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The Ethics of Documentary Filmmaking: Truth vs. Narrative

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ABSTRACT
Film documentary falls between journalistic investigation, aesthetic expression, and social activism to take a central and disorganized ethical quandary; the discussion between the quest of truth and the requirement of narration creation. This paper states that there is no need of solving a problem but this tension is the plot that makes the genre. With a thematic analysis in the context of the principles of Art and Design, the article conducts the historical changes of this duality through the staged realities of Robert Flaherty's Nanook of the North to the performative boundaries of self of Joshua Oppenheimer The Act of Killing. It evaluates how philosophy supports the idea of truth in nonfiction media arguing that documentaries are not just presentations of the truth, but creative interpretations of reality in the form of editorial decision-making, framing, and sound design. The essay examines particular ethical issues such as misrepresentation, emotion work and the false balance problem through selected examples of The Cove, The Fog of War, and 13th to see how the directors manage all those. Lastly, the paper discusses the pressing concerns of modern technologies like AI generated footage and Virtual Reality and the movement toward documentary-as-activism that increases these ethical issues. With the end-result of the article being that the way ahead must entail a new covenant of openness and media literacy wherein filmmakers pledge to the truth of narrative design, and the audience reevaluate their approaches to watching documentaries through a critical perspective on views rather than trying to look at documentaries as being like beam-true fact accounts of the world.

Keywords: *Documentary Ethics, Truth in Film, Narrative Construction, Filmmaking Transparency, Representational Integrity, Documentary Activism, New Media Technology.*

Introduction

Documentary filmmaking exists in a perpetual state of negotiation, a hybrid form demanding both journalistic integrity and artistic vision. This inherent duality creates a foundational ethical tension: the struggle between the objective recording of fact and the subjective crafting of story. The filmmaker, as both archivist and *auteur*, must employ the principles of narrative design character development, thematic pacing, and visual composition to transform unstructured reality into a coherent and engaging argument. However, each of these artistic choices, from the editing of an interview to the omissive power of the camera frame, inherently alters the perceived truth of the subject matter. This is not a new dilemma, but contemporary digital culture, saturated with misinformation and partisan media, has amplified the stakes exponentially. A documentary is no longer viewed as an inert record but as an active participant in public discourse, capable of influencing policy, shifting cultural attitudes, and rewriting historical narratives in real-time. Therefore, the ethical burden on the contemporary documentarian is heavier than ever; they are not merely telling stories but

architecting reality for an audience that often lacks the time or tools to deconstruct the built environment of the film they are watching.

The core of this ethical dilemma is the problematic but necessary relationship between truth and narrative. Pure, unmediated truth is an epistemological phantom in any documentary; the mere act of selecting a subject, turning on a camera, and choosing an angle is an interpretive act (Nichols, 2017). The ethical challenge, therefore, shifts from achieving an impossible objectivity to navigating the morality of *subjectivity*. The central question becomes: how does a filmmaker construct a compelling narrative without engaging in gross misrepresentation or emotional manipulation? This construction is achieved through what Renov (2004) identifies as the "discourses of sobriety" techniques like voice-over authority, talking-head experts, and verité footage which are design choices that lend the film an air of unimpeachable truth. Yet, these very discourses can be deployed to subtly guide the audience toward a predetermined conclusion, privileging one perspective while silencing others. The ethical line is crossed not when perspective is present, but when the film's constructed nature is deliberately hidden, presenting a designed argument as an objective revelation. This creates a passive viewer who consumes rather than critiques, trusting the frame to be a window when it is, in fact, a carefully composed painting.

Consequently, the modern viewer's perception of reality is profoundly shaped by this mediated encounter. Documentaries like Bryan Fogel's *Icarus* (2017) or Alex Gibney's *The Inventor: Out for Blood in Silicon Valley* (2019) function not just as films but as cultural events, their narratives directly impacting public understanding of complex issues like state-sponsored doping and corporate fraud. The ethical implication is that the filmmaker's choices whom to platform, whom to vilify, what evidence to showcase, and what to leave on the cutting room floor have tangible consequences beyond the screen. As such, this article will argue that the highest ethical standard in contemporary documentary practice is not neutrality, but transparency of form. This means embracing reflexive techniques that acknowledge the film's construction, providing space for contested narratives, and prioritizing contextual accuracy over narrative neatness. By critically dissecting this tension, we can advance a new framework for both production and consumption, one where filmmakers are held accountable for their artistic choices and audiences are empowered to engage not as passive recipients of truth, but as active interpreters of a crafted, and therefore fallible, reality.

Historical Context of Documentary Filmmaking

The evolution of documentary filmmaking is fundamentally a history of an ethical and aesthetic negotiation, a centuries-long dialogue between the empirical impulse to document and the artistic urge to narrate. This tension was crystallized at the very inception of the form's modern identity by Scottish filmmaker John Grierson, who, in a 1926 review of Robert Flaherty's *Moana*, first coined the term "documentary," famously defining it as "the creative treatment of actuality" (Grierson, 1926, p. 8). This phrase is not a mere description but a profound and enduring paradox that has governed the genre ever since. The words "treatment" and "actuality" exist in a state of productive friction: one implies intervention, design, and subjective crafting, while the other implies a pre-existing, objective reality. Grierson's definition thus established the central philosophical battleground for nonfiction cinema, framing the documentarian not as a passive recorder but as an active interpreter and

composer, whose creative choices from framing and editing to narrative structure inevitably shape, and potentially distort, the reality they seek to present. This foundational principle moved the documentary away from the early actuality films of the Lumière brothers, which were mere snippets of life, and towards a form capable of complex argument and social persuasion, but at the cost of ontological purity.

The practical manifestation of Grierson's paradox is nowhere more starkly illustrated than in Robert Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* (1922), a film that remains a cornerstone of the documentary canon and its original sin. Flaherty's project to document the life of an Inuit hunter was pioneering in its empathetic, immersive approach, yet it was built upon a scaffold of elaborate fictions. He staged hunting sequences using obsolete weaponry, cast a well-known local hunter as "Nanook," and presented a nuclear family unit that was not his subject's own (Zimmermann, 2021). Flaherty's justification was one of artistic and thematic truth; he sought to capture the essence of a pre-industrial way of life, not its contaminated present. This established a dangerous but persistent precedent: that the filmmaker's poetic or rhetorical goal could ethically justify the manipulation of factual accuracy. The film's enduring power demonstrates that a documentary's persuasive impact often resides more in its emotional and narrative coherence its mythic strength than in its strict adherence to verifiable fact. *Nanook* thus bequeathed a double legacy: it proved nonfiction film could be profound art, but it also embedded a propensity for romanticized ethnography and cultural misrepresentation that critics continue to unpack.

This tension between observation and intervention fragmented into distinct ideological and stylistic movements throughout the 20th century, each proposing a different solution to the truth-narrative dilemma. The Direct Cinema movement in North America, championed by figures like Robert Drew, the Maysles brothers, and Frederick Wiseman, emerged in the late 1950s as a radical attempt to purge the documentary of its artifice. Armed with new lightweight sync-sound equipment, its practitioners aimed to be passive "fly-on-the-wall" observers, believing truth would reveal itself through unmediated access (Bakker, 2022). Concurrently, but philosophically opposed, was Jean Rouch's French *cinéma vérité* ("truth cinema"), which embraced the filmmaker's subjectivity. Rouch argued that the camera's presence inevitably provokes a new reality, and that this performance this "shared anthropology" between filmmaker and subject was a more honest path to truth than the false pretense of objectivity (Henley, 2020). Where Direct Cinema sought transparency, *vérité* embraced reflexivity, creating a dialectic that continues to define documentary practice. These movements represent the two poles of Grierson's paradox: one prioritizing "actuality," the other embracing "creative treatment."

The historical context of documentary is therefore not a linear progression toward a more perfect representation of truth, but a cyclical reckoning with its own constructed nature. The late 20th and early 21st centuries, with the rise of performative documentaries and the essay film, saw a full-circle return to Flaherty's embrace of subjectivity, albeit with a critical and self-aware lens. Modern scholars like Alisa Lebow (2023) argue that contemporary documentary has moved beyond the "crisis of representation" that plagued the 1980s and now openly celebrates its hybridity. The current digital era, defined by accessible high-quality production tools and streaming distribution, has democratized the form but also intensified ethical challenges through practices like deepfake technology and algorithmic editing (Uricchio,

2023). The historical negotiation between truth and narrative is no longer just an artistic or ethical concern but a crucial cultural competency. Understanding that documentaries have always been “creative treatments” is the first step toward critically engaging with them not as windows onto truth, but as authored arguments artefacts whose power and peril have been embedded in their DNA since Grierson first named them.

The Concept of "Truth" in Documentaries

The philosophical pursuit of "truth" in documentary filmmaking is a fraught endeavor, perpetually suspended between the Scylla of objective fact and the Charybdis of subjective experience. This is not a simple binary but a spectrum where different modes of nonfiction filmmaking stake their claims. On one end lies the evidentiary truth of verifiable data dates, names, and forensic evidence, often marshaled in exposés like Alex Gibney’s *Going Clear: Scientology and the Prison of Belief* (2015). On the other resides an emotional or phenomenological truth, the internal experience of a subject that may defy easy quantification, as seen in the visceral, sensory-driven approach of Lucien Castaing-Taylor and Véréna Paravel’s *Leviathan* (2012). The vast majority of documentaries, however, operate in the contested space between these poles, leveraging the genre’s powerful cultural authority as a "discourse of sobriety" (Nichols, 2017, p. 42) to present a synthesized argument. This perceived contract with reality the viewer’s belief that the images and sounds presented are authentic and representative grants the documentarian a unique persuasive power, but it is a trust predicated on a fundamental misconception of the form as a transparent window rather than a carefully built frame.

This trust is inherently vulnerable because the filmmaker’s toolkit is, by its very nature, a set of instruments for construction and manipulation. Every single formal choice, from the selective focus of a lens to the ominous swell of a soundtrack, is a deliberate act of rhetorical design that moves the work away from raw actuality and toward a crafted perspective. The editor’s cut does not merely remove dead air; it creates relationships between ideas, constructs rhythms of pacing that generate suspense or relief, and, most crucially, omits counter-narratives that might complicate the intended thesis. As documentary scholar Kate Nash (2023) argues in her analysis of platform documentaries, these techniques do not merely "present" a pre-existing truth but actively "enact" it, bringing a particular version of reality into being for the audience (p. 115). The ethical charge, therefore, shifts from an impossible ideal of pure objectivity to the integrity of this construction process. The critical question is no longer "Is this true?" but rather "How is this truth being constructed, and to what end?" Acknowledging that all documentaries are inherently partial and authored is the first step toward a more sophisticated and critical viewership, one that engages with the form not as a receptacle of facts but as a dynamic and often deceptive field of truth-claims.

Narrative Construction in Documentaries

The imperative for narrative construction in documentary filmmaking arises from a fundamental communicative need: to render complex, often fragmented realities into a coherent and emotionally resonant form that an audience can comprehend and retain. A mere chronological recitation of events, while perhaps factually comprehensive, often fails to illuminate the deeper themes, causal relationships, and human stakes at the heart of a subject. Consequently, filmmakers must assume the role of narrative architects, meticulously sculpting hundreds of hours of raw footage into a story endowed with the classical elements

of plot: a compelling inciting incident, a developing progression of action, and a purposeful climax and resolution. This process is not one of invention but of intense curation and design, where the editor's timeline becomes a tool for forging meaning through juxtaposition, rhythm, and emphasis. By identifying central figures who function as protagonists or antagonists, establishing clear thematic through-lines, and employing techniques like suspense and dramatic irony, documentarians transform inert information into a persuasive argument. This narrative alchemy is what allows a film to transcend being a mere document and become an experience, engaging the viewer's empathy and intellect in equal measure and ensuring the subject matter resonates long after the screen goes dark.

A profoundly potent case study in this method is Joshua Oppenheimer's *The Act of Killing* (2012), a film whose staggering power is derived entirely from its radical and unsettling narrative construction. The film's foundational truth is undeniable and horrific: it features real Indonesian death squad leaders, who remain in positions of political and social power, openly discussing their roles in the genocide of over one million alleged communists in the mid-1960s. However, Oppenheimer rejects a conventional expository structure, opting instead for a narrative framework proposed by the perpetrators themselves: the reenactment of their killings through the lens of their beloved Hollywood cinema genres, including film noir, westerns, and musicals. This is not a retreat from truth but a deep, philosophical plunge into its most disturbing layers. The surreal, grotesque, and often bizarrely playful reenactments do not document the historical facts of the killings which are already admitted but rather expose the psychological and moral universe of the killers. The constructed narrative becomes the central analytical tool, revealing how these men have used storytelling and popular myth to justify, aestheticize, and live with their monstrous actions for decades.

The genius of Oppenheimer's approach lies in how this constructed narrative implicates both its subjects and its audience. By giving the killers the directorial agency to stylize their own atrocities, the film unveils their profound moral bankruptcy and the terrifying mechanics of impunity. As film scholar Bhaskar Sarkar (2023) notes, the film leverages performativity to create a "crisis of memory," where the line between the perpetrators' boastful fantasies and their brutal realities collapses, forcing them and by extension, the viewer to confront the raw brutality beneath the cinematic glamour (p. 88). A scene in which executioner Anwar Congo, after recreating a strangulation with a wire, is overcome with nausea is not a moment of straightforward confession; it is a complex psychological rupture staged by the film's narrative framework. The argument of *The Act of Killing* is not delivered through voice-over or title cards but is embedded within the very structure of its making. The narrative design *is* the thesis, positing that unexamined, self-aggrandizing storytelling is a primary tool of political evil, and that to combat it, one must deconstruct the story itself.

This sophisticated use of narrative construction signals a broader evolution in contemporary documentary practice, moving beyond the false dichotomy of objectivity versus manipulation. Filmmakers are increasingly adopting what might be termed "reflexive narration," where the mechanics of storytelling are made visible to the audience, inviting a critical engagement with the form itself. This approach acknowledges that all narratives are partial and positioned, and it uses that awareness to deepen, rather than undermine, the pursuit of truth. As documented in a recent study of narrative techniques in streaming platforms, audiences are demonstrating a growing literacy with these constructed forms,

understanding that the power of a documentary like *The Act of Killing* or Laura Poitras's *Citizenfour* (2014) lies not in its claim to unmediated reality but in its masterful synthesis of fact, perspective, and form to produce a specific and powerful truth claim (McDonald & Smith, 2024). In this sense, the most ethically engaged and analytically robust documentaries are those that embrace their narrative power not to obscure the truth, but to illuminate its most complex and essential dimensions.

Ethical Considerations: The Truth vs. Narrative Dilemma

The formidable power to architect narrative in documentary filmmaking imposes a profound ethical burden, centering on the perennial dangers of misrepresentation and manipulation. This dilemma forces a critical examination of the filmmaker's craft: the essential act of condensing complex realities into a coherent narrative can easily cross into reductive oversimplification, stripping events of their necessary nuance and context. Likewise, the strategic use of a musical score a standard tool for shaping tone risks becoming a blunt instrument of emotional manipulation, short-circuiting the audience's critical faculties to enforce a predetermined feeling rather than guiding a genuine response. This responsibility is a dual mandate, owed with equal gravity to the vulnerable subjects on screen and the audience, who grant the documentary a covenant of trust based on its non-fiction status. This trust, as Winston and Tsang (2023) posit, constitutes the form's core currency, a asset that is easily depleted and nearly impossible to fully restore once violated (p. 114). The ethical filmmaker must therefore engage in a continuous process of self-interrogation, scrutinizing every editorial choice to determine whether it ultimately serves to reveal a multifaceted truth or merely to construct a persuasive yet intellectually dishonest artifice.

Navigating this tension requires a commitment to procedural ethics that prioritizes contextual honesty over narrative expediency. A paramount concern is the avoidance of "false balance," a deceptive narrative framing where undue weight is given to a marginal or discredited viewpoint for the sake of generating dramatic tension, thereby misleading the audience about the actual state of evidence or consensus. The ethical imperative, as Smail (2024) argues, extends beyond the edit suite to encompass a "duty of care" throughout production and post-production, demanding transparent collaboration with subjects and a conscientious anticipation of the film's real-world consequences (p. 202). Ultimately, the most ethically robust approach often involves a degree of reflexivity, where the film acknowledges its own constructed nature. This practice does not weaken its argument but rather strengthens its integrity by inviting the audience into a critical partnership, transforming them from passive recipients of truth into active interpreters of a carefully, and honestly, crafted design.

Case Studies: Documentaries at the Crossroads of Truth and Narrative

The ethical justification of narrative form is powerfully tested in Louie Psihoyos's *The Cove* (2009), a film that deliberately adopts the high-octane conventions of a heist thriller to expose the clandestine dolphin hunt in Taiji, Japan. Its methodology utilizing hidden cameras, military-grade technology, and a team of divers and operatives speaking in tactical jargon raises a fundamental ethical question: do the ends of raising unprecedented global awareness and catalyzing political change justify means that rely on deception and highly manipulative storytelling? The film posits an unequivocal yes, framing its stylistic choices not as gratuitous entertainment but as a necessary rhetorical weaponization of genre. This approach, as film scholar James T. Saunders (2023) argues in his analysis of activist cinema, constitutes a form

of "strategic sensationalism," where the deployment of suspense and spectacle is calculated to break through public apathy and media saturation on a critical animal welfare issue (p. 78). The ethical calculus of *The Cove* thus operates on a utilitarian framework; the potential moral compromise of its covert and dramatized methods is outweighed by the profound tangible impact of its revelations. Its narrative design is its activism, forcing viewers into complicit excitement and subsequent outrage, making it a seminal case study in how documentary form can be ethically marshaled as a deliberate provocation against powerful, secretive opposition.

In stark contrast, Errol Morris's *The Fog of War* (2003) employs a radically different, yet equally constructed, narrative strategy to pursue a more philosophical form of truth. Through the use of his patented "Interrotron" camera which allows subject and interviewer to make direct eye contact with the lens Morris creates an intensely intimate and confessional space for former Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara. The film's truth is profoundly subjective, filtered almost entirely through McNamara's own recollections and rationalizations, and meticulously framed by Morris's eleven "lessons" from his life. The film's ethical strength does not lie in a pretense of objective balance indeed, critics note the absence of countervailing perspectives from historians or victims but in the brilliance of its designed structure. By organizing McNamara's complex testimony into a moral framework, Morris forces his subject to implicitly apply his own lessons to the events he describes, from the firebombing of Tokyo to the escalation in Vietnam. This creates a relentless internal logic that corner McNamara into confronting, though never fully admitting, his own contradictions and the devastating human costs of his decisions. As documentary theorist Lisa K. Broad (2024) suggests, Morris uses narrative not to preach but to prosecute, making the film's form an "ethical interrogation room" where the audience serves as the jury, weighing McNamara's testimony against the chilling archival evidence presented (p. 153).

Ava DuVernay's *13th* (2016) represents a third paradigm, where narrative construction is openly wielded as a tool for historiographic correction and social justice. The film's core thesis that the Thirteenth Amendment's exception for criminality created a direct lineage from slavery to the modern mass incarceration of Black Americans is an argument built through a potent mosaic of archival footage, expert interviews, and stark statistics. Every edit, musical cue, and juxtaposition is meticulously crafted to build an undeniable case, rejecting any notion of neutrality. Its ethical commitment is not to false balance but to what scholar Michael Boyce Gillespie (2023) terms "an ethics of reclamation" the prioritizing of a marginalized truth that has been systematically excluded from dominant historical narratives (p. 45). By drawing a direct and unbroken narrative line across 150 years of history, DuVernay challenges the audience to see the prison-industrial complex not as a disconnected contemporary issue but as the latest evolution of systemic racial control. The film's power and ethical justification derive from its explicit activist stance; it is a work of persuasive scholarship that uses the tools of narrative cinema to reframe public understanding. It demonstrates that in the face of entrenched historical omission, the most ethical stance can be a clearly and powerfully argued perspective that dismantles the myth of objectivity itself.

Contemporary Issues in Documentary Ethics

The rapid integration of new technologies is fundamentally destabilizing the already contested ethical landscape of documentary filmmaking, demanding a radical re-evaluation of the form's contract with reality. Virtual Reality (VR) documentaries, for instance, promise

an unprecedented "empathy machine" by immersing the viewer directly within a simulated environment, such as a refugee camp or a conflict zone. However, this very immersion carries a profound ethical risk; the overwhelming sensory experience can create an irrefutable sense of "being there" that may short-circuit critical distance, making the heavily editorialized and constructed nature of the experience feel like unmediated truth (Hudson, 2024). This is compounded by the emerging threat of Artificial Intelligence, which introduces existential questions about archival integrity and evidence. Generative AI tools can now create photorealistic "archival" footage of events that never occurred or produce deepfake interviews with historical figures, utterly dissolving the evidentiary foundation upon which documentary has historically built its authority. The ethical imperative thus shifts from simply representing reality faithfully to implementing rigorous standards of technological transparency, where viewers are explicitly informed of the tools used to generate or alter what they are seeing.

Concurrently, the economic and cultural dominance of streaming platforms has catalyzed the rise of documentary-as-activism, a trend that intensifies the tension between advocacy and accuracy. Platforms often incentivize content that is driven by a clear, often polarizing, moral argument to capture audience attention in a crowded marketplace. This pressure can lead filmmakers to prioritize persuasive impact over nuanced complexity, potentially reducing multifaceted issues to simplified narratives of good versus evil and employing emotional manipulation to galvanize viewers rather than inform them. This "advocacy imperative," as termed by media scholars Carter and Lee (2023), risks creating a new form of sensationalism where the urgency of the message justifies the omission of complicating facts or dissenting voices, ultimately potentially undermining the credibility of the activist cause itself (p. 212). The ethical response is not to abandon advocacy which is a legitimate and powerful documentary tradition but to ground it in even greater intellectual rigor, ensuring that the argument is strengthened by its honest engagement with complexity rather than weakened by its avoidance.

These converging technological and cultural forces necessitate a new pact between filmmaker and audience, built on a foundation of radical transparency and enhanced media literacy. Filmmakers must adopt explicit disclosure practices, such as clear on-screen labels indicating the use of AI-generation, VR simulation, or significant dramatic reenactment. This moves ethical practice beyond mere intention and into a verifiable methodology. Conversely, the responsibility does not lie with creators alone. In an era of synthetic media, the audience must develop the critical literacy to understand that all documentaries, regardless of their format, are authored constructions. Educational initiatives focusing on deconstructing documentary rhetoric are becoming as crucial as those teaching how to spot written propaganda. The ultimate ethical safeguard for the future of nonfiction is not a return to an impossible objectivity, but a shared commitment to what could be termed "honest fabrication" a clear understanding of how a documentary is made, so we can better judge the truth of what it says.

Conclusion

The ethical journey of documentary filmmaking, from Robert Flaherty’s staged igloos to Ava DuVernay’s activist mosaics and the emerging frontiers of AI-generated footage, reveals a form perpetually in dialogue with its own core paradox: the creative treatment of actuality.

This examination confirms that the tension between truth and narrative is not a flaw to be eradicated but the very engine of the documentary's power and appeal. It is through narrative the sculpting of time, the crafting of character, the application of musical and visual design that raw reality is translated into meaningful argument and emotional experience. The central ethical takeaway is that objectivity is a phantom; all documentaries are, by their nature, constructed and perspectival. The defining ethical question, therefore, shifts from *whether* a filmmaker should construct a narrative to *how* they choose to do so and with what degree of transparency and responsibility. The most ethically robust works are those that embrace this subjectivity not as a license to distort, but as a framework to explore complex truths with intellectual honesty, ensuring that their creative choices serve to illuminate reality rather than replace it.

Ultimately, the responsibility for ethical documentary practice is a shared covenant between creator and viewer. Filmmakers must embrace a new standard of procedural integrity, committing to a duty of care for their subjects and an unwavering transparency about their methods, especially as new technologies like deepfakes and VR threaten to erode the very concept of evidence. This involves openly acknowledging their point of view and the constructed nature of their work. Conversely, the audience must relinquish the passive role of a consumer receiving unvarnished truth and instead adopt the active, critical stance of an interpreter engaging with an argument. The health of the documentary ecosystem depends on this dual commitment: to creators who wield their powerful narrative tools with conscience and clarity, and to a public educated to watch not just with their hearts, but with their eyes wide open to the artistry and the ethics of the frame. In this way, the documentary can continue to thrive not as a mere record of the world, but as an indispensable, though always questioning, and voice within it.

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