

READING DOCUMENTARY FILMS : HERMENEUTICS AND ITS IMPACT ON THE DOCUMENTARY FILM

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Özet

Belgesel filmin başlangıcından beri gitgide öne çıkan önemi ve değeri, günümüz araştırma ve belgeleme teknikleri ile çok daha belirgin bir biçimde karşımıza çıkmaktadır. Her bir bireyin yaşamında önemli bir yere sahip olan belgeselin, genelde toplumlar ve yapılanım biçimleri üzerinde de oldukça etkili olduğu yapılan araştırmalarla daha bir belirlenmektedir. Belgesel, yapısı, yansızlığı ve olayları, olguları sunuş biçimi ile diğer görüntüleme ve betimleme türlerinden ayrılmakta, bireylerin kendi düzeylerine ve kişisel özelliklerine koşut algılama biçimleri ile daha farklı katmanlarda daha değişik okumalar ve yorumlamalar getirmektedir. Üretim ve tüketim kalıplarının gelenekselin ve alışılmışın sınırlarını zorladığı günümüzde belgesel filmlerin üretimi ve bireyler tarafından tüketimi de belgeselin kalıpları ve geleceği açısından önem taşımaktadır.

Anahtar sözcükler: Belgesel Film, Hermenötik

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As the new approaches begin to appear to understand and interpret the modern Documentary Film, some new dimensions are added to the production and consumption values. The underestimated value of the individual's cognitive factors and the cyclical form of the Documentary film give way to the new realization of the questions asked before such as how the new aspects of the documentary film could be emphasized and acknowledged in a deeper sense.

Hermeneutics and reception aesthetics give us some clues on how the people see the things they watch and how they associate the new and old information in their cognitive system. As the researches concentrate more on the receiver, the sender -in this case, it is the film producer or the scenario writer- would be regarded having some secondary importance, which contradicts with the main principles of the documentary film. Hermeneutics deal with the main principles of how we see the world, how original, creative or interpretative we are in the way we get the messages and how we put them into an order considering their hierarchical values.

To determine all these, we need to have an objective analysis of the documentaries firstly, looking at the documentary film as an ordinary text. But the question is if the documentary film could be accepted as an ordinary text or not. Or how the receiver evaluates and interprets its messages having ordinary or distinctive values. The most important part of it is perhaps to formulate the individual's perceptions and cognitive processes in

which s/he associates the meanings and forms s/he gets. According to the hermeneutics principles, the text is an unfinished product having a value open to negotiations and new interpretations with every piece of the new information the individual gets. That's why all these unfinished texts should cycle in the individual's cognitive system regaining their values and meanings each time they are considered. Thus, the text would have unlimited meanings and evaluations throughout the different evaluations in the individual's uniqueness. The individual is seen as not only receptive but also productive having this new production of the meanings. The individual also has some pre-set concepts, values before s/he watches the documentary which is formulated in a distinct way. But this uniqueness and distinctive features of the text is not enough for the receivers unless they use the same system of values to evaluate the material. Therefore, not only the intra-textual elements but also the inter-textual elements having all different value systems should be considered to put the documentary into a certain place in the life of the individual or in the social context of the societies.

The message for the individual is embedded in his/her identity. Depending on their social and individual identities the different people would decipher the same message in different ways. If the message should be in the sender, as s/he would never be carried into the primary position in the documentary film contexts, it would never get the primary attention. Instead all the messages would be formulated and given in the transandantal truth rather than the implied truth. The individual could get the

message in the documentary through different ways, including the different density degrees of different factors of the film. The message could be given in the form of the single or multiple scenes of audio, video or information formulations. Even if the audio and video formulations would be the same, the order of them or their perception by the individuals would be different producing different meanings and cycling concepts for different individuals.

As a result, the documentaries would be reaching only to the certain individuals having certain perception styles and degrees among all the other viewers. The audience could be classified in different ways depending on their ways of perception and reception and depending on how they position and give meaning to the things they watched in their social reality.

Upon all these considerations some questions should be answered such as if the documentary film could be unique and creative, if it looks for the new ways of formulating the truth, if it is open to new interpretations or capable enough to convey the truth. All their answers would be hidden in the hermeneutics and documentary film extensions.

Documentary and The Individual

Unlike the other genres the documentary has messages open to anyone. Its target is larger than any other genre. The documentary is highly individual in its nature. The producer tries to reflect his/her point of view of a certain event, period of time or concept through the documentary s/he produces. The individual

tries to find out these messages in the text watching different documentaries on the same issue. Gathering all different aspects of the same theme the individual interprets what s/he sees. So, the interpretation of the documentaries is not embedded in the film itself. It's in the outer world, it's in the individual who gathered all different reflections before or during the interpretation. It depends on the sum of the things making up the issue. It could be just a single film or a series of films related to each other. Once the sum is made up it would be difficult for the individual to refer to single messages given in the individual films because the sum now reflects opinion of the reader -the individual himself/herself-not the writer -the documentary film producer.

Documentary films having a function of giving an aesthetic pleasure are regarded as leisure time, enjoyment activities and thus having a relaxation function on the individuals. With their cultural and educational function come the informativity, updating and re-structuring function causing the individuals shaping their social identity and expectations in general. Watching the documentaries the individuals feel more secure and informative for the nature and the society we live in. The documentaries have a function of convincing the individuals. The ways they handle the subject, the theme, the way they emphasise the different aspects of the ordinariness make them convincing enough to cause to shape the individual's life.

The documentaries gaining more importance in everyday life of the individuals function as an icebreaker for them creating a world to improve the listening and critical thinking skills. Apart

from their isolated individual world, when they go into the social situations they would like to prove that they are not spending their time for gobbledegook but for important matters. The more sophisticated the dialogues between the individuals the more importance is given to the elicitation, presentation, practice or production of the new information as well as generating the new ones. The natural exchanges between the individuals are becoming to be more informative according to the linguists analysing the natural discourse of a given society. We frequently hear such sentences: "According to the latest statistics.....", "In a documentary I watched recently.....", "There are many documentary films regarding this issue....", "Considering the documentaries I watched, I may say that" So, we may easily claim that the documentaries shape the individual and their interpersonal relationships.

The Acceptability of the Documentaries

These natural dialogues are really a requirement of the communication exchanges and the exchanged information tends to be about the personal experiences in general. The world of television gives an opportunity to the individual to have and enlarge the experiences of an outer world that perhaps s/he could never find a way to explore. Thus more and more individuals today are ready to accept the televised information as their own personal experience. It could be claimed that due to its very nature the documentaries function as to carry the individuals to such an expedition providing all the necessary information,

background, situationality and intertextuality. Since the information given in the documentary film is usually having cross-border qualities independent of specific countries, societies or having much more an international and universal these have an acceptance of a wider range. Thus, having the acceptability factor, they tend to reach to higher levels of preferences. This multiples the effects it has, enriching the possibilities of different decodings of the same message on a multi-lingual and multi-cultural bases.

Reading the Documentary Films is becoming more and more important today. There are many reasons for it. The educated audience shaping the programs has a clear choice for the documentaries. With the help of the developing technology and due to the most important social problems in the twenty-first century such as ageing or social alienation TV gets personal. (Day, 2001:66-69) The more problematic the daily life is the more objective programs are required by the individuals. The individuals have more tendencies to plan for their watching and to shape their own preferences. Depending on the cultural values and the educational level of the society, documentaries have an important affect on the audience and the could reach to a wide range of the society. As the programs get more personalized, the diversity and the choice the programming appears considering the type of programming. The society has a great affect on the accessibility and readability of the programs. This brings the issue of "readiness" of the audience before the choice is made. And the

“readiness” of the audience is the result of the way the cultivation and hermeneutics shape the society.

Cultivation Theory and Hermeneutics

Cultivation Theory occurring as a theory of communication in 1970s. In its basic form, and suggesting that television is partially responsible for shaping or “cultivating” viewers’ conceptions of social reality has a lot to do with the program preferences of the society in general and individual in particular. George Gerbner, Larry Gross, Michael Morgan, Nancy Signorielli and other cultivation theorists have championed several ideas that serve as a preamble for this theory. Television is seen as the world’s dominant storyteller. The highly stylised, stereotyped and repetitive messages presented and images portrayed on television have become a common potential source of socialisation and everyday information.

Having an interest and capacity to learn more about the world we live, the documentary film audience is seen as the elite level of the society almost in any society. They are accepted to be at an educated level having the necessary background to get and interpret the messages in the documentaries and a richness of the sociocultural values as well as the objectivity are required to watch the documentaries. Although there could be so many individual differences shaping the expectations and the ways of fulfilling these satisfactions the audience in general has a wide range of acceptability for the documentary films. The factors seen as a handicap in other types of television programs become an advantage for the documentaries. For example, the cycling nature

of the documentaries in general, has a better influence on the individual. The repetitions which would be regarded as unnecessary in other film types sometimes become necessary to support the background informativity and intertextuality. Again considering the other film types, the similar type of programs avoided in general also become important parts for the documentary audience yielding the inter and intra-relationships to the individuals for the missing parts.

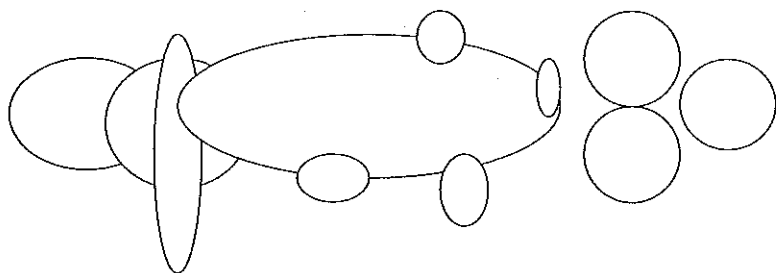


Figure 1. How the different documentary films share the same content and context.

Once the required information is cultivated and accepted by the individual, then there would be a great possibility for the consumption of the similar types of documentaries on the same content and having the same context but perhaps reflecting a different point of view. This means reaching to the ability of getting appropriate messages from a certain genre and getting used to its structure. To exemplify, it is just like the audience type fond of action films or military ones and watching all the ones

having similar aspects. The familiarity with the type brings the familiarity with the individual products and its structural variations within the same genre.

Also unlike the other genres, the documentary film has a lot of subtitles ranging from the cultural, social and scientific research to the stories of individuals or institutions. The ones having their themes from natural life, countries and places, special days, art, adventure and explorations, historical ones and the ones about the hobbies are also very important. All these subtitles under the documentaries mean a lot to the audience. Even if the content or the structure would be the same, the way the message is given, the way it's been exemplified and the order of the sequences would all be different from each other. These differences would force different types of reading and interpretation techniques to occur. Unlike the other genres, the documentaries do not have a single or prototype messages for the audience.

Many new approaches and methods have appeared and frequently used with the help of the changing and improving technological facilities and these brought new ways to compose, structure and transfer the documentaries. The cross-border qualities of the documentaries increase the popularity in national, international or supra national fields thus, adding new dimensions to their validity and intentionality. Each different culture facing the same documentary would have different interpretations about the way the message is conveyed and the structure is delivered. Structuralism, Functionalism, Eclecticism, Hermeneutics,

Linguistics, Communication Science, and Criticism developed and with the help of these new theories and approaches documentary filmmaking became a new field of application and deep analysis.

Because of the changing cultural structures, some new types of audiences have appeared and thus, new types of documentaries are needed to satisfy the needs and expectations of this new audience. Documentary filmmaking has the best use of all the possibilities of using the technological, economical and human resources. So, the concept of the re-definition of the documentary and re classification of the documentary types appeared. To have a look at the structural, conceptual and functional level of documentary to re classify these qualities would give us a fresh idea on how people consume the documentaries and apart from its consumption how they are affected through this process.

Different Layers of Documentaries

Even if the subject and the structure would be the same, the documentary audience would still be active and motivated to get the information in the text because the documentary has a multiple layered structure and within this structure different layers could gain more importance than the others, changing their density and order thus creating a new wrapping for the same context and content. Each documentary having similar structural forms, would have a different implied meaning for each individual and if the context and content is interesting enough for the individual the documentary input would be a thick one causing

better readings throughout the consumption period. The documentary is not the single code in it. It is a combination of a series of codes. To be named we could mention the following.

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|-------------|-------------|-------------------|
| a. Interest | d. Visual | g. Information |
| b. Concept | e. Audio | h. Content |
| c. History | f. Language | i. Interpretation |

The audience would be relying on the first layer the interest part of it before watching. This code makes the documentary a consumable product for the individual. Only the interested reader would be involved in the text and only the interested reader could try to figure out its real meaning through grasping the information in several different parts of the text. The more interested audience the film has the more detailed it would be regarded as a message and a detailed reading procedure would be followed.

The concept in the documentary film reflects not only the concept of the documentaries in its structural form in general but also the concept of reality in the outer world and in the individual's life. The concepts are dangerous. On one hand these are required to get and evaluate the message, on the other hand, having these as constraints the individual could not keep the shape of the original message, the message is just classified under certain concepts and creating new concepts would take time for the individuals. Without having a set of appropriate concepts it would be difficult for the individual to read the

documentary. Having the concepts would not be enough because the concepts cultivated before watching the documentary would be shaping the expectations and perceptions of the individual consumer. So, these concepts must be flexible enough to permit the reader to understand the message but not to classify or read it in a certain defined way.

The history layer has a twofold meaning: On one hand it is the informativity within the text and on the other hand it is the whole sum of the related things watched or gathered before by the individual. Since all codes and layers of the documentary are somehow related with each other, the history layer has a lot to do with the interest and concept layers. If the individual were interested in documentaries or a certain type of documentary then, the history layer would be a bit thick. It is the same when there are enough concepts established to get the reader ready for the text.

The documentary having the codes in it is an unfinished product because the meaning part of it is established by the reader – the audience. The individual associates and adds extra codes into it during or after watching. To be named, the documentary has a visual code in it. Even this one alone could not make up a unique structure of the messages gathered through the documentary. The documentary aims to reflect the truth through the combination of the series visual material. For the documentary filmmaker every visual part of the product is important and is put there to make up a certain meaning. Also the order of the visual parts is also important as it is in any other film.

But the message of the documentary might be in the visual part of the documentary for some readers or it might be in the combination of the other parts establishing the whole documentary. There is also a great possibility of constructing the message using not the visuals but their associated meaning to formulate the message and these associates could be changing from one reader to another.

The audio codes are usually associated with the language codes. Listening is important for especially the documentary audience. Listening is a fundamental component of communication and we spend a great deal of time engaged in the activity. A classic study showed that we spend more than 40 percent of our time engaged in listening. (Rankin, 1926:847) Similarly, contemporary studies demonstrate we listen to a greater extent than we engage in any other form of verbal communication. Weinrauch and Swanda found that business personnel, including those with and without managerial responsibilities, spent nearly 33 percent of their time listening, almost 26 percent of their time speaking, nearly 23 percent of their time writing, and almost 19 percent of their time reading.(Weinrauch & Swanda,1975:25-32) Werner (Werner, 1975) investigated the communication activities of high school and college students, homemakers and employees in a variety of other occupations, he determined they spent 55 percent of their time listening, 13 percent reading, 8 percent writing. Many other studies have documented the great amount of time people spend listening. How much time is spent for listening each day?

Researchers have determined the relative proportion of time spent in various communication activities by college students. Each day, you spend 32 percent of your time listening to the mass media, 21 percent in face-to-face listening, 17 percent reading, 16 percent speaking and 14 percent writing. (Wilt,1950:626, Bird, 1954: 230)

These researches were dated back. If these investigations were to be repeated in the 1990s or 2000s, an even larger percentage of our time would be shown to be devoted to listening. We engage in listening for a variety of reasons – for appreciation, discrimination, comprehension, evaluation, empathy and therapy. (Wolvin ve diğeri 1982)

The audio density of the documentary could affect the readers more than the visual density. Sometimes the basic information given in the documentaries are in the audio layer not in the visual one. Also the audio layer has a lot to do with the language factor. One could be given as the original recordings or accompanying music but the other is the language of delivery used in the documentary such as being English, Spanish, Turkish, etc. The sounds, voices and music could be used to make the documentary more realistic and believable, to tune the audience for the appropriate theme or to affect them emotionally. Sometimes having a different language, subtitled or translated versions could create some difficulty in reading but these also add to the acceptability and situationality of the text.

Information get through the text and its content would be a valuable source for the individual to interpret the message. For the appropriate interpretation the reader should decode all s/he

gets. And each piece of new information is added to the old one would change the hierarchy of the previous ones. Through this change there would be the ones to be reshaped or evaluated causing numberless actions in the reading system of the individual. Apart from the difficulties of reading a certain text, the individual would be forced to use all his/her schemata to read the message. This is the point where we should place the readings and their impacts. Apart from the other genres the documentaries have a specific quality of being read again and again. It is not only reading the text during the actual watching event. The text itself and the impact of it would be reflected in further readings. These readings would be of the same type or not. These readings would reinforce the messages or require sequences of reshaping and reordering with any piece of information added to the sum of the previously gathered messages. During the process of reading the reader should be able to resist the familiarity of the similar messages to notice the slight differences and details embedded in the new one. These establish the cycles of reading some of them thick, some thin, some having larger cycles some smaller. Thus, the reading the individual reaches is not an end product it is still an open text and it gradually gets its meaning through various other readings.

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