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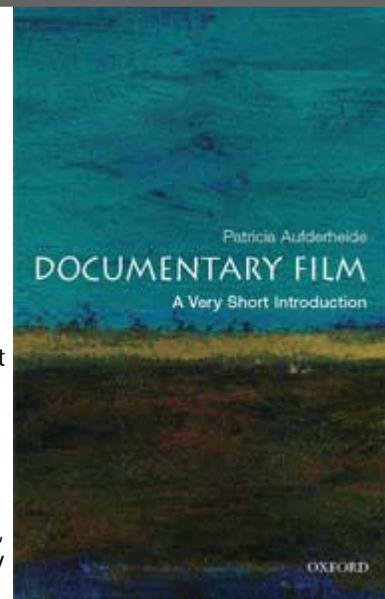
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**The Long and the Short of It:
A New Primer on Documentary
By Sheila Curran Bernard**

Documentary Film: A Very Short Introduction

By Patricia Aufderheide
Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2007
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Before reviewing Patricia Aufderheide's thoughtful and thought-provoking *Documentary Film*, I'll start with a disclosure: I've met the author, interviewed her for an upcoming book, and am serving as an advisor on an initiative she recently launched on best practices in documentary ethics. With that noted, I can honestly share with IDA readers how compelling this book is, particularly the author's decision to focus on subgenres within the form that allowed her to "address concerns about objectivity, advocacy and bias that have always swirled around documentary but with renewed vigor since the breakthrough popularity of *Fahrenheit 9/11*."



Aufderheide, as many readers will know, is a professor in the School of Communication at American University in Washington, DC, and the founder and director of its Center for Social Media (www.centerforsocialmedia.org). A longtime film scholar and cultural critic, she received a Preservation & Scholarship Award from the IDA in 2006. She has served as a Sundance Film Festival juror and a board member of the Independent Television Service, and has been honored with both Fulbright and Guggenheim fellowships. With Peter Jaszi, a professor of law at American University and faculty director of the Glushko-Samuels Intellectual Property Law Clinic, Aufderheide spearheaded the groundbreaking *Documentary Filmmakers' Statement of Best Practices in Fair Use*, available at CSM's website.

Which is all to say that Patricia Aufderheide knows her stuff, and her comprehensive book, *Documentary Film*, reflects this. Handsome and compact, international in scope, *Documentary Film* contains 158 pages of small but manageable print and big, compelling concepts. The book is divided into three chapters. In the first, "Defining the Documentary" (pages 1-55), Aufderheide explores varying definitions of documentary, from a film that "tells a

“artistic representation of actuality” and beyond. The discussion drives to the author’s own statement, which informs the rest of the book:

Our shared understanding of what a documentary is—built up from our own viewing experiences—shifts over time, with business and marketing pressures, technological and formal innovations, and with vigorous debate. The genre of documentary always has two crucial elements that are in tension: representation and reality. Their makers manipulate and distort reality like all filmmakers but they still make a claim for making a truthful representation of reality. Throughout the history of documentary film, makers, critics and viewers have argued about what constitutes trustworthy storytelling about reality. This book introduces you to those arguments over time and in some of the popular subgenres. (9-10)

The first chapter looks at the roots and evolution of the documentary form, giving special focus to the pioneering work of Robert Flaherty, John Grierson and Dziga Vertov before moving into a discussion of the emergence and impact of cinema vérité. Throughout the chapter, surprising and telling details remind readers that the purpose and form of documentary have *always* been contested and challenged, as makers faced commercial, political, technological and artistic pressures, including those that were self-imposed as they sought to understand, utilize and push the form in which they worked.

The second and largest chapter, “Subgenres” (pages 56-124) offers an exceptional overview of subject areas within documentary, “a film genre in which a pledge is made to the viewer that what we will see and hear is about something real and true—and frequently, important for us to understand.” The six subgenres presented are: public affairs, government propaganda, advocacy, historical, ethnographic and nature. Aufderheide defines each and places them in historical context, naming films and filmmakers and offering references to relevant scholarship. In this chapter, as in the first, the range of creative forms documentary expression takes even within subgenres may be surprising to some readers. Furthermore, the ongoing evaluation of ethical considerations—by makers as well as critics—in these evolving forms is informative. Overall, this chapter strikes me as essential reading for any student of documentary.

The book’s brief third chapter, “Conclusion” (pages 125-136), introduces the widening continuum of documentary today, with technological and other changes putting production within reach of a growing and more diverse body of makers. This expansion “may create new subgenres or may eventually force rethinking,” Aufderheide notes. “When political operatives, fourth graders and product marketers all make downloadable documentaries, will we redraw parameters around what we mean by ‘documentary?’” Alternatively, the author suggests, these new forms and approaches may simply serve, as their precedents did, to exhibit “the tension driving documentary” and the underlying questions each generation of makers must explore:

How does a filmmaker responsibly represent reality? What truths will be told? Why are they important, and to whom? What is the filmmaker’s responsibility to and relationship with the subjects of the work? Who gets the opportunity to make documentaries, how are they seen, and under what constraints? (127)

For a “Very Short Introduction” (part of an Oxford University Press series that now includes nearly 200 titles, from African History to The World Trade Organization), Aufderheide’s *Documentary Film* covers a lot of territory. Aufderheide concludes the book with a review of documentary scholarship and suggestions for new research directions, including greater attention to international scholarship and a closer look at “formulaic” and “sponsored” documentaries, including those produced for entertainment. In an appendix, she offers a useful list of “One Hundred Great Documentaries” in chronological order, from *Nanook of the North* (1922) to *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006).

For those of you who will be attending SXSW, Patricia Aufderheide will be there Sunday, March 9 at 2:30 p.m. at the Austin Convention Center to sign copies of Documentary Film: A Very Short Introduction. She will also moderate a panel discussion, "Is Fair Use Fair?"--Saturday, March 8, also at the convention center.

Sheila Curran Bernard is the author of Documentary Storytelling, 2nd edition: Making Stronger and More Dramatic Nonfiction Films (Focal Press 2007) and co-author with Kenn Rabin of Archival Storytelling: A Filmmaker's Guide to Finding, Using, and Licensing Third-Party Images and Music (Focal Press, forthcoming 2008). See www.documentarystorytelling.com.

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