu Buthelezi. Because the montage is so fast one may actually miss the sight of this character who easily blends in with all the others. The other instance is at the beginning of the couple’s sequence when the characters are passionately kissing. Juxtaposed to the real characters of the film are others I sources outside who are not part of the film or who are “unreal.”