

The genre of audiovisual documentaries.

Semiotic description and practical exploitations in the field of IT

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1) The « programme » as a media text

diversity of possible (semiotic) approaches to the phenomenon “media” or “mass media”

One approach : the systematic description of –

- ⇒ the **media text** itself :
- ⇒ the (information, entertainment, ...) **products** or **services** developed by the media industry.

Such products or services : identifiable and classifiable with respect :

- ⇒ to specific – textual – **genres**
- ⇒ to their function or role they play in the **programme** largely speaking of the (information, entertainment, ...) offer of a - for instance – tv channel, newspaper or magazine.

It is likely that the daily and weekly programme of a tv channel :

- ⇒ is organised following a kind of – implicit – **contract** between the channel (so to speak) and its consumers of what the latter expect (is supposed to expect) and for which the first will be evaluated and sanctioned,

- ⇒ is determined (but also – reciprocally – determines) not only the cultural **perception** and values of the consumer but also the **rhythm** of at least a part of his/her social life.

Problem of a building a typology of styles or **genres** of programmes –

Thematic criterion

thematically specified programming styles or genres determining the profil of whole tv channels and titles of the written press :

- sport channels, music channels, fashion channels, history channels, wildlife channels, community channels, regional and local channels, profession channels, ...

Temporal criterion

the **temporal organisation**, the temporal “linearization” of themes (specific subjects) with respect to the socio-temporal framework of a *typical day* of the consumer (the spectator).

- paradigmatic notion of “prime time”
- “routine temporal planning” of a day, a week, ...
- Analogy to the calendar of a year

Criterion of the (textual) genre

“genre” is a “ritualised”, typical structural pattern for dealing with, for developing a specific subject, a specific theme : a specific theme (the cloning of animals, the history of political movement, ...) can be developed

- through one or more documents belonging always to the same textual genre (the ethic interrogations of cloning animals can be developed through one or more documentaries)
- through a variety of textual genres (the ethic problems concerning the cloning of animals can be developed through a documentary, interviews with experts or “common people”, round tables, fictions, etc.).

⇒ It is through concrete information products and services belonging always to a particular genre that the “staging” (the “mise en scène”) of a subject constituting a programming text, has to be undertaken

⇒ a staging follows “scenarios”, more or less simple scenarios but also sometimes highly sophisticated ones for specific occasions : political elections, sport competitions, demonstrations, etc.

2) The (audiovisual) documentary

Is a central information product - quantitatively and from a functional, strategic point of view :

- constitutes sometimes the almost exclusive product of whole tv channels (specialised in wildlife, for instance, info-tourism, popularisation of science, history, ...)
- is conceived and delivered not only within the context of television but also within other – professional or social - contexts : business and corporate communication, tourism, political communication, social communication, education, research and scientific communication, etc.
- is therefore present in our daily but also professional life as some other central genres – central genres such as, for instance, the news reporting, the interview or again the group discussion.

“Subjects” of documentaries :

- almost all what one can imagine; but already a very global analysis of the programmes of tv channels shows a preponderance of typical subjects :
 - countries, regions, cities; people, communities; celebrities; wildlife; history; “adventure”; art history; ...

- more important is the specific treatment of subjects by the “actualisation” (selection, hierarchisation and development) by the means of more particular thematic configurations (narrative loci : motifs, stereotypes, clichés, ...)
 - **history** : battles and wars, personal destinies, individual vs “mass-person”, “origins”, “mysteries”, ...);
 - **communities**: “ethno-graphic locus amoenus”, “pre-capitalistic” economy, rituals, folklore, ecological harmony, ...
 - **celebrities** : special childhood, specific talents or characteristics, “vision”, “heroic acts”, ...
 - **regions, countries, cities, ...** : “imaginary geography” : empty and full places, “private” (“intimate”) and public places, places of culture (and power) and places of anti-culture, counter-culture, “modern places and “traditional places”, ...

What is a documentary :

Difficult to give a general, global characterisation of documentaries which is an internally highly diversified genre (a genre that has to be broken down in a “family” of sub-genres, of more specialised genres)

⇒ Very broadly speaking – a documentary is a kind of a (more or less sophisticated) **description** of a given object, situation, period, event, ...

⇒ Description as a “**qualification**” in the sense of classical rhetoric : a valuated “instauration” or “foundation” of a reality (“construction”, “production” of a reality)

⇒ “instauration”, “foundation” of a reality : reflects a “point of view” and presupposes a **cultural background** (values, tradition, ...)

Examples : documentaries on Naples in Italy

- Naples a place of production of popular songs
- Naples as a place of rich and succulent kitchen and food
- Naples as a place of people between church, poverty and mafia
- Naples as a place of exceptional cultural heritage
- Etc.

qualification : more or less sophisticated structure :

- Only developed through the voice of the narrator (“voix off”) and a series of pictures more or less closely related to the discourse
- Developed through a more sophisticated staging: reports, discussions, testimonies, “subjective camera”, ...
- Close and motivated integration of picture, sound and discourse (“poetic documentary”)
- “juxtaposition” of several “portraits” that together form the general description-qualification
- integration of “fictional” scenes (played reconstructions, excerpts from “fictional” films, etc.)
- integration of “services” (for instance : info-tourism)
- etc.

3) Functions of the (audiovisual) documentary

Central place in thematic channels but also in the emerging virtual organisation of web tv

⇒ may be – analogically – compared with the classical idea of “*encyclopaedia*” as a kind of knowledge and value producing, disseminating and sharing instrument for a community (a collective actant)

⇒ possesses the important cultural and social function of “**reality framing**”, i.e. of the producing and/or reusing of given cultural patterns for interpreting and understanding with pieces of “reality” and for dealing, interacting with these pieces

- reality framing → instauration, foundation of a reality
- pieces of reality → historical periods, cities, regions, communities, animals, ...

Examples

Genre “info-tourism”

⇒ “new age” framing, “new generation” framing of places and people : extreme sports, alternative manners of life, “hard nature” vs “soft nature”, “small community” and “mass communion”, ...)

Genre “historical documentary”

⇒ Unknown, unknowable origins (*“framing the denial of – historical – framing”*) , heroic acts, charismatic personalities (typically opposed to either anti-cultural forces and/or cultural anti-subjects, ...), ...

Genre “biographies of celebrities”

⇒ “specific marks/characteristics”, childhood qualifying the subject to become a celebrity, the decisive encounter(s), the hard trials, the judges, ...

⇒ cf. the genre “legend”

“**Contribution**” of documentaries to a culture, to collectively shared knowledge and values :

⇒ **cultural themes** as collective identification resources :

- imaginary geography, typical social life forms (“communitarian style”), “organic history”, “natural/evidential morality”, ...

⇒ **typical structural patterns** of how to develop a “discourse” about a given piece of “reality” :

- typical rhetorical roles performed by typical actors : the narrator (voix off) on the one hand and on the other kind of “folk taxonomy” of typical expert roles, roles of witnesses, ...)
- typical narrative settings for building bigger textual sequences
- typical visual motifs for dealing with a given piece of reality (the church, the park, the museum, ... for a speaking about a city; the
- typical sound features
- typical intersemiotic relationships between sound and voice

⇒ documentaries contribute in the building and maintaining of “**discursive communities**”, of “discursive positivities” (M. Foucault) of how to speak “correctly” of a piece of reality ...

4) (Audiovisual) documentary and IT

⇒ The strategic importance of audiovisual documentaries is also concerned more particularly with the emergence of **“virtual” web tv** channels as well as, more generally, of **on line audiovisual libraries** (mediatheques, videotheques) and **portals**

⇒ **A new “hybrid market”**

- One of the possible – so to speak – **“business models”** of interactive web tv is concerned by a “hybrid market” joining life long (extra-scholar) learning, cultural heritage, entertainment, leisure and tourism but also community services.
- In other words, what has been separated traditionally seems to be joined, integrated in a new, more global information (entertainment, ...) offer.
- Pieces (segments) of audiovisual documents can be used in different contexts, for different objectives as well as for different groups of “consumers”.

Example :

a documentary (documentaries) of a city such as Naples in Italy, could be used – such as or in combination with other audiovisual pieces – as:

- cultural information products,
- as educational ones,
- as tourist services,
- but also as services for the communities leaving in Naples,
- etc.

Remarks :

⇒ From a purely technological point of view, such a business model can be implemented even **by very small structures** (for instance : web tv of student organisations, web tv on local level, audiovisual libraries by created by tourist offices, by companies, schools, ...)

⇒ One of the central pieces here : the genre of the audiovisual documentary as a kind of “**encyclopaedia**”, fulfilling a kind of encyclopaedic function

⇒ But the notion of “**document**” is **ambiguous** - we have to think much more in terms of -

- **thematically** motivated “segments” or sequences;
- “**logical**” segments and not (only) physical (“textualised” ones);
- “**subjective**” (i.e. corresponding to the needs, objectives, interests, ... of each person reading or watching a documentary);

⇒ Notion of **knowledge base, knowledge referential**

- “library” of (physical and/or logical segments as well as of “(descriptive) profiles of segments, i.e. of meta-data)

⇒ Notion of **reuse** of (physical, logical and/or subjective) segments

- for example – segments of wildlife in an info-tourism can be reused in different other documentaries, but also in other info products: learning, ...

⇒ Notion of “**customizable, personalizable (publishing) products**”;
i.e. **customizable, personalizable documentaries**

- Assembling, following the needs and interests of the client, different segments that constitute a documentary “sur mesure”.

5) Semiotic description of corpora of documentaries

Our activities of research and development in Paris : cf the ESCoM web site : <http://www.semionet.com>

1) select a specific corpora of documentaries (diffused via tv channels, via cultural organisations, via research institutions, ...)

2) produce a hierarchical textual description of the documentaries (sequences, scenes, plans, frames)

3) produce a thematic description of these corpora (identify the principal taxemes that can be supposed to cover parts of the contents of the analysed documentaries and define them)

4) produce a description of the rhetorical (narrative) patterns of these documentaries (identify and define them)

5) produce a description of specific discursive patterns (identify and define them)

- 6) produce a description of typical visual expression forms
- 7) produce a description of typical sound expression forms
- 8) produce a description of typical “interaction patterns” between visual and sound expressions
- 9) identify recurrent typical structural patterns that may constitute a genre or a “sub-genre”.

6) (Practical) uses of a semiotic description of documentaries

