

## Defining the documentary and its discontents

Zachary Baqué

When John Grierson used “documentary” as an adjective to describe one of the values of Flaherty’s *Moana* (1926), he implied that the documentary “impulse” was not linked to cinema as a distinct medium and could thus be found in other media. As such, the documentary can be understood as an epistemological approach that can be actualized through varied media (cinema, television, photograph, literary reportage, Internet website, transmedia practices, etc.). Critics such as William Stott even exclude films from their studies of “documentary expressions”. However, after heated semantic debates in the 1930s, documentary, as a noun, has come to mean almost exclusively a film, thus connecting the approach (basically, dealing with reality) and the medium. A documentary that is not a film has to be qualified: one can talk about TV or Internet documentaries. In a 2013 manifesto, Peter Wintonick rejected the term “documentary” to offer a new descriptive to an ever-growing practice: “docmedia”. If this knee-jerk reaction against “documentary” and what it connotes is not entirely new, what is new in Wintonick’s suggestion is the reaffirmation that dealing with the real need not be constrained by one specific medium. What may have been meant to be a mere provocation, made by a self-described “film-maker” and “docmedia operative”, in the last chapter of a collective scholarly book on the documentary, has recently caught on in academic circles as the most adequate way to describe a social practice regardless of the chosen medium. For Brian Winston and his coauthors, a traditional linear film documentary is just but one example of what docmedia can be, as they celebrate the potentialities afforded to the approach by the digital turn. This paper will strive to map out the semantic evolution of the term “documentary” in relation to the various media it was ascribed to, from Grierson to Wintonick. It will argue in favor of a return to documentary as an adjective.

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Zachary Baqué is an Associate Professor of American Studies at the University of Toulouse – Jean Jaurès. He teaches both American and film studies. He has published on the work of David Lynch, on documentary practices in the 1960s, and more generally on the relation between film and politics. He is working on a book devoted to documentary film propaganda in the 1930s.