# Experimental and Documentary Films: Crash Course Film History #16

Crash Course: Film History
https://youtube.com/watch?v=cCY-4NxXCU8
https://nerdfighteria.info/v/cCY-4NxXCU8

Hello, my name is Craig and this is Crash Course Film History. Most movies that we watch are examples of narrative filmmaking. They're works of fiction, and tell made-up stories about invented characters. Even films that are based on actual events are carefully crafted stories that are made to seem real or plausible. But there are types of cinema that play by entirely different rules... weird rules. Experimental films reject the techniques and goals of narrative filmmaking altogether, aiming to evoke a specific mood, thought, or emotion. And documentary films may borrow from the narrative techniques of fiction films, but instead of inventing their stories and characters, they seek them out in the real world. These filmmaking styles both have their own histories, methods, and major figures. And they interact with the fictional narrative movies we're used to watching in interesting ways. It's time to jump into Experimental and Documentary films.

[Opening Music Plays]

We could easily spend an entire Crash Course series on the history of either experimental or documentary film. There's a long tradition of filmmakers using cinema to achieve different goals than mainstream narrative films, which are usually trying to educate or entertain by telling a story. Experimental film covers all kinds of movies, from shorts and features, to films with vague story-lines and those that reject narrative altogether. No story, no setting, and no characters. You'll sometimes see experimental film referred to as "avant-garde" or "vangarde" cinema. Or, "That Weird Stuff." Whatever you call it, it wasn't until the strict conventions of narrative fiction filmmaking took hold in the early 20th century that experimental cinema came into its own. Because it deliberately opposes those conventions. Audiences used to mainstream action movies and rom-coms might feel confused or even frustrate by non-narrative experimental cinema. Some experimental films are trying to make you feel uncomfortable, test your patience, or push you to think more deeply. Others might be profoundly beautiful abstractions, intended to soothe you. I like to think that I'm a profoundly beautiful abstraction intended to soothe you.

The thing that binds all these films together is that they refuse to be bound by the typical rules of telling a story. The first major avant-garde movements in the arts began to flourish in Europe in the 1920s, just as narrative feature films were asserting themselves as the dominant commercial form of cinema. At this time, a group of French filmmakers inaugurated the Cinèma Pur movement. Their goal was to return film to its most basic elements, which they saw as light and motion. Filmmakers like René Clair, Fernand Léger, Man Ray, and Marcel Duchamp emerged from the Dada art movement. They viewed the rules of narrative storytelling as tyrannical and bourgeois. So instead of building their films around characters involved in a plot, they focused on images, trick shots, slow or fast motion, and eventually music and sound. René Clair's 1924 film *Entr'acte* is 22 minutes long and comprised of disconnected shots like people running in slow motion, a cannon being fired, a ballet dancer shot from below, and people disappearing. The rhythm is beautiful, but there's no story in sight. I think I had a dream like that once. That same year, Fernand Lèger made the frenetic short film *Ballet Mécanique* with co-director Dudley Murphy. Constructed of abstract images, either painted or drawn, upside down shots, mechanical devices, double-exposures, and more, the film explores the relationship between art, design, and engineering.

Surrealism, another abstract art movement, took a more whimsical and sometimes confrontational approach. The Surrealists drew on dream-like imagery that invites interpretation, but isn't directly symbolic. Their work aims to not have any literal meaning, but still be moving, scary, beautiful, or absurd. I like to think of myself as moving, scary, beautiful, and absurd. Salvador Dali is probably the most famous surrealist, and collaborated on a funny, disturbing film with director Louis Buñuel. Released in 1929, *Un Chien Andalou* is made up of a series of scenes that seem to be about a volatile relationship between a man and a woman. The film doesn't make logical sense, and yet it provokes a strong sense of wonder and dread. Once you see it, you'll never forget it. I saw it, I remember.

Now, the 1940s saw the arrival of American filmmaker Maya Deren who believed that film was meant to create an experience, not tell a story. Her films *Meshes of the Afternoon* and *Meditation on Violence* lull viewers into expecting a story with some narrative film techniques, only to move into abstract shots and cuts that make it impossible to understand what the heck is going on. That's because the point isn't to understand the film, but rather to feel it. And it just goes to show: without a steady diet of mainstream narrative films, much of the avant-garde wouldn't work – we wouldn't have the expectations that Deren's films subvert. Hey Nick, can we do an experimental film where I repeatedly punch the eagle over and over again? Nick: No.

Working from the 1950s to the 1980s, Stan Brakhage is an acknowledged master of experimental film and known for a kind of cinematic collage. He found unusual techniques to create abstract imagery, from physically painting or scratching the film, to using multiple exposures and rapid movement to mimic the movement of the human eye. And Canadian filmmaker Guy Maddin is perhaps the most widely known living experimental filmmaker. Working in short films, features, and installation art, Maddin refuses to be identified with any particular style or theme. In his hands, true experimental film continues to thrive.

Many narrative filmmakers have drawn inspiration from experimental film. Before he made Luke, Han, and Vader, George Lucas made his own politically charged avant-garde shorts as a film student at USC. David Lynch, the mind behind *Blue Velvet* and *Twin Peaks*, borrows heavily from the experimental film tradition. Although his films are clearly telling stories, they don't seem interested in answering their own questions. They're often about ambiguity, dream logic, and the fine line between absurdity and violence. Other narrative feature films skirt the edge of experimental cinema – from E. Elias Merhige's horror movie *Begotten* and David Gordon Green's coming-of-age drama *George Washington*, to Steven Soderbergh's *The Girlfriend Experience.* Just to name a few.

Now, you may not have seen many experimental films, but chances are you've seen a few documentaries. Documentary film is almost as broad a category as experimental film. Some documentaries rely on interviews, while others use footage of actual events. Some take a more abstract approach, and others use narrative fiction techniques to recreate past events. Whatever its methods, a documentary is a work of non-fiction that aims to explore – or document – some aspect of reality as accurately as possible. But it's important to remember it's still a film told through the lens of a filmmaker, and still an illusion of reality. The very first films ever made were documentaries, from Thomas Edison's vaudeville acts to the Lumière brothers' slice-of-life shorts and actualités. And the first feature-length film known to incorporate documentary techniques is Robert Flaherty's 1922 film *Nanook of the North*. An exploration of the Arctic life of an Inuk and his family, the film mixed fictional drama with documentary footage long before that was a popular – or even accepted – thing to do. In fact, we didn't even have the word "documentary" until 1929, when Scottish filmmaker John Grierson coined it to describe a work of non-fiction filmmaking. In 1932, Grierson wrote an essay called "First Principles of Documentary" which argued that the true power of cinema was in recording and presenting real life, rather than creating fictional stories. And in the 1930s and '40s, documentary film became a major force in news and propaganda.

Prior to television, newsreels often screened before feature films, presenting documentary footage of events from around the world. Governments harnessed the power of documentary film to sway public opinion. One of the most famous examples is Leni Riefenstahl's 1935 film *Triumph of the Will.* Commissioned by Adolf Hitler, the film documented the Nazi Party Congress in Nuremburg, Germany in 1934, using actual footage, staged scenes, and stirring music to convey a sense of power and myth to the Third Reich. The United States set about producing their own documentaries in response, like Frank Capra's "Why We Fight" series, which drummed up support for the American war effort in World War II.

In the post-war period from the 1950s to the 1970s, Cinema Verité came into fashion. Rather than staging action like a narrative film or employing a narrator to explain what the audience was seeing, Cinema Verité put you directly in the center of the action as it unfolded. Direct Cinema also emerged in these years. Very similar to Cinema Verité, these deeply personal films attempt to present reality with as little commentary as possible, and to consider the complex relationship between cinema and truth. Ross McElwee's 1985 film *Sherman's March* is a great example. What begins as a journey along the route of General Sherman's Army at the end of the Civil War, becomes an examination of McElwee's inability to find a new romantic partner after a bad break-up. The availability of lighter, cheaper, easy-to-use film equipment made these kinds of films possible, just as they had for Italian Neo-Realism, French New Wave, and the subsequent generations of independent fiction filmmakers.

In the 1980s and '90s, documentaries flourished on television, from nature documentaries on the Discovery Channel to long form documentaries like Ken Burns' brilliant and comprehensive 9-part film *The Civil War.* These days, platforms like YouTube and Vimeo, along with high-quality digital cameras and editing software, make it possible to produce and distribute documentaries extremely quickly.

Now, like experimental film, the documentary tradition has influenced fiction films and been influenced in return. Mockumentaries use the visual and narrative techniques of a documentary to tell a fictional story. Usually to hilarious results... or horrifying. Rob Reiner's 1984 film *This Is Spinal Tap* pokes fun at the self-serious rock documentaries of its time. One of its stars, Christopher Guest, has made a career out of mockumentaries, from *Waiting for Guffman* to *Best in Show*. In 1999, directors Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sánchez used the mockumentary form to scare the pants off a generation of film goers with *The Blair Witch Project*. Wait that wasn't real? Nick? Nick: No. It was real. And *Lake Mungo,* a 2008 psychological thriller from Australia, uses documentary techniques like interviews to excavate the story of a family coming to terms with their daughter's drowning. Documentaries have long borrowed fiction film techniques as well, to recreate scenes and weave them in with interviews and strict documentary footage.

Master documentarian Errol Morris made *The Thin Blue Line* in 1988 about a man on death row for a crime he didn't commit. His cinematic recreations of the crime launched a wave of true-crime docu-series on television. These days there's no shortage of cinematic documentaries – like the incredible visuals of Werner Herzog's *Into the Inferno*, the immersive 2015 film *The Birth of Saké*, and the heartbreaking narrative of *Fire at Sea,* which examines the 2016 European refugee crisis. And in 2017, the sequel to the BBC's astounding *Planet Earth* series captivated audiences all over again. Whether we see them on the big screen or a small one, even today documentaries maintain the power to inform, entertain, and move us in profound ways.

Today we talked about the emergence of experimental film as an alternative to mainstream narrative fiction filmmaking. We examined strategies that experimental films use to convey meaning and evoke thoughts and emotions. And we briefly discussed the history of documentary films and how they have influenced – and been influenced by – fiction films. Next time, we'll shift gears and look at fiction film production, beginning with the script and the screenwriter. And you'll be getting a new host, actress and overall awesome human being, Lily Gladstone. I guess this is goodbye, Beardlovers.

Crash Course Film History is produced in association with PBS Digital Studios. You can head over to their channel to check out a playlist of their latest amazing shows like, Blank on Blank, PBS Space Time, and Global Weirding with Katharine Hayhoe. This episode of Crash Course was filmed in the Doctor Cheryl C. Kinney Crash Course Studio with the help of these profoundly beautiful abstractions intended to soothe you and our amazing graphics team is Thought Cafe.