



DOCUMENTARY BEGINNINGS

Documentaries are films about real events and real people. Some of the earliest films ever made were documentaries. In 1895, French inventor Louis Lumière developed a small, light-weight camera called the cinématographe, that allowed him to film whatever activities interested him. He called his one-minute films "actualities" because they were records of actual events. *Arrival of a Train at the Station*, one of the actualities, appeared so real to audiences that they believed the train would blast through the screen and into the theater.

Documentaries can be funny, sad, disturbing, or thoughtful. Unlike fiction movies that are based on real events, documentary filmmakers will not change a story to give it a happy ending or include something that did not really happen to make the story more dramatic. Documentarians do not simply turn on their cameras and shoot, however. That kind of film would be boring.

There are many different types of documentary films. What do you think makes a film a documentary?

Have you ever seen any documentaries? List the titles and a brief description.

What did you think about them? Were they serious? Humorous? Dull?

What kinds of topics would make a good documentary? Why?

Sometimes filmmakers will stage or re-enact an event that happened in the past. Although some documentary filmmakers do not agree with the use of re-enacted scenes, they have been part of documentary filmmaking from the beginning. Robert Flaherty, who in 1922 made *Nanook of the North*, one of the first feature-length documentaries, asked his Inuit subjects to hold a walrus hunt for the camera. Reenactments can, however, bring historical accuracy into question.



NANOOK OF THE NORTH (1922) is considered to be the first full-length feature documentary. Photo from the Margaret Herrick Library Collection, AMPAS.

DOCUMENTARY TERMS

ACTUALITIES: One-minute films of real events and real people, made first by employees of the French Lumière company and later by other companies, including the Edison Manufacturing Company.

ARCHIVAL MATERIALS: Historical photographs, documents, stock footage and other materials gathered from libraries, film archives and research facilities.

RE-ENACTMENTS: Using actors or nonprofessionals to portray actual events that happened in the past.

DIRECT CINEMA: A style of documentary filmmaking that attempts to capture events as they happen without preplanning, staging or interference. Documentaries made in this manner usually do not use narration or on-camera interviewers.

NARRATION: Off-camera commentary for a film. Narration can link the visuals together or provide extra information.

POINT OF VIEW: The perspective from which a story is observed or told. A point of view can be objective, subjective or a combination of the two.

PROPAGANDA: Films intended to sway the public with one-sided, misleading or half-true statements.

STRUCTURE: The organization of film elements, including story and time.

THEME: The central idea of a film which is represented by its characters, action and imagery.