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# What's in a name?

BY PAUL DEVLIN

THRILLER! ROMANCE! COMEDY! HORROR! THE list of genres used to market fiction films is dynamic enough to turn a nonfiction filmmaker grassy green with envy. Because no matter how creatively a nonfiction maker describes his or her film, the response is invariably, "Oh, it's a documentary."

The term "documentary" has been problematic ever since it was coined in 1926 by British filmmaker John Grierson to describe an emerging style of nonfiction cinema. Today it carries much baggage when presented to the theatergoing masses, many of whom mistakenly perceive documentary as a talking-head, social-issue, slow-but-important form that does very well on public television.

It is time to revolutionize that perception. This year the *New York Times* headlined, "Documentary Films Get Top Billing at Sundance," and IndieWIRE reported from the Los Angeles International Film Festival that "the vanguard of American independent cinema more and more seems to be documentaries."

One way this ascendance can be even further enhanced is by creating a new vocabulary for nonfiction film.

For example, is *Wild Man Blues* a documentary? Perhaps, but Barbara Kopple would prefer to call her depiction of Woody Allen's European jazz tour a "Musical Comedy." "We shouldn't use the word 'documentary' anymore," the two-time Academy Award winner says emphatically. She has been known to contact festivals directly to ensure that the word is not attached to her work.

Is *Koyaanisqatsi* a documentary? Well, it is nonfiction . . . sort of. But Godfrey Reggio's movie is also impressionistic, abstract, and completely nonverbal. Let's get imaginative. Why not call *Koyaanisqatsi* a "Motion Poem"? Or maybe "Lyrical Nonfiction" or "Cine-Literature." Any others?

How about Errol Morris's *Thin Blue Line* and Vicky Funari's *Paulina*? These movies broke new ground by mixing fact and fiction in very innovative ways. Such hybrids certainly deserve their own genre name. Why not update the television term and call them "DramaDocs"?

And as long as we're thinking short and catchy, how about shortening "Mockumentary" to "Moc Doc" for fake documentaries such as *This Is Spinal Tap* and *Dadetown*. Then chop up "Rockumentary" and use "Roc Doc" to describe concert films such as *Don't Look Back* and *Stop Making Sense*.

Of course, there are dissenters. Chuck Workman's film *The Source* traces the influence of the Beat Generation in American culture and uses actors such as Johnny Depp to 'illustrate' the literature. Workman does not like the idea of inventing new genre names for nonfiction: "To me it's unnecessary. Genres pigeonhole the film." He's never been afraid to call his film a documentary. In the end, he says, "Who cares what you call it?"

Not caring how your film is labeled is uncomfortably close to not caring what the poster looks like—labels and posters are both marketing elements that affect the perception of the film. When promoting my film *SlamNation* last year, I was very frustrated that it was being labeled Documentary. Although I had made a

nonfiction feature about competitive Olympics-style poetry readings or "Slam" Poetry, I did not consider the movie a documentary at all. I struggled to extract the film from the crowded pigeon-hole imposed by that word. So I adopted the genre name "Nonfiction Narrative" to describe my movie.

Unlike documentary, but very much like most fiction films, the Nonfiction Narrative has a very specific dramatic structure at its core: It introduces a dramatic question, then builds tension to a climax which answers that dramatic question. Documentaries like *Crumb* and *The Cruise* are fascinating films, but neither has a dramatic question answered at the climax.

As in *Hands on a Hardbody*, the competition in *SlamNation* led naturally to this structure ("Which team will win the National Poetry Slam?"). The Nonfiction Narrative has a long tradition, stretching past Michael Moore's *Roger and Me* ("Will he actually interview Roger?") and Joe Berlinger and Bruce Sinofsky's *Brothers Keeper* ("Will the brother be convicted for murder?"), back to Barbara Kopple's *Harland County USA* ("Will the miners win the strike?") and Robert Drew's *Primary* ("Will Kennedy beat Humphrey?"). Until now, however, the Nonfiction Narrative has not been identified as a genre separate from Documentary.

Perhaps D.A. Pennebacker and Chris Hegedus best expressed the difference when they wrote in *Imagining Reality*, "Why can't we have a true theater of documentary (nonfiction) filmmaking that entertains and excites rather than explains? . . . As big and bright as any narrative fiction film, it would be filmed from reality, not scripts, and its protagonists would be the villains and heroes around us . . . a new and different sort of theater that searches for its plots and characters among the real streets and jungles of our times."

Sounds like the nonfiction answer to the Dogma 95 Manifesto.

I have no illusions that I will be able to find my film in the Nonfiction Narrative section of Blockbuster anytime soon. I do believe, however, that if nonfiction films are to fulfill the exciting promise made this year, those films will not be called Documentaries. It is up to independent filmmakers to lead the way in deciding what their nonfiction "Thrillers" "Romances" and "Comedies" will be called instead.

Paul Devlin is the maker of *SlamNation* [[www.slamnation.com](http://www.slamnation.com)], released nationally in theaters this past year by The Cinema Guild and now on video. He is scripting a DramaDoc which he hopes to shoot in the spring of 2000.

