

A Contextual Analysis of Documentary Film as a Product and Tool for Academic Exercise

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the justifications for using documentary film as a product of academic exercise, using the films "Return of the Biblical Plague: Mosquitoes" and "Bitter Lake" as case studies. Through an analysis of the production and reception of these films, the paper explores how documentary can be used to visually tell stories that follow the replicability of academic research procedures, from the selection of subject matter and site to planning and interviewing subjects to data collection and analysis. The paper also addresses the challenges and ethical considerations associated with using documentary film as an academic exercise, including representation, power, and objectivity issues. Ultimately, the paper argues that documentary films have the potential to enhance academic exercise by providing a compelling, engaging medium through which to explore complex issues and promote critical thinking. The paper is structured into four segments of analysis. The initial segment encompasses the foundational aspects of documentary film production, which involves establishing the core argument and exploring its historical contexts. The subsequent segment delves into research as a reproducible methodology, establishing empirical evidence concerning a particular phenomenon. The third part also examines the essence of the documentary film-making process, accompanied by a comparative analysis juxtaposed with research as a scientific procedural endeavor, including the analysis of two documentary films, "The Biblical Plague" and "Bitter Lake". Using the Auteur film theory, the final segment centers on, culminating in a comprehensive conclusion that substantiates the contention that documentary film-making serves as both a creative output and a valuable tool within the realm of academic exploration.

Keywords: Academic exercise, documentary film, film production, research.

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I. BACKGROUND AND HISTORICAL CONTEXTS OF DOCUMENTARY FILM

A. Introduction

Documentary film has been used as a tool for academic exercise since the early 20th century (Bruzzi & Gibson, 2017), with scholars and educators using it to explore various subjects and issues (Smith, 2010). According to Smith (2010) and Nichols (2017), documentary film is a form of non-fiction film-making that aims to document real-world events, people, and places, often focusing on social and political issues. Over time, the use of documentary film in academic contexts has evolved, reflecting the changing social, cultural, and political contexts in which it is used (Jones, 2015). According to Brown (2018), while debates and contestations about the role and value of documentary films in academic settings are ongoing, the justifications for its use remain compelling.

As shown by the definitions of Nichols (2010) and Bruzzi (2018), documentary film is a complex and multifaceted genre that presents reality in a creative and interpretive way. It is not neutral or objective but rather shaped by the filmmaker's subjective perspective. According to Winston (2013), storytelling and emotional impact are important elements in documentary film-making to capture the viewers' attention and encourage them to connect with the subject matter, just as a scientific or academic research paper. This genre can serve various purposes, such as social commentary, emotional storytelling, and education, just like an academic paper.

The term academic exercise or research refers to tasks or activities performed for learning, training, or practicing academic skills. It is commonly used in educational institutions to enhance students' understanding and knowledge of specific subjects. Academic exercises can come in various forms, including essays, research projects, and presentations. (Gunnarsson, 2018). Academic research involves a "systematic and rigorous investigation of a particular topic or issue in a specific field" (Wisker, 2018, p.

1) with the primary objective of producing new knowledge, advancing existing knowledge, or challenging accepted knowledge within that field (Neuman, 2016). This type of research is typically conducted by scholars or researchers affiliated with academic institutions, such as universities. It is often published in peer-reviewed journals or presented at academic conferences (Fink, 2019).

Documentary film is a form of academic exercise due to its adoption of qualitative research methods. It employs a scientific process of gathering, processing, and analyzing data to empirically explain a particular issue or phenomenon in a visual form. As Nichols (2002) states, the documentary film is based on actualities, making it a critical reality-shaping communication. Similarly, academic research follows a replicable procedure to explain a particular phenomenon in the social world. Documentary production follows the same procedure with more complicated activities, including capturing images in video form and recording voice narrations to present research findings convincingly. Compared to academic written work, documentary films are more reliable and easily accessible to the public, reaching beyond just literate audiences.

Moreover, documentary films are used to investigate social phenomena; as such, it is seen as an academic research activity that integrates the qualitative research approach in the social sciences to investigate the phenomena. According to Kothari (2004), qualitative phenomena require qualitative research approaches in the social sciences. This involves all the elements of qualitative research, from site selection through data collection to sharing results after production. This approach involves investigating the quality or kind of a phenomenon to discover the underlying reasons contributing to its state through in-depth interviews (Mühl, 2014).

Documentary films qualify as an academic exercise since they follow a replicable academic research process and assume qualitative approaches in examining attitudes and sorting opinions of interviewed subjects. Due to their nature of actuality, capturing videos of people, objects, and places in real-time, documentary films are comparable to other academic products (Eckhardt, 2012; Fitzgerald & Lowe, 2020; Nichols, 2002).

The production of documentary films as an academic exercise has gained attention in recent years, and there is a need to understand and justify their role within academia comprehensively. This study aims to challenge the notion that documentary films are non-academic and, for that matter, inferior to academic products, such as journal publications, books, and reports. To justify our argument, we undertake a comparative methodological analysis of two documentary films, "Return of the Biblical Plague: Mosquitoes" and "Bitter Lake" and other academic products. These documentary films will exemplify the replicable research process, qualitative approaches, and the ability of documentary films to capture real-life experiences and perspectives.

B. Historical Context

Documentary film-making has a long history, dating back to the early 20th century (Nichols, 2017). The genre began to emerge in the 1920s and 1930s, with filmmakers aiming to capture the reality of everyday life (Corner & Rosenthal, 1991; Nichols, 2017). The post-World War II era saw documentary film-making becoming more politically engaged, with filmmakers using the medium to critique social and political issues (Corner & Rosenthal, 1991; Nichols, 2017).

Documentary film has also been used in academic exercises, with early documentary filmmakers like John Grierson and Robert Flaherty using the medium to document social and political issues (Nichols, 2017). In the 1960s and 1970s, documentary film became an important tool for social activists, who used it to document protests and social movements (Nichols, 2017). This period saw the emergence of a new wave of documentary filmmakers, such as Frederick Wiseman, who used the medium to explore complex social issues in-depth. Documentary film in academic exercise continued to grow throughout the 20th century, with scholars and educators using it to explore various subjects, including anthropology, history, and environmental studies (Nichols, 2017).

In Africa, documentary film-making has a distinctive and vibrant history that traces its origins to the 1920s. Nonetheless, it was not until the 1960s that filmmakers began producing documentaries that addressed social and political issues related to anti-colonial struggles and the fight for independence (Jagire, 2016; Muyumba, 2015). With the rise of digital technology, Africa has shifted towards a more personal and subjective documentary film-making style (Jagire, 2016; Muyumba, 2015).

II. THE NATURE OF ACADEMIC RESEARCH

A. Purpose of Research: Investigating Phenomena

According to Kothari (2004), research involves defining and redefining problems, collecting data, and organizing and evaluating them for deduction and conclusion. Bhattacharjee (2012) further defines academic research as a systematic process of using scientific methods to investigate phenomena in the social world. This has made research the primary means of discovering social problems and solutions

(Mühl, 2014). As emphasized by Bhattacharjee (2012), Kothari (2004) and Sam (2012), each research endeavor aims to explore a specific phenomenon. Therefore, theories and concepts are applied to make academic research scientific (Mühl, 2014; Sam, 2012).

According to Bhattacharjee (2012), theories play a crucial role in explaining why events occur and predicting future events or behaviors. The author emphasizes that prediction relies on identifying correlations between incidents by observing events and their outcomes. On the other hand, explanations involve investigating causality and understanding to analyze cause-effect relationships in events. These characteristics distinguish academic research from ordinary forms of research, setting it apart as a distinct endeavor. As an academic enterprise, research aims to scientifically explore specific phenomena, contributing to advancing knowledge in the social realm.

B. Literature Review: Building on Existing Knowledge

Academic research is a systematic and rigorous process of investigating a particular phenomenon to generate new knowledge or validate existing ones (Ojimelukwe *et al.*, 2018). The main objective is to lead to a better understanding of the phenomenon and promote efficient learning, which can be achieved by building basic knowledge, providing information, correcting wrong notions, and developing critical thinking for change in the social world (Ojimelukwe *et al.*, 2018). A literature review is an important step in academic research as it allows the researcher to gain an in-depth understanding of existing research and debates on the topic under investigation (Sam, 2012). This helps the researcher identify the existing literature gaps and frame better research questions to address those gaps. Thus, the literature review is crucial to academic research and adds to its scientific rigor.

C. Filling a Gap: Answering Specific Questions of Phenomena

Academic research aims to generate new knowledge or challenge and validate existing knowledge (Ojimelukwe *et al.*, 2018). A crucial aspect of scientific research is to identify gaps in the existing knowledge and address them (Leavy, 2017). When conducting a literature review, researchers can identify such gaps and refine research questions, methods, participants, and audiences accordingly (Leavy, 2017). This enables researchers to build on existing knowledge and contribute to advancing their field of study.

D. Methodology: Following Replicable Procedures

Academic research is a systematic process that aims to generate or validate new knowledge through scientific methods (Bhattacharjee, 2012; Kothari, 2004). Research methodology is an essential component of academic research, as it outlines the various steps involved in solving a research problem and provides the logic behind them (Bist, 2014). Research methodology includes research methods, defines the techniques involved, and answers questions such as why, what, where, when, and how the research will be conducted (Bist, 2014). Research methods serve as a means of measuring the phenomenon being studied, either by the researcher or others (Bhattacharjee, 2012).

E. Advances Human Understanding/Knowledge of Phenomena

Academic research plays a significant role in advancing human understanding and knowledge of various phenomena in the social world (Leavy, 2017). The research process helps individuals conceive and transform ideas into more tangible views based on a deep understanding of a particular phenomenon, leading to further discoveries for the benefit of others (Ojimelukwe *et al.*, 2018). Through research, hidden phenomena in the social world can be unraveled, leading to the discovery of new knowledge that can benefit humanity. Whether research aims to validate or challenge existing findings, it helps to expand human understanding of phenomena, and new perspectives can provide additional knowledge to correct or counter old findings (Leavy, 2017).

III. NATURE OF DOCUMENTARY FILM-MAKING

Documentary films are a powerful medium that blends storytelling, journalism, and cinematic artistry to explore and shed light on various aspects of the human experience (Dovey, 2016). Unlike fictional narratives, documentary films aim to capture real-life events, people, and places, presenting them as engaging and informative (Nichols, 2017). The nature of documentary film production encompasses a unique set of characteristics and challenges that distinguish it from other forms of film-making. Documentary film production is driven by a commitment to capturing truth and presenting it to audiences authentically and compellingly (Rascaroli, 2017). Documentaries often delve into real-world issues, historical events, social movements, scientific discoveries, or personal narratives, seeking to educate, inspire, and provoke thought (Renov, 2013). Filmmakers involved in documentary production strive to explore different perspectives, uncover hidden truths, and challenge preconceived notions, allowing viewers to gain deeper insights into the subjects being explored (Winston, 2013).

One of the key aspects that sets documentary film production apart is the emphasis on research and factual accuracy (Bruzzi, 2018). Documentaries are typically grounded in extensive research, with filmmakers immersing themselves in the subject matter to gather information, conduct interviews, and gather primary sources (Nichols, 2017). This rigorous approach ensures that documentaries present a well-informed and reliable account of the topic. Ethical considerations also play a crucial role, as documentary filmmakers must navigate issues of consent, representation, and the responsibility to portray their subjects fairly and honestly (Ruby, 2013).

Documentary film production often demands flexibility and adaptability. Unlike scripted narratives, real-life events can be unpredictable, requiring filmmakers to be ready to capture moments as they unfold (Bruzzi, 2018). This may involve extended periods of observation and patient waiting for the right opportunity to document significant moments or capture candid interviews. Additionally, documentary filmmakers often work with limited budgets and resources, relying on creativity and resourcefulness to bring their vision to life (Renov, 2013).

A. *Types of Documentary Films*

Documentary films have been acknowledged as a powerful tool for exploring complex issues, promoting critical thinking, and advancing scholarly inquiry (Nichols, 2010). The various types of documentary films each have their unique characteristics and purposes. The main types of documentary films include poetic, expository, observational, participatory, and reflexive, each with its unique characteristics and purposes. Documentary filmmakers use these types to create engaging, informative, and thought-provoking films. Poetic documentaries are a type of film that uses images, sound, and text to create a subjective and personal impression of reality.

According to Nichols (2010), poetic documentaries are characterized by their emphasis on visual and emotional impact rather than on informational content. Expository documentaries, on the other hand, are a type of film that uses voice-over narration, interviews, and other informational techniques to convey a message or argument. Nichols (2010) states that expository documentaries are characterized by their emphasis on factual information and their use of authoritative voices to guide the viewer's interpretation of events. Observational documentaries are another type of film that attempts to capture reality as it unfolds without intervention from the filmmaker. According to Nichols (2010), observational documentaries are characterized by their emphasis on realism and their rejection of voice-over narration or other techniques that might interfere with the viewer's immersion in the world of the film. Participatory documentaries involve the filmmaker in the action or subject of the film. Nichols (2010) characterizes participatory documentaries by their emphasis on subjectivity and their use of the filmmaker's presence to explore the subject matter. Reflexive documentaries are a type of film that draws attention to the film-making process. According to Nichols (2010), reflexive documentaries emphasize self-reflection and use meta-narrative techniques to explore the relationship between the filmmaker, the subject, and the viewer. These are the classifications of documentary films, which are produced based on the type of documentary film production technique employed by the filmmaker.

B. *Types of Documentary Production Techniques*

Documentary films are a popular genre of film that seeks to capture real-life events or experiences. There are several types of documentary production techniques, including directed documentary, cinema vérité, and directed and cinema vérité mix (Eckhardt, 2012; Rosenthal & Eckhardt, 2016).

A directed documentary is a film where the filmmaker has complete control over the production process. The filmmaker's vision drives the story; the film is usually scripted and well-planned (Rosenthal & Eckhardt, 2016). The film's subjects are often interviewed and carefully selected for their relevance to its theme. The director typically uses voice-over narration to guide the viewer's understanding of the film's content. However, scholars like Nichols (2010) and Renov (2013) criticize that this type of documentary is sometimes too biased, as the filmmaker's perspective is heavily emphasized.

Cinema vérité, or direct cinema, is a documentary film production emphasizing spontaneous and unscripted moments. This type of film production is often associated with the French New Wave movement of the 1960s (Eckhardt, 2012). The filmmaker typically uses handheld cameras and tries to capture the subjects in their natural surroundings, often without preconceived ideas of how the film will unfold. Cinema vérité filmmakers attempt to remain as unobtrusive as possible, allowing the subjects to speak and act naturally. This type of documentary is celebrated for its realism, but critics argue that it can lack structure and may not adequately address the subject matter.

A directed and cinema vérité mix documentary is a type of film technique that combines elements of both directed and cinema vérité production techniques. The filmmaker may have an overall plan or theme for the film but still allows for capturing spontaneous moments. This type of documentary is often more flexible and less rigid than a directed documentary but still maintains an overall narrative structure (Rosenthal & Eckhardt, 2016). The choice of documentary production technique depends on the filmmaker's vision, the subject matter, and the intended audience. Each type of documentary production

technique offers unique strengths and weaknesses, and choosing the right one can significantly impact the film's success.

C. Research Elements in Documentary Film Production

Documentary filmmakers often use qualitative research methods to frame their questions, allowing them to explore people's attitudes and opinions on the investigated issues. It uses several elements, including problem identification, knowledge gap analysis, data collection and analysis, narration, references, animations, and graphics. By incorporating these elements effectively, filmmakers can create impactful, engaging films that inform and inspire their audiences.

Documentary films are produced to address a societal problem, often used to create awareness and promote social change (Aitken & McDonald, 2013). As such, a crucial aspect of documentary production is problem identification, which involves identifying and understanding the issue the film aims to address. Through this process, filmmakers can determine the best approach to take and ensure their work is impactful and relevant. Another essential element of documentary production is knowledge gap analysis, which involves identifying what is known and unknown about the issue (Russell, 2018). By doing this, filmmakers can clearly understand the knowledge gaps and determine how to present their findings to the audience best.

Data collection and analysis are also critical components of documentary film-making. Footages on site, interviews, inserts, and ambient sound are all used to provide evidence and support the film's arguments (Corner & Rosenthal, 2015). Through careful analysis of the collected data, the filmmaker can ensure that the film is accurate and relevant to the issue. Narration is another important element in documentary film-making, and it can take the form of voice-over or talking heads (Eckhardt, 2012). Voice-over narration often provides context, explains complex concepts, and provides a cohesive narrative structure. Talking heads, which refer to interviews with experts or key individuals related to the film's subject, can provide credibility and context to the film's arguments (Renov, 2013). Furthermore, references such as in-text citations are often used in documentary films to support the film's arguments and provide evidence for the claims made (Rosenthal & Eckhardt, 2016). These references can include research institutions, experts in the field, and statistics, among others. Finally, animations and graphics are often used to illustrate complex concepts or data that may be difficult to convey through traditional footage. Animations and graphics can also be used to create visual interest and enhance the audience's engagement with the film (Corner & Rosenthal, 2015).

D. Film Production Process

Film-making is the art and process of creating motion pictures captured and recorded on an electronic device, such as a camera (Hurbis-Cherrier, 2013; Nichols, 2010). Documentary film production is a specialized genre of film-making that aims to document actual people, events, and places (Nichols, 2010). Therefore, it shares the same three basic stages of film production: pre-production, production, and post-production (Bordwell & Thompson, 2013).

E. Pre-production Process

The pre-production stage of documentary film production involves various activities, such as idea conception, topic selection, and concept development, followed by research (Nichols, 2010). Research involves contextual research and field surveys to gather more knowledge on the subject matter. At the same time, a synopsis is written to detail logistics and techniques to be applied in filming, including camera and framing techniques and personnel required for the project (Bordwell & Thompson, 2013).

Two important scripts are written at this stage: a shooting script and a letter of consent. The shooting script is an essential document in the pre-production phase, which provides technical details of camera framing techniques, shooting scene arrangement, and a comprehensive breakdown of the shooting activities (Izod & Kilborn, 2012). It serves as a guideline for the crew members on applying footage, sound, and lighting techniques to achieve the intended footage. The shooting script outlines technical requirements for each scene, providing information on the equipment needed, camera positions and lighting positions, and microphone placement (McKernan, 2012).

By following the shooting script, the crew members can work efficiently and cohesively towards achieving the objectives of the film. Furthermore, a letter of informed consent is written to obtain official consent from identified subjects and assure them of confidentiality regarding ethical issues surrounding their privacy (Bordwell & Thompson, 2013).

F. Production Process

During a documentary film's production process, ideas organized during the pre-production stage are translated into actual footage through the efforts of technical and non-technical crew members (Strohmaier, 2018). Footages are captured through interviews with subjects and capturing necessary B-roll footage. Following the shooting stage, the filmmaker selects the best footage and examines its

contents for analysis (Izod & Kilborn, 2012). This analysis guides the filmmaker in creating a script for voice-over production. The voice-over script serves as a means for the filmmaker to narrate the story and provide analysis of various footage to suit their agenda. The voice-over script is typically meant for narrations and audio analysis of the featured footage (Izod & Kilborn, 2012).

After the footage selection and analysis, the editing script is written to guide the visual editor in arranging footage to create a compelling visual story (McKernan, 2012). The editing script includes details of where ambient sound and music can be applied to enhance the visual story (Izod & Kilborn, 2012). In essence, the editing script helps the visual editor to know which footage to use, the sequence to follow, and where to add sound effects and music to create an impactful story.

G. Ethical Consideration in the Production Process

In documentary film-making, ethical consideration is essential to consider. They are the principles and values that guide filmmakers in their decision-making process. One crucial aspect is protecting the privacy of interviewees or participants as part of their responsibility to respect and uphold the participants' privacy. Filmmakers obtain consent before conducting interviews, ensuring participants understand how their footage will be used. Through this, they exercise discretion by selecting content for the final production. This helps avoid negative portrayals that could harm participants or mislead viewers. Documentary filmmakers maintain ethical standards in their work by prioritizing privacy protection, consent and unbiased storytelling (Nichols, 2012, 2017).

Ethical considerations are pivotal in selecting talking-heads or participants for interviews in academic research papers and documentary film production. Ensuring that the chosen interviewees provide valuable and informative opinions on the subject matter under investigation is essential, but it must be done ethically. According to Johnson and Smith (2019), selecting interview participants in academic research should adhere to ethical guidelines to safeguard the rights and well-being of the individuals involved. This includes obtaining informed consent from potential participants, explaining the interview's purpose and scope, and ensuring they are comfortable sharing their opinions. Similarly, in documentary film production, ethical principles outlined by Nichols (2017) and Clark (2018) underscore the significance of choosing interviewees responsibly. Filmmakers must avoid exploitation or manipulation when selecting participants, ensuring that the individuals' perspectives align with the subject matter and that their involvement contributes meaningfully to the narrative. By adhering to ethical guidelines in participant selection, academic researchers and documentary filmmakers can maintain the integrity of their work, uphold the rights of interviewees, and elicit the best possible opinions on the matter at hand.

H. The Post-production

The post-production stage involves the activities on the editing bench, which includes using documentary tools at the filmmaker's disposal, footage captured on location, archival images/videos, ambient sound, soundtrack music, special sound effects, dialogue, and voice-over narration. With the aid of the editing script, visual editors arrange the above tools to tell a story visually.

Post-production is a crucial stage in documentary film production that involves editing footage to create a cohesive story, adding sound and music, and color correction and grading. The editing script is developed in the post-production stage of the documentary film-making process. It includes instructions on how the different scenes should be arranged and sequenced and the incorporation of sound and music. The editing script also guides the filmmakers on how to add and edit different visual effects to enhance the film's final presentation (Nichols, 2010). Hurbis-Cherrier (2013) notes that post-production is the final stage of film production, where the editing team works closely with the director to assemble the footage into a cohesive story. The team selects the best footage, organizes it into a coherent story, and adds visual and audio effects to enhance the viewer's experience. Strohmaier (2018) emphasizes that the editing team's primary objective is to create an informative and entertaining narrative structure. Jutel (2015) observes that sound is an essential element in any film, and the sound team is responsible for adding dialogue, sound effects, and ambient noise to create an emotional connection with the viewer.

Moreover, music is added to the documentary to reinforce the narrative structure and create an emotional connection with the audience. Finally, the color correction and grading process is critical in creating a cohesive visual style that reinforces the narrative structure of the documentary (Jutel, 2015).

I. Knowledge Production

According to Aufderheide (2007), the concept of reality in documentary film-making is not just about what exists in the world. However, rather, it is about our collective knowledge, understanding, and interpretation. Similar to academic research, documentaries use pre-existing knowledge as a foundation to generate new insights for public consumption. As a form of media communication, documentaries play a significant role in informing and shaping our perception of the world and our place in it as social actors (Aufderheide, 2007). Since documentaries are based on actual events, they capture a part of the world that is presented to local and global audiences.

Documentary films serve as a vital source of knowledge for filmmakers and audiences as they investigate phenomena and increase society's knowledge about the world and its people (Eckhardt, 2012). Aufderheide (2007, p. 2) further posits that documentaries serve as a portrait of real life, using real life as raw material to portray actuality through audiovisual communication. The actuality featured in documentaries increases viewers' knowledge as it builds upon their existing knowledge and interests in the selected topic about the world that the filmmaker presents to them (Aufderheide, 2007, p. 2; Eckhardt, 2012).

Carey (1989) notes that this process of increasing knowledge through documentary films is grounded in the idea that reality is constructed through what we know, understand, and share of what is out there. In other words, documentaries expose events or situations of human interest that are not in the public domain, thereby increasing the public's knowledge of the world (Carey, 1989). For example, the documentary "13th" by Ava DuVernay exposed the history of racial inequality in the United States through the criminal justice system, increasing public awareness of this issue. Other examples are in "The Return of the Biblical Plague: Mosquitoes," a documentary film that explores the history and impact of mosquitoes, as well as efforts to control their populations to prevent disease transmission (Curtis, 2015). Similarly, "Bitter Lake" is another documentary film that analyzes the complex history and current situation in Afghanistan, exploring the impact of international involvement and the role of media representation in shaping public perceptions (Curtis, 2015). These films serve as examples of how documentary films can provide valuable knowledge to audiences, illuminating important issues and deepening our understanding of the world. Therefore, documentary films play a crucial role in representing the varied phenomena in the social world through visual communication and increasing the audience's knowledge.

J. Return of the Biblical Plague

The documentary film "Return of the Biblical Plague: Mosquitoes" by Johannes Backes and his co-directors (2007) is a noteworthy example of visual communication in academia, examining the complexities of malaria, its carriers, and the difficulties in controlling their spread in Europe and Africa, particularly Kenya. Through on-location footage and research, the documentary vividly depicts the lethal impact of malaria and mosquito infestations on Kenyans, attributed to superstition and ignorance. The documentary also emphasizes the successes in controlling mosquito-borne diseases in Europe due to past experiences with malaria. The film raises important issues surrounding faith, superstition, and science and their roles in combating epidemics. Overall, "Return of the Biblical Plague: Mosquitoes" provides a compelling exploration of the challenges and possible solutions to spreading malaria and mosquitoes in different parts of the world. The documentary uses elements such as on-site footage, interviews, voice-over narration, key participants (talking heads) in in-text citations, and animations and graphics to convey its message effectively.

Further, the documentary explores the relationship between faith, superstition, and science in combating the spread of mosquitoes and malaria. Using a combination of archival and on-site footage, as well as voice-over narration, the film effectively portrays the challenges individuals and communities face worldwide. It compares the mosquito problem in different regions, highlighting the severity of the issue globally. Statistical data indicates that malaria is responsible for the deaths of over 200 million people annually. Over 30,000 people die in Kenya yearly, with a child dying from the disease every thirty seconds.

The film depicts the belief among many Christians that those natural disasters, including mosquito invasions and diseases like malaria, are a curse similar to the biblical plagues in ancient Egypt. This has contributed to the rise of mosquito-borne diseases in Africa, as many seek healing through church services instead of scientific solutions. In contrast, Europe has experienced high death rates from malaria and now understands mosquitoes as carriers of the disease. Researchers in countries such as Germany, Switzerland, and Italy are working to prevent outbreaks of diseases like West Nile virus, Zika, and Dengue Fever by using technology and chemicals like BIT pellets to kill mosquito larvae in wet or swampy areas.

The documentary suggests that mosquito-borne diseases are not limited to Africa and are exacerbated by superstitious beliefs, poverty, and poor living conditions. The solution involves demystifying superstitions through scientific research and public education. The film uses in-text citations and follows a team of researchers, biologists, and clinicians, such as Dr. Steffen Bormann and Dr. Charles Mbogo, who work to combat malaria through a multifaceted approach of education, prevention, research, insecticide use, and destruction of mosquito breeding grounds. The approach has yielded positive results and helped dispel the myth.

Consequently, the documentary highlights the positive impact of community involvement in the fight against mosquitoes and the importance of public health education. The film also presents alternative methods to reduce the mosquito population, such as the use of neem trees, which are more cost-effective

and conducive to public health compared to military-related tactics and BTI pellets used in Europe. The documentary concludes that scientific research and public health education are crucial in combatting the spread of malaria, and while progress has been made in Kenya, more pragmatic measures are needed to prevent the global spread of mosquito-borne diseases amidst natural and man-made disasters like global warming (Backes *et al.*, 2007).

K. *The Bitter Lake*

Another documentary film worth considering as an academic exercise is the 2015 documentary “Bitter Lake” by Adam Curtis. This film explores the uncertainties of global politics and their impact on Afghanistan, using both unused and specially made footage from BBC and US military archives. Curtis provides historical context to events in the Arabian Peninsula, exposing the diplomatic ties between Saudi Arabia and America, how the agreement granted Saudi Arabia hegemony through Wahhabism to eliminate communism and European imperialism and the resulting consequences in the Arab world and beyond.

Curtis (2015) explores the consequences of Saudi Arabia's rescue mission in Afghanistan, which was supported by the US and aimed at countering the Soviet Union's presence in the region. The film uses mixed documentary film techniques such as poetic and cinema verité to highlight the contradictory reasons behind the war in Afghanistan, which now has global security consequences, especially for the West. Curtis establishes Afghanistan as the focus of his narrative. He begins with a reframing shot of the moon setting behind Afghan mountains, while his voice-over states that “events come and go like waves of a fever, leaving people confused and uncertain...” He asserts that those in power tell stories to help people make sense of reality, but those stories are increasingly unconvincing and hollow.

The documentary utilizes a variety of archival footage to support Curtis's thesis on the uncertainties of global politics and its impact on Afghanistan. The footage includes a child dancing in Afghanistan in 1953, a mass dance in London in 1953, performers in Saudi Arabia in 1974, farmers dancing in Ukraine in 1989, a bird's eye view of a high building in New York in 1993, and a chaotic scene of bloodshed without location and date. Through these images, Curtis introduces how the world was once serene until global security challenges disrupted it. The film delves into how American foreign policy granted Saudi Arabia hegemony, specifically through the spread of Wahhabism.

The narrative provides a historical perspective into the 1945 meeting between King Abdul Aziz of Saudi Arabia and US President Roosevelt, where they negotiated for US military and technology support in exchange for oil and the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan. Curtis argues that this agreement led to the spread of Wahhabism and, ultimately, the formation of terror groups like Al-Qaida and ISIS. Additionally, the film highlights Saudi Arabia's role in protecting the Arab world against the US and Israel during the Egypt-Israel war in the 1970s, despite their bilateral agreement with the US. The film also depicts the atrocities committed by foreign troops in Afghanistan, killing innocent people despite the warnings of local Afghan chiefs. Curtis argues that the stories about Afghanistan by political leaders and the media no longer make sense, as discrepancies in the narrative are evident. He concludes that US support for Wahhabism to please Saudi Arabia created the opportunity for terror groups to rise and demand the formation of an Islamic state in the Arab world and beyond. Further, the film suggests that the consequences of the Afghan War led to a global security crisis, threatening the peace of every nation-state. Despite the violence and bloodshed portrayed in the film, unedited archival footage adds credibility to the story of what happened in Afghanistan.

L. *Purpose of the Documentary Films*

The documentaries by Backes *et al.* (2007) and Curtis (2015) aim to provide solutions to various phenomena. They present detailed information on their research topics to increase audience awareness and knowledge. For example, while many people may know the causes of malaria, they may not realize that only female mosquitoes transmit the disease. Curtis' documentary reveals underlying factors that led to the destruction of Afghanistan, such as Saudi Arabia's role in promoting Wahhabism with support from the US, resulting in global terrorism by Islamic extremists seeking revenge for the country's destruction. Academic documentary film-making involves developing a concept and conducting scientific research to establish a hypothesis. The resulting film represents an analysis of the gathered data, presenting the findings to the audience. This method has been utilized by researchers in the past, including Fitzgerald and Lowe (2020) and Iwasaki (2021).

M. *Connections with Existing Knowledge*

The documentary films “Return of the Biblical Plague” and “Bitter Lake” aimed to investigate different phenomena by building upon existing knowledge. Backes *et al.* (2007) examined malaria as a global phenomenon and highlighted why it has become deadlier in Africa. He also discussed the repercussions of superstition and emphasized that science is the only viable solution for modern society to tackle health issues. On the other hand, Curtis (2015) explored the political history of the Arab world and how external

forces have disrupted their peace to date. He exposed hidden aspects of Afghanistan's internal political affairs. He highlighted the historical perspectives of the war, pointing out the hegemonic rivalry between and among Britain, America, Russia, and Saudi Arabia.

Both films were based on existing knowledge about the phenomena they investigated. Backes *et al.* utilized researchers as talking-heads to provide detailed information on the nature of the mosquito-borne disease in Kenya, which helped investigate why the case became so peculiar. In contrast, Curtis relied on the existing files of BBC News to make sense of the whole scenario in Afghanistan, providing insights into the phenomenon.

N. Answering Questions

Framing research questions involves identifying key variables, and a thorough literature review is conducted to determine the appropriate questions. Similarly, in documentary film production, filmmakers ask questions to gain insights into the phenomenon being investigated. For instance, in Backes *et al.* documentary, he presents the idea of a matchup between man and mosquitoes to emphasize the severity of the issue and asks who will win. He then seeks answers from Professor Colin Humphreys of Cambridge University to provide empirical evidence for his findings. In "Bitter Lake," Curtis uses archival footage and poses questions to newsmakers to establish the uncertainties in the war in Afghanistan.

IV. JUSTIFICATIONS FOR THE USE OF DOCUMENTARY FILM AS ACADEMIC EXERCISE

Documentary film production has been recognized as a valuable tool for promoting learning and engagement in academic exercises due to several justifications. Several studies have provided evidence for using documentary films as academic exercises. Mangan and Wilmot (2015) suggest that documentary films can help students connect with real-world issues and events and gain a deeper understanding of complex topics. Pedersen and Jensen (2019) note that the production process of documentary films requires a range of tasks, including critical thinking, research, and communication skills. Barna and Szabó (2018) argue that documentary films can serve as powerful tools for social change by exposing injustices and inspiring audiences to act. Finally, Mangan and Wilmot (2015) suggest that the production process fosters a culture of collaboration and teamwork.

Many studies demonstrated the benefits of incorporating documentary films in teaching and learning. The replicable process involved in documentary film production provides a unique opportunity for students to develop the necessary skills to contribute to broader societal goals. Using documentary films in academic exercises provides a valuable and effective means of promoting student learning and engagement while contributing to broader societal goals.

V. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Although there are compelling reasons to use documentary films in academic exercises, it is essential to consider certain limitations. Firstly, using documentary films in academic contexts can be challenging due to the required time and resources, which may be difficult for some educators and institutions. Secondly, documentary films may be restricted in their application due to their focus on real-world events and situations, which may not always align with the objectives and goals of academic programs. Finally, using documentary films in academic exercises raises ethical, representational, and power-related questions, which must be addressed to ensure that the medium is used responsibly and effectively.

This analysis is based on the auteur film theory, which originated in literary criticism and significantly impacted film studies. The theory asserts that a film reflects the director's vision, artistic expression, and authorship, positioning it as the primary creative force behind the work. While the author theory is traditionally associated with fictional narratives, it has also been explored in documentary film-making. Similar to academic research, where the final output reflects the researcher's vision, documentary film production involves the director's creative vision and interpretation of the subject matter.

As the auteur theory posits, the documentary filmmaker is the author of his film, just like a qualitative researcher in the social sciences. Both exercises use qualitative research approaches such as literature view, data collection and analysis. The documentary filmmaker goes through the initial process of qualitative research and proceeds with extra tasks to transfer the findings into visual production, as inferred above.

VI. CONCLUDING THE DEBATE

Consequently, just like the social science researcher, the documentary filmmaker is influenced by

existing knowledge, aspirations and motives behind investigating a phenomenon. The academia decides what to investigate and the method to apply. Research questions are framed based on the issue under investigation, and collected data is analyzed in line with the researcher's bias. On the other hand, the documentary filmmaker selects interviewees, decides the nature of camera angles to capture the interviews, and records voice-over to analyze the footage based on the impact he/she wants to make on the audience.

Both documentary films and other academic works, such as papers, books, and reports, are essentially the same, seeking to uncover knowledge of given phenomena using replicable methods of investigation and reporting.

Consequently, documentary film may not only be worthy as an academic product but can also be even worthier than most academic works for the following reasons:

- 1) Documentary films appeal more to larger segments of society than most academic works, which remain within the circles of intellectuals who produce them.
- 2) Documentary films are easily accessible to larger segments of society than other academic works.
- 3) Documentary films have wider viewership compared to the average academic paper or book.
- 4) Documentary films are more easily translated into meaningful applications than most academic works.
- 5) Documentary films produce both immediate and lasting effects on people than most academic works.

Despite their limitations and challenges, documentary films still serve the same crucial purpose as any academic product. To overcome the limitations and challenges, future research should concentrate on creating effective strategies for integrating documentary films into academic curricula. Additionally, research should investigate the ethical and representational concerns related to the medium. The potential of new technologies, such as virtual reality and interactive media, to enhance the use of documentary films as academic exercises could also be explored.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

We declare that we have no conflict of interest.

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