

## **EXTENDED ESSAY**

### Documentary Film and the Art of Projecting Reality

**RESEARCH QUESTION:** To what extent do the films of Jean Rouch, Frederick Wiseman, and Errol Morris attempt to capture reality?

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## **ABSTRACT**

More than any other film genre, documentaries raise issues of realism in the art form. They observe real events and real people, thus receiving their label as “non-fiction films.” But how real does a documentary have to be? That is up to the director to decide. This study focuses on three accomplished documentarians, Jean Rouch, Frederick Wiseman, and Errol Morris, and the extent by which each of them attempts to capture reality. The investigation’s purpose is to uncover the multiple theories behind documentary realism, as well as the techniques used to pursue it. The thesis is that Rouch is the most adherent to realism, then Wiseman, and lastly Morris.

To find the levels of realism in each director’s work, the investigation examines three major components of documentary realism: the directors’ approach to film realism, the narrative structure of the film, and the style of interviewing. Through these three components, the directors are compared and contrasted with one another. The limitation of this study, however, is that availability of sources for Rouch and Wiseman. Rouch only speaks French, making quote-citing inconvenient, and his films are difficult to access outside France. Wiseman, meanwhile, is very reclusive, working independently and giving few interviews. Finally, much of the paper consists of personal analysis and opinion and may not reflect the director’s true intentions. Sources used included films from each director, scholarly books, articles, and interviews.

By comparing the three documentarians to each other, the investigation finds that Wiseman’s films capture reality the best. Wiseman goes to great lengths to be as aloof from subjects as possible, never involving himself in the happenings onscreen or

interviewing subjects unlike Rouch and Morris. Yet the debate on documentary realism will continue to live on as long as the genre does.

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## INTRODUCTION

Since the early 20th century, audiences around the world have been fascinated and inspired by the documentary art form. It has become a film genre of its own, but what exactly separates documentaries from theatrical films? One simple answer may be that documentaries are non-fiction films, films about real life. While fiction films create their own reality, non-fiction films capture it; documentaries attempt to capture and educate audiences primarily about real-life events, issues, and/or people. In contrast to theatrical films, most documentaries have no scripts or actors. Yet the most distinguishing element of documentaries is their claim to realism; they strive to achieve a sense that the viewer is watching real life. This dynamic is unlike that of any other art form, making it the most distinctive and controversial characteristic among audiences and documentarians. Many would agree that documentaries are the most convincing and authentic depiction of the real world by any art form today.

Yet one must remain wary of Pablo Picasso's wise words: "Art is a lie that makes us realize the truth."<sup>1</sup> The same applies to the documentary. While documentaries may claim and seem to be real, they are as much a "lie" as any other art form. Complete realism is impossible in film. One issue is what is onscreen versus what is off-screen; the viewer only sees what the camera sees. Anything behind or adjacent to the camera goes undocumented, making the viewer's perspective incomplete. In addition, film editing

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<sup>1</sup> De Zayas, Marius. "Past Masters: Picasso Speaks, 1923." *Gallery Walk*. Ed. Scot Borofsky. Arts Council of Windham County, 2003. Web. 20 Sept. 2009. <[http://www.gallerywalk.org/PM\\_Picasso.html](http://www.gallerywalk.org/PM_Picasso.html)>.

The statement was made in Spanish to Marius de Zayas. It was later published in *The Arts* (New York, May 1923) under the title "Picasso Speaks."

removes a great deal of footage and can manipulate scenes into any order, within any timeframe the editor chooses. The whole process of filmmaking diminishes realism, but those methods are necessary for making watchable, informative documentaries.

Like any filmmaker, documentarians constantly grapple with how to represent reality in their films. Three of the most acclaimed documentarians, Jean Rouch, Frederick Wiseman, and Errol Morris, make up a diverse body of work that combines a variety of approaches to film realism. Focusing on these three documentarians will shed light on much of the realism methods used today by exploring their approaches, their storytelling techniques, and how they conduct interviews. The study also begs the question of who succeeds in making the most realistic documentaries. At face value, Rouch would be the obvious choice for being the most adherent to realism of the three. Yet while some documentarians may claim to believe in one approach to realism, their films may say the contrary.

With the rising production value and popularity of documentaries in recent years, it is now more important than ever to understand the documentary. At the core of art is humanity's ability to create something out of nothing, like a sculptor who takes a slab of rock and turns it into a beautiful goddess, or a musician who takes silence and turns it into a euphony of sounds. Documentary is an art form too, that art coming from the filmmaker's ability to create an illusion of real life on to an otherwise blank screen.

## THE DIRECTORS

### Jean Rouch

Arguably one of the most influential documentarians in history, French director Jean Rouch had a prolific career of over one hundred films. While he never became a household name, he is still celebrated as a revolutionary filmmaker and anthropologist, focusing much of his work on African culture and life. Rouch is often credited as the father of cinema vérité, one of the most controversial and significant documentary movements of the century. Cinéma vérité, sometimes referred to as “truth cinema,” is a theory of documentary that follows the belief that through less interference, the filmmaker can capture the authentic and real world on screen. The less obtrusive the filmmaking process is to subjects, the more real the footage is. Rouch’s most well-known work, *Chronique d’un été* (1961), or *Chronicle of a Summer*, documents the lives of citizens during a summer in Paris. The film explores numerous realism techniques and is recognized as the exemplary cinéma vérité film. *Chronicle of a Summer* is purely an experiment, but a fascinating and first of its kind experiment at that.

### Frederick Wiseman

Boston-born filmmaker Frederick Wiseman has been hailed as one of the greatest living documentarians today. He explores American social institutions<sup>2</sup> through over 30 documentary features, including mental asylums, high schools, and meat processing plants. Wiseman is hardly a conformist; his films have been involved in numerous lawsuits for being too revealing or injuring the reputations of his subjects. Although his

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<sup>2</sup> "Frederick Wiseman, Chronicler of the Western World." *Zipporah Films*. Ed. John Weir. Zipporah Films, Inc., 2006. Web. 20 Sept. 2009. <<http://www.zipporah.com/wiseman>>.

style is very close to Rouch's, Wiseman dislikes being placed in the same category. Wiseman often calls his films "reality fictions"<sup>3</sup>; they are never meant to be objective, rather, they document what he saw and found most interesting in the moment.<sup>4</sup> Two of Wiseman's most impressive works are *Titicut Follies* (1967), which documents a Massachusetts asylum for the criminally insane, and *High School* (1968), about a Philadelphia public school.

### **Errol Morris**

Errol Morris has become one of the most famous and critically acclaimed American directors, an unusual combination for a documentarian. Since his first documentary feature in 1978, Morris' films have introduced the world to some of the most bizarre and intriguing subjects: from pet cemetery owners to Steven Hawking, from a topiary gardener to an execution device designer, from Robert McNamara to Abu Ghraib. These are just a taste of the world of Errol Morris. As a documentarian, Morris is the least concerned about realism compared to Rouch or Wiseman, opting to make his films more theatrical and artistic. Morris' breakout film, *The Thin Blue Line* (1988), which investigates the murder of a police officer, challenges the value of realism in documentaries. *The Fog of War* (2003) is another great work that showcases his unique interview methods and controversial narrative structure.

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<sup>3</sup> p. 1, Benson, Thomas W., and Carolyn Anderson. Reality Fictions: The Films of Frederick Wiseman. 2002nd ed. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois UP, 1989.

<sup>4</sup> p. 52, Aufderheide, Patricia. Documentary Film: A Very Short Introduction. New York, NY: Oxford UP, 2007.



## APPROACHES TO REALISM

Before a documentary begins production, the director has an established idea of an approach to the project. One's approach to realism can be the foundation for the rest of the film: its story structure, the conducting of interviews, and even the ultimate message or goal of the film. Rouch, Wiseman, and Morris have refined their approaches to realism through experience and through watching each other's films.

Rouch's approach to capturing reality became what is now known as the *cinéma vérité* formula. Rouch was an advocate of realism in film, believing he had the ability to capture the real world and transfer it to the screen untouched. Through realism would transpire raw, undeniable truth. Thus he developed a method to make documentaries more authentic and convincing to audiences. First, they must be shot using a handheld camera.<sup>5</sup> The unsteadiness gives the camera natural body movement and creates the illusion that the camera is the eye of the viewer. Second, the films must use natural, available light, in contrast to the heavy use of artificial lighting by studio films.<sup>5</sup> Third, directors and crew must be as unobtrusive as possible during shooting.<sup>5</sup> Like a fly on a wall, they must observe, but not be observed. In the search for a pure reality, Rouch departed from traditional techniques of big-budget Hollywood productions by relying less on machines and more on nature.

"Documentaries, like theatre pieces, novels or poems are forms of fiction."<sup>6</sup> As previously mentioned, Wiseman labels his films as "reality fictions," an odd yet insightful phrase into his opinions of realism. The name can imply several things: first, it

<sup>5</sup> p. 44, Aufderheide, *ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> "Frederick Wiseman, Chronicler of the Western World." *Zipporah Films*. Ed. John Weir. Zipporah Films, Inc., 2006. Web. 20 Sept. 2009. <<http://www.zipporah.com/wiseman>>.

denounces Wiseman's responsibility for representing objective realism. Wiseman has claimed that his films do not attempt to be fair and balanced, but reflect his personal opinions on the subject.<sup>7</sup> "Reality fictions" also furthers Wiseman's claim to artistic freedom in his films, since "fiction" is the creation of alternative realities. These beliefs sharply contrast Rouch, who refused to manipulate his captured reality by adding personal views or artistic flourishes.

Yet for someone trying to distance himself from Rouch, it is puzzling to see the resemblance of Wiseman's films to *cinéma vérité*. Wiseman appears to follow all the rules, using only handheld camera, available light, and being even less obtrusive than Rouch. Wiseman is a hybrid of contrasting realism theories, making him impossible to place in one category.

Meanwhile, there is little ambiguity of Morris' stance on realism. To him, preserving reality is less important than preserving truth, for truth encompasses the film's meaning and discovery. Thus he is fully opposed to *cinéma vérité*:

"[*Cinéma vérité*] is one of those meat-grinder ideas. You put in the appropriate ingredients, and magically, truth results. To me, it's utter nonsense. Who could have ever made such a claim? On the basis of *what*? Does the font you use to print a sentence guarantee its truth or falsity? I think not."<sup>8</sup>

In response to Rouch, Morris tries to defy all his rules. One, he does not shoot handheld: since his movies consist mostly of interviews, the camera is always on a tripod. Two, he chooses to use all artificial lighting: from interviews to reenactments, Morris shoots much of his footage on studio sets. Three, he allows himself to be very obtrusive:

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<sup>7</sup> p. 52, Aufderheide, *ibid*.

<sup>8</sup> Morris, Errol. "The Anti-Post-Modern Post-Modernist." History and Literature Public Lectures. Harvard University, Cambridge, MA. Errol Morris. 2005. 30 Sept. 2009 <<http://www.errolmorris.com/content/lecture/theantipost.html>>.

Although Morris never appears on screen in his documentaries, he is occasionally heard asking the questions or responding to a subject's answer. No aspects of Morris' films take the "fly-on-the-wall" approach of Rouch and Wiseman. He instead thrusts his audiences into the movie and sets them in the interviewer's chair. The audience is not a bug but a human being conversing with other humans.

## THE NARRATIVE

One's approach to realism plays heavily on film narrative, or how the story is told. Documentaries, like fiction, have story lines to organize and condense hours of footage as well as to engage audiences. Some directors choose to model their film in the three-act structure of theatrical films. Others may construct a looser structure to replicate the spontaneity of real life.

Rouch's takes the latter approach in *Chronicle of a Summer*. The film, co-directed by French philosopher Edgar Morin, follows the lives of the multiple Parisians without a clear plot or climax. Since Rouch is against interfering with his footage, there is no need for him to mold the film into a story if there was none in the first place. Thus the film's progression is natural and unforced, paying more attention to character development than actual plot. The people experience real-life triumphs and setbacks from the beginning to the end of the film: a young boy discovers love for the first time; a man loses his job for being in the film; a woman overcomes depression; a couple struggles to stay together. These character progressions make the subjects and the film as a whole more relatable and realistic.

While spontaneous in its subject matter, at the same time the film is carefully structured. *Chronicle of a Summer* was partly intended to be a social experiment. Like any scientific study, there is an introduction and hypothesis by the Rouch and Morin, numerous trials, and a conclusion and evaluation. This structure furthers the realism because it retracts the film from art and strives for scientific study.

One of the primary ways by which Rouch attempts to validate the authenticity of the study is by making the filmmakers present throughout it. Rouch and Morin are onscreen the moment the film begins and ends, as well as during interviews. The frequent presence of Rouch is ironic as it defies the *cinéma vérité* law of observational filmmaking. Perhaps *Chronicle of a Summer* is an exception since it is both a social and filmmaking experiment. But the presence of the filmmakers does have its benefits to realism, for it admits that the film is just a film. Viewers also have the chance to watch the production process of the film, which was very uncommon at the time. It also gives the impression that Rouch has nothing to hide, making the film seem more convincing.

Wiseman, in contrast, adheres to the three-act story structure for his works. *Titicut Follies* exemplifies various narrative techniques. For one, he selects certain subjects to protagonists (the inmates) and antagonists (the asylum guards). There is much rising action too, as the treatment of prisoners becomes more and more unsettling with each scene. Wiseman also brings his story full circle by beginning and ending the film with an inmate talent show. The use of these storytelling techniques reveals Wiseman's view that realism does not have to exclude structure.

Wiseman never reveals himself or the production process like in *Chronicle of a Summer*. He too includes no narration and, oddly enough, no interviews. Rather, the

subjects tell their story through their interactions with others. In *High School*, the film progresses through the relations between the students and teachers. Without narration or interviews, the viewer believes that they are seeing an objective reality and are free to make their own judgments. As Wiseman admitted previously, such is not his intention as he makes the films reflect his interpretations.

Morris also uses the three-act structure to tell his stories but compared to Wiseman, they are more dramatized than realistic. *The Thin Blue Line* plays like a good detective flick; it has suspense, mystery, and a dramatic payoff at the end in which the true killer is revealed. Morris' films further their theatricality with the inclusion of musical score, something neither Rouch nor Wiseman use. The cinematic style of Morris' films hence takes little regard for realism and more for entertaining audiences.

Like Rouch, Morris's films consist entirely of interviews. In *The Thin Blue Line*, the story develops solely through interviews with police officers, lawyers, and witnesses. Meanwhile, *The Fog of War* is an interview of one person, Robert McNamara. It is commonly believed that one must weigh both sides of the story for a more real, complete picture, but this is not so in *Fog of War*. Morris' disregard for balance interestingly echoes Wiseman's refusal to be objective. But while Wiseman may find more realism in observing the existential actions of people, Morris believes that talking directly to subjects can paint a fuller, more real portrait of them .

To have the entire movie be talking heads would quickly bore audiences. For this reason, Morris inserts plenty of cutaway footage: archive film, photos, artistic montages, and reenactments. Artistic montages in *The Fog of War* add dramatic effect to what Robert McNamara says. These montages are highly metaphoric: for instance, when

McNamara speaks about the buildup to the Vietnam War, Morris shows a line of dominos falling over on a map of Asia. This inclusion of artistic montages like this marks a departure from Rouch and Wiseman, diverting his attention from realism and bringing his films closer to art.

Reenactments are another unique element that furthers Morris' apathy for realism. In *The Thin Blue Line*, Morris inserts reenactments of the policeman's murder based on witnesses and police accounts. "The reenactments were my attempt to put the audience right in that mystery,"<sup>9</sup> says Morris. The scenes are beautifully shot and very cinematic in their nature; the camera angles, the color palette, the heavy use of shadows, the sophisticated editing; all things not expected in a documentary. It is these aspects that make *The Thin Blue Line* seem less like a documentary.

These various narrative structures further complement the conflicting outlooks on realism from each director. Both Rouch and Morris depend heavily on interviews to unveil realism in their stories, while Wiseman only captures the existential actions of people. On the other hand, Wiseman and Morris agree on using the three-act structure for their films, while Rouch allows stories to develop spontaneously. Wiseman and Morris additionally both take artistic liberties with their stories, while Rouch adds little to the footage he has compiled.

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<sup>9</sup> A Brief History of Errol Morris. Dir. Kevin Macdonald. Perf. Errol Morris. DVD. Film Transit International, 2000.

## THE INTERVIEW

Interviews are another major element of realism. They include real people with real opinions, creating the illusion that they are conversing with the audience. Without interviews, filmmakers would have to resort to voice-over narration, which defies realism in the first place. There are many methods of filming a conversation, and Rouch, Wiseman, and Morris represent just a few of them.

Apart from being an experiment in *cinéma vérité*, Rouch's *Chronicle of a Summer* is also an experiment in interviewing. Rouch tests nearly every technique in the book. Early in the film, a hidden camera films an interviewer as she walks through the crowded streets of Paris, confronting random strangers for "a survey." These candid interviews can claim to be more realistic than seated ones, but pushing a microphone in people's faces can be just as obtrusive as shoving a camera in front of them.

At times, Rouch detaches himself from interviews by prompting discussion between two or more subjects. In one scene, a white worker and black boy sit on a staircase and discuss poverty. Rouch is experimenting how much he as the filmmaker has on the interview, and whether the conversation between the two strangers is more natural. But can this conversation be considered totally natural, since Rouch prompted them to converse? While the filmmaker's absence may follow the *cinéma vérité* formula, the nature of the conversation is unrealistic since the filmmaker arranged it.

The most unique interview of *Chronicle of a Summer* takes place at the end, in which the subjects watch the completed film and assess its authenticity and truth. Rouch

called this technique “shared anthropology.”<sup>10</sup> This fascinating scene further enforces the film’s realism as a social study because the subjects are extremely analytical of the film. Rouch’s boldness to insert this scene at the end also ratifies his confidence that he has nothing to hide from the viewer, further rendering the film as believable and realistic.

Although Wiseman has no interviews in his films, he too includes plenty of conversations between the subjects. All of them are shot handheld with one or more cameras, allowing Wiseman to cut from person to person and capture all of their reactions. He occasionally uses extreme close ups of the face, mouth, and hands to accentuate facial expressions and body language. At other times, the camera is placed in very obscure areas to peer behind objects or corners of the room. These shots make up the “fly-on-the-wall” approach in which viewers feel as though they are eavesdropping on conversations. At the same time, the filmmaker is perceived as unobtrusive and hiding from subjects to capture the candid actions of people. This style fits the *cinéma vérité* model of filmmakers as observers of reality, rather than some of the experimental exploits of Rouch in *Chronicle of a Summer*.

When Wiseman tries to be aloof from his subjects, Morris’ interview techniques are intruding. His interviews are usually done in a studio, a violation of *cinéma vérité* since studios use artificial lights and makeup. But as discussed before, Morris is not a doctrinaire of realism; he does not hide behind corners like Wiseman or sit with his subjects at a dinner table like Rouch, but places the camera right in front of them. Yet

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<sup>10</sup> p. 44, Rothman, William. *Three Documentary Filmmakers*. Albany, NY: State University of New York P, 2009.



Morris can agree with the issue raised in *Chronicle of a Summer*, that people can act differently in front of a camera.

That is why Morris invented the “interrotron,” a device that combines a movie camera with a teleprompter. In most documentaries, subjects look off to the side of the camera at the interviewer, but the interrotron forces subjects to look directly into the lens. Morris and his subject sit apart from each other, each with an interrotron directed straight at their faces. The interrotron takes the live video of Morris’s face and projects it in front of the lens that is filming the subject, and vice versa. The subject is not jarred to look directly into the camera because all they see is the talking face of Morris.

Why go through all this trouble just to make people look at the camera? Morris explains:

“I think eye contact is really important. What’s absolutely clear is that it has dramatic value. You know when someone is looking at you, and you know when you’re looking at a person who is looking at you. You know when you connect in that way.”<sup>11</sup>

*The Fog of War* is just one of the films to implement this technique. By having the subject, Robert McNamara, look directly at the camera, it creates the illusion that he is looking at and talking to the viewer. According to Morris, a profound connection is built between subject and viewer, adding a whole new aspect of realism to the film. Morris also notes the “dramatic value,” an appropriate addition to the theatricality of his work.

The ways by which documentarians film human interactions reflect their stances on film realism. Wiseman chooses to film others’ conversations, while Morris always talks to subjects one-on-one. Rouch’s experiment implements both of their approaches,

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<sup>11</sup> A Brief History of Errol Morris. Dir. Kevin Macdonald. Perf. Errol Morris. DVD. Film Transit International, 2000.

otherwise he would most likely side with Wiseman on filming on location and not interfering with subjects. Meanwhile, Morris feels that the realism of interviews lies not in where they are filmed but in their connection with the viewer. Without concerns for realism in interviews, documentaries would be deemed untrustworthy and be less effective in spreading the filmmaker's message.

## CONCLUSION

Documentaries, as with all art forms, are essentially not real. A documentary can look and feel realistic, but it is a separate world from the one we live in. The inevitably restricting qualities of the camera and the editing process prevent viewers from ever seeing the complete picture, but that is where directors come in. Directors like Jean Rouch, Frederick Wiseman, and Errol Morris have the ability to make their documentaries as realistic as they want them to be using various techniques in storytelling and interviewing.

Each director exemplified the different approaches to creating film realism. Rouch was a champion of objective realism and non-intervention by filmmakers. Wiseman was the middle-man; on one side he borrowed *cinéma vérité* methods and on the other he believed in expressing art and subjectivity. Morris was the polar opposite of Rouch, being a nonchalant realist who implemented both theatrical and artistic aspects in his work.

The narrative structure of their documentaries revealed key similarities and differences between the directors' takes on realism. Rouch chose not to force his footage into a clear plot in order to show an untouched, realistic story. He also decided to reveal

the production process of his film *Chronicle of a Summer* and appear onscreen. Wiseman never revealed himself on camera, while Morris never appeared physically onscreen but was sometimes heard during interviews. Morris additionally differentiated himself by using art montages and reenactments throughout his films, a diversion from realism disapproved by Rouch and Wiseman.

The conducting of interviews further compared the different views on realism. Rouch and Morris' films mostly consisted of interviews, believing that talking to people revealed more. Meanwhile, Wiseman decided conversations between subjects to be realistic enough. Rouch tested the latter view in *Chronicle of a Summer*, but instead provoked subjects to interact. Morris, meanwhile, introduced an innovative invention that encouraged subjects to connect with viewers.

To what extent, then, did the directors ultimately preserve reality? While Rouch might seem the obvious choice due to *cinéma vérité*, Wiseman's work is the most convincing and realistic. His films do not feel manipulative, but if they are as Wiseman claims, it is difficult to detect what makes them so. This is helped by Wiseman's zealous effort to distance himself from what he is filming. Rouch and Morris, meanwhile, both involve themselves in the happenings on screen, specifically during interviews. Wiseman felt no need to provoke conversations or insert a plethora of cutaways to wrap the audience's attention; instead he just tried to capture the natural, spontaneous goings-on of people's lives, which is the basic concept of film realism.

As one can see, the divisions between the directors are not clear-cut. The directors occasionally shared opinions on realism, even when they were polar opposites like Rouch and Wiseman. Realism in documentary is such a broad and complex issue, it is no

wonder that documentarians continue to argue and discuss it. How realistic is one willing to make their film? By what means does one take to fulfill that realism? These questions are still debated today and will continue to be until the documentary genre fades away.

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