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## Do Documentary Films Constitute A Social Science

Alyssa Kaiser

Seton Hall University, [alyssa.kaiser@student.shu.edu](mailto:alyssa.kaiser@student.shu.edu)

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## *Do Documentary Films Constitute A Social Science?*

*Alyssa Kaiser*

The accuracy of science is constantly improving with new technology becoming available that can expand upon and refine existing knowledge. New technology has resulted in many great accomplishments, such as better understanding the solar system, the lives of ancient societies, and the animals that roamed the earth before the existence of humans. These discoveries allowed for the scientific community to progress. As a result of those discoveries, new fields of science were formed. As more and more fields were created, science came to be divided into two categories; the natural sciences and the social sciences. Natural sciences are based upon universal laws and theories, focusing on areas such as chemistry and physics.<sup>1</sup> Social sciences include areas such as political science and psychology, for example, which aim to understand and interpret human behavior and detect patterns.<sup>2</sup> Different approaches on how to best study these fields can be used to try to achieve the goals desired by the researchers, and these approaches can be looked at through the views of positivists and antipositivists, with positivists believing in the use of strictly the scientific method in all sciences, and antipositivists believing another factor is needed beyond the scientific method to study social sciences.<sup>3</sup> In the realm of social science, new technology has led to the creation of documentary films, which can potentially develop into their own discipline, much like other great areas of research have come to do. Documentary films can be used to advance science to further

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<sup>1</sup> McDonald, L. Methodological Debate in the Social Sciences. n.p.: In Early Origins of the Social Sciences (pp. 3–18). McGill-Queen's University Press, 1993.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

<sup>3</sup> Von Wright, G H.. Two traditions. n.p.: Explanation and understanding (pp. 1 - 32) Cornell University Press, 1975.

human understanding. They are described as a medium that can be used to explore the reality of actual people in real world situations.<sup>4</sup> These films may provide a fuller understanding of events as compared to the classical methods currently used in studying the social sciences. This new development may help to advance the scientific field, and given the advancement in technology of recording devices, most researchers will have a camera readily available for use which should only help the field to grow, along with the rise in popularity of the field in itself. This new tool may add a new dimension to the way social sciences are studied if accepted by the scientific community. It can be argued that documentary films provide knowledge about human nature in different ways than any other social science discipline currently does, and therefore should become its own distinct area of research. As is typical when new ideas are being explored, there is hesitation to accept changes being made, and this seems to especially be the case within the scientific community. It is extremely relevant to consider the possibility that the study and creation of documentary films could eventually develop into their own field of social science, as this may have a large impact on the relevance of documentary films in the future. To do this, social science must be defined, documentary films must be defined, and then one must compare definitions and see if the two understandings can work together. Perhaps science, and the technology used to study it, is ever-changing, just as humans appear to be. Scientists should not be hesitant to accept these changes and rather embrace them to expand upon knowledge.

## WHAT IS SOCIAL SCIENCE

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<sup>4</sup> Rabiger, M. In Focal Press (Ed.), *Directing the documentary* (Fourth Edition ed.) Taylor & Francis. n.p.: n.p., 2004.

Science is used to investigate unexplained events. VonWright explores different methods that are used to understand the sciences; both the natural sciences and the human sciences. Some researchers feel as though the two sciences can use the same methods to arrive at conclusions and explanations throughout both fields, and others feel as though the two sciences should be studied in different ways. These views can be explored through the beliefs held in positivism and antipositivism.<sup>5</sup> It is important to consider if the social sciences can truly be studied in the same ways as the natural sciences and capture all that is relevant within the studied phenomenon. Perhaps the two main branches of science may be able to be studied in the same way, but the question is which way is the most effective to study each of the scientific fields. It is important to explore the pros and cons of the positivists' and antipositivists' viewpoints in regards to using the different scientific methods in order to achieve the most complete understanding.

Those that feel there is only one way to study all sciences, through the scientific method, are positivists. They believe in methodological monism; that there is only one scientific method that should be used to study all sciences, whether it be a phenomenon in the natural sciences or the human sciences.<sup>6</sup> These ideas are also referred to as the explanation method, as science is trying to explain phenomena.

Within the natural sciences, there are universal laws that have developed over time that have become concrete facts, such as the law of gravity. While trying to understand the laws of gravity, the scientific method was effective and sufficient to grasp

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<sup>5</sup> VonWright, G H.. Two traditions. n.p.: Explanation and understanding (pp. 1 - 32) Cornell University Press, 1975.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid

the entire phenomena that was occurring.<sup>7</sup> Scientists were searching for an explanation as to why objects continually fell to the ground instead of floating in the air or flying to the ceiling, and they found that reason. The whole phenomena was captured and explained by using the scientific method. To apply this same theory to the social sciences, one can try to apply the scientific method to a specific event, such the American Revolution, and try to determine why it occurred. When using the scientific method, one could identify repeated circumstances and every time that these certain circumstances occur, a war is the result. If this method is to work, the American Revolution must meet these standards and all future wars must also meet this standard. This method would allow predictions of future wars, too. The scientific method can be useful to identify information in this way, and positivism seems to have found a place in the social sciences.<sup>8</sup>

Mazlish, a modern thinker, asserts that using positivist methods in both the natural sciences as well as the human sciences can be seen as getting as close to certainty as possible.<sup>9</sup> He notes that influential thinkers, such as Bacon, whom contributed to forming some of the basic tenets of positivism, views positivism as attempting to achieve degrees of certainty. This would rely upon tests, rather than interpretations by humans, as interpretations can bring about uncertainty to a result.<sup>10</sup> Bacon, though, does not apply the human sciences to the study of positivism as it has developed in the present day, but was one of the first thinkers to attempt to do so. He firmly believed than man would come to understand the human experience and be able to explain it using a method.

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<sup>7</sup> McDonald, L. Methodological Debate in the Social Sciences. n.p.: In Early Origins of the Social Sciences (pp. 3–18). McGill-Queen's University Press, 1993.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid

<sup>9</sup> Mazlish, B. Positivism. n.p.: In The Uncertain Sciences (pp. 37–66). Yale University Press, 1998.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid

Bacon is partially responsible for the advancement of positivism as a method for the sciences.<sup>11</sup>

There are other influential thinkers that feel as though methodological monism is the best way to study all of the sciences. Karl Marx and John Stewart Mill are two people that had a large impact on the social world and they have particular viewpoints that follow a naturalistic point of view to study the social sciences. They believe that since “human beings and societies belong to the natural order, a single method, broadly defined, will work for all sciences.”<sup>12</sup> This would suggest that they support the positivist viewpoint of explanation and that this will provide a clear depiction of all phenomena that requires explaining to a satisfactory level.

Marx and Mill each have separate opinions on whether people actually make choices and exercise free will, or if their fate is already determined for them. These conclusions may have a large impact on the way that one feels about the methods needed to explain science. The idea of determined fate is central to the positivist’s point of view because it suggests that there is an answer and that it will just take precise measurements to figure out why certain phenomena occur. Marx is more finite in believing that people do not make any of their own choices than Mill, whom believes that people make choices but eventually follow universal laws.<sup>13</sup> Regardless of the specific beliefs of each person, they both essentially believe that there is a “correct” path to be on. This allows for the idea that there is a “correct” answer for the social sciences to arrive at, much like gravity is the correct answer to why a pen falls to the ground in the natural sciences. These

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid

<sup>12</sup> Hollis, M. Introduction: Problems of structure and action. n.p.: The philosophy of social science (pp. 16) Cambridge University Press, 2008.

<sup>13</sup> Hollis, M. Introduction: Problems of structure and action. n.p.: The philosophy of social science (pp. 1 - 23) Cambridge University Press, 2008.

beliefs shape their viewpoint on the effectiveness of using the scientific method to explain the social sciences.

However, others feel as though the social sciences have a different aspect as compared to the natural sciences because humans are involved, so a psychological component must be taken into account. Those that share this viewpoint are known as antipositivists.<sup>14</sup> VonWright suggests that human action is meaningful and should be taken into account if scientists want to not only identify causes but also interpret the meaning as to why the events occurred.<sup>15</sup> To do this, some feel as though one needs to interpret the meaning of human action.<sup>16</sup> If not, they will miss what is going on in the world and in specific events. This suggests that events involving human interaction may not fit into a neat box that can be explained through specific scientific methods as neatly as those in the scientific world.

Building upon the foundational information provided by VonWright, Martin Hollis expands upon what it means to have an “explanation” point of view as compared to an “understanding” point of view. He makes the distinct argument that explanation is sufficient for the natural sciences but it is not sufficient for the social sciences.<sup>17</sup> Since the goal is to understand the best way to understand the social sciences, as this is where the debate is centered, it is important to focus mainly on the point that understanding may yield the best results for the social sciences.

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<sup>14</sup> VonWright, G H.. Two traditions. n.p.: Explanation and understanding (pp. 1 - 32) Cornell zUniversity Press, 1975.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid

<sup>16</sup> Ibid

<sup>17</sup> Hollis, M. Introduction: Problems of structure and action. n.p.: The philosophy of social science (pp. 1 - 23) Cambridge University Press, 2008.

Relevant thinkers such as Hegel and Dilthey believe that understanding different aspects of society by using more than one method is relevant to the study of social sciences. Dilthey concludes that human life can only be understood by “means of categories that do not apply to knowledge of the physical world, like purpose, value, development, and ideal – aspects of meaning.”<sup>18</sup> Dilthey summarizes the belief commonly held by antipositivists, stating that in contrast to the scientific method, there is meaning to the individual parts that make up a whole person.<sup>19</sup> These beliefs suggest that there are many factors that need to be considered to understand phenomena within social sciences and these factors may vary from event to event or from person to person. Additionally, the social world must be understood from within the world rather than looking outside of it.<sup>20</sup> Facts and figures may be relevant to understand what happened, but to understand why, there are other aspects that need to be looked further into, which can be accounted by the understanding point of view of the antipositivists.

Can explanation and understanding theories be combined? Hollis states that the different perspectives need to be understood independently in order to eventually work together.<sup>21</sup> Explanation seems to be complete in itself for the goals that the method sets out to accomplish, as it can explain phenomena and does not need any other methods to arrive at answers to the scientific method. However, understanding may incorporate the scientific method into reaching a conclusion. The understanding method uses many different methods to arrive at an ultimate conclusion.<sup>22</sup> It would seem that it is better to

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid

<sup>19</sup> Ibid

<sup>20</sup> Ibid

<sup>21</sup> Ibid

<sup>22</sup> Ibid



have more knowledge, especially if it can achieve a sufficient understanding of the social sciences.

It can be argued that antipositivists' understanding perspective may be the most likely to relate to the social sciences, due to the fact that it is the most complete gathering of knowledge. The argument can also be made that positivist's explanations play a role in social science research for antipositivists, as the scientific method may just be one of many that is used. The two methods do not have to be mutually exclusive according to the antipositivists' perspective, which would seem to be the most logical and beneficial. Typically, the more relevant information, the better.<sup>23</sup> Being able to obtain the facts about an event requires looking for understanding in events. The argument can be made that the strongest arguments in the social sciences include data provided by the scientific method as well as other methods, which all work together to explain a social phenomenon.<sup>24</sup> It depends on the type of science to determine if one can find strength in an explanation or if understanding is required to grasp the entire picture of what is occurring.<sup>25</sup>

VonWright describes an interesting concept in that understanding is tied to intentionality, while explanation is not.<sup>26</sup> Understanding is usually considered to be the additional component that can be discovered through the use of antipositivists' methods, whereas explanation refers to the positivists' methodological monism methods.<sup>27</sup> This may be due to the fact that for the most part, natural science is not controversial. The

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid

<sup>24</sup> VonWright, G H.. Two traditions. n.p.: Explanation and understanding (pp. 1 - 32) Cornell University Press, 1975.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid

<sup>26</sup> Ibid

<sup>27</sup> Ibid

results of tests can be statistically proven to be true and there are generally no debates of these results once they are accepted by the community. In social sciences, however, there are not always such definite answers.<sup>28</sup> For example, there may be many reasons why Barack Obama beat Hillary Clinton in the primary race for the Democratic nomination for the presidential election, but it is hard to pinpoint one particular reason, as the scientific method would intend to do. Many factors come into play when looking at this event within the social sciences and it emphasizes the need for more than one method to identify things that happened throughout the race. Even if one can pinpoint exact reasons for the defeat, there is more information needed to understand exact causes. This highlights the antipositivists' point of view and depicts a situation where additional methods would be useful. The point can be made clear when one looks at natural science as having no particular debate after finding the conclusion, but in social sciences, there is a debate because it is important to look at a person's intentions and decisions, which effect how the results come about and how they are interpreted.<sup>29</sup>

For the social sciences, multiple methods must be used to arrive at conclusions and explanations. It is important to explain the events that happen, as the scientific method does for the natural sciences, but it is also important to include other methods to understand why things happen for the social sciences. Results in social sciences do not have a definite answer, which is similar to most disciplines that study human or animal behavior, as they naturally have variability. If one believes in the idea of free will, then it follows that not all humans will act in the same ways. This allows for no definite

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<sup>28</sup> Hollis, M. Introduction: Problems of structure and action. n.p.: The philosophy of social science (pp. 1 - 23) Cambridge University Press, 2008.

<sup>29</sup> Von Wright, G H.. Two traditions. n.p.: Explanation and understanding (pp. 1 - 32) Cornell University Press, 1975.

conclusion and positivism would not be sufficient. The social sciences seek to explain events and also understand the background knowledge to the event, too. So, it is fair to say that the antipositivists' view of using multiple methods to study will yield the most complete results.

## DOCUMENTARY FILMS

The field of film study has recently begun to take interest in documentary films. Although classic fiction films have been around for a long time, in the last few decades, there has been a shift towards depicting people as themselves, acting as they usually would in their natural environment— or supposedly. There has been success in movies and also reality television shows, as the ability to record has gotten much easier with the improvement of technology. In comparison to fiction films, some have made the claim that documentary films depict reality and fiction films do not.<sup>30</sup> However, these claims are not typically made by those within the field, rather by those who would like to refute the statement, anyway. As of 1970, the view within the field was predominantly that documentary films are fiction films and fiction films are documentary films.<sup>31</sup> Over time though, the field has come to acknowledge that although documentary films may not be more truthful than fiction films, there are important differences between the two.

Filmmaking can typically fall under the broad categories of either fiction or nonfiction films. Although both may be able to be referred to as a documentary based upon the fact that there are live humans or other objects that are the feature of the film, there are still distinctions to be made. The film is viewing real people through a camera.

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<sup>30</sup> Grant, B K., Sloniowski. *Documenting the Documentary*: n.p., 2014.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid

Barsam, however, claims that documentary films are nonfiction.<sup>32</sup> He goes further by stating that all documentary films are nonfiction, but not all nonfiction films are documentary films.<sup>33</sup> What separates other nonfiction films, such as those intended for educational, training, or travel purposes, from documentary films are that documentary films are focused on and distinguished by their sociopolitical purpose. There is a message that is trying to be expressed rather than just facts being presented.<sup>34</sup> This is not to say that documentary films are not art forms, though. Like other nonfiction and fiction films, great art is always powerful and moving, and documentary films are no exception to this.<sup>35</sup> Documentary films express both facts and opinions, which go further than nonfiction films, and they mostly rely upon facts. In referring to his specific work, John Grierson, commonly considered the father of documentary films, claimed that the goal of his documentary films was to make peace exciting.<sup>36</sup> Perhaps this is the goal of all documentary films, to make their work and passions exciting to others.

Bill Nichol's *Representing Reality* published in 1991 and Michael Renov's *Theorizing Documentary* published in 1993 mark an important shift for documentary film.<sup>37</sup> Shortly after these books were released and differences were recognized between the two types of films, a distinction was set for those studying the field in the future to use and move forward in analyzing the different types of work. Perhaps this distinction can allow for the critique of documentary films in a different way than the critique of nonfiction films. There are important differences between the two types of works. The

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<sup>32</sup> Barsam, R. *Nonfiction film, A critical history*. New York: E.P. Dutton & Co. Inc, 1978.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid

<sup>34</sup> Ibid

<sup>35</sup> Ibid

<sup>36</sup> Ibid

<sup>37</sup> Grant, B K., Sloniowski. *Documenting the Documentary*: n.p., 2014.

most critical difference may lie within the intent of the film. Fiction films are not “efforts to bring real life to the screen,” rather they may be efforts to bring fantasies and myths to life.<sup>38</sup> Although these films are depicting real people, the subjects are not playing themselves. While some documentaries are depicted in fantasy and myth, that is not usually the goal. Marshall Curry, the director of *Street Fight* mentioned that his goal was to make the documentary accurate and depict what had happened during the time period that was filmed.<sup>39</sup>

Curry’s documentary followed a mayoral election in Newark, New Jersey that involved dirty politics and took a closer look at each candidate and their campaign methods. He mentioned in an afterwards addition to the film that he did think that he captured the events accurately, and even the candidate that was portrayed unfavorably could not refute this.<sup>40</sup> Each documentary seems to have its own goal, but it is hard to describe raw footage of real events as inaccurate.

There are times when this was not always the case, though. *Nanook* is one of the first works that was described as a documentary with the intent to “bring real life to the screen.”<sup>41</sup> Although this may have been the goal, filmmaker Robert Flaherty actively engaged with the main character, Nanook, and his family, often telling them what to do and directing their performance for the camera.<sup>42</sup> They may have been performing acts that they typically did, but is the goal of documentary film to recreate real life or to just capture real life? This recreation may not be considered “real.” Perhaps this happens more often in documentary films than one is aware of or would like to believe. But is

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid: 2

<sup>39</sup> Curry, M. *Street fight*. [Video/DVD] Tribeca Film Festival: Marshall Curry Productions, 2005

<sup>40</sup> Ibid

<sup>41</sup> Grant, B K., Sloniowski. *Documenting the Documentary*: n.p., 2014.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid

there value in this, anyway? After all, viewers are being exposed to something that they may otherwise not be. It is also important to note that there were real, raw, moments captured on film - and some that seemed to take things too far - at least in Nanook's eyes. For example, Nanook seems to draw a line at one point and does not want the camera filming him. He and other hunters had just killed a seal and were eating it, and it was a very raw and personal feeling. In this moment, Nanook looks to the camera and expresses his desire to not be filmed through his eyes. Although this is unwanted, perhaps it is also valuable to watch.<sup>43</sup> The filmmaker stopped recording at this point, though. Although *Nanook* was one of the first documentary films and already is unique from more modern films in that the director instructed reenactments, it would seem to go against the goal of documentary films if the director is only allowed to capture what is allowed by the subject to be filmed.<sup>44</sup> Perhaps this goes to show that it is hard to remain objective in filmmaking and not sympathize with the subject. Some of the hardest or most vulnerable moments of a person's life are likely to provide the best insight for the film. With this component lacking or being controlled, the viewer may not have a full understanding of the experience.<sup>45</sup> Many films expose people to experiences and lifestyles that they would otherwise be unaware of, though, so even if there are some problems, there still appears to be a value, too, as people still do believe that they are learning.<sup>46</sup>

The idea of ethics then comes into play. If one is allowing a director to follow a situation, it is important that they are able to trust the filmmaker's ethical values. It is in

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid

<sup>44</sup> Moore, M. "(2014), Michael Moore's 13 rules for making documentary films." (retrieved January 21, 2016).

<sup>45</sup> Ibid

<sup>46</sup> Ibid

this way that the director will be able to obtain the most useful information.<sup>47</sup> There is a trust that certain moments are too personal to be recorded, as may have been the case with Nanook. The director has an ethical responsibility to acknowledge that there is a possibility that there are times the camera must be turned off. From her experience as a director, Bouis acknowledges that the camera does add an element that may cause a reaction in situations other than what would typically occur if the subject was not being filmed.<sup>48</sup> She tends to advise subjects to do their best to act as if the camera was not there. She realizes that they are naturally going to know that there is a camera filming them, but through the trust she builds with her subjects, she is able to capture raw moments as best she can.<sup>49</sup>

Documentary films can capture “real life” in that they capture a situation exactly as it happens, but they also may be edited or directed so that the messages that the director wants to get across are expressed. Although filmmakers and other journalists may find it very important to appear objective, it is also important for them to be fair.<sup>50</sup> So, the filmmaker should get both sides of a disputed argument and fact check what the two sides are saying. This can allow for the argument to be presented objectively, but also give credit to the person that appears to be telling the truth. This will provide clarity.<sup>51</sup> Rabiger also asserts that objectivity does not necessarily mean that a filmmaker should not guide the audience in a way that they feel is correct. This would mean that the

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<sup>47</sup> Bouis, A W.. Rosen. On Ethics. n.p.: In *Woman with a Movie Camera* (pp. 213–215). University of Texas Press, 2006.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid

<sup>49</sup> Ibid

<sup>50</sup> Rabiger, M. In *Focal Press* (Ed.), *Directing the documentary* (Fourth Edition ed.) Taylor & Francis. n.p.: n.p., 2004.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid

filmmaker should present the facts of both sides of an opinion and then allow the viewer to make a conclusion that is similar to the filmmakers.<sup>52</sup>

There are times, however, that the filmmaker must present their views, as it is not always valuable to be objective. If writers did not continually try to be politically correct when the Nazi's were taking over in Germany, perhaps the Nazi movement could have been opposed to before it was too late. Suggesting ideas based upon facts is not always a bad thing.<sup>53</sup> It is important to present both sides of an argument, but it is not always necessary to avoid picking a side when it comes to a highly important issue.

Perhaps this is not much different than the teaching of social sciences. When one considers political science, for example, it is typically taught by a teacher that has their own views on the world, which typically impact the way that they teach. Even a teacher that tries to teach without showing favoritism to a particular topic or belief may not be able to do this perfectly. This does not prevent the field from thriving. So, should we really hold this against documentary films? Objectivity is important in films, but naturally the filmmaker has control of the story, which alludes to certain limits that naturally exist. However, documentary films do allow a raw perspective of what happens in different situations and brings topics to life.<sup>54</sup> This does seem to have an inherent value.

Certain documentary films can be seen as uncovering new evidence to an unsolved problem or case. There have been times when documentary films have entered

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid

<sup>53</sup> Ibid

<sup>54</sup> Moore, M. "(2014), Michael Moore's 13 rules for making documentary films." (retrieved January 21, 2016).



the legal system.<sup>55</sup> This seems to bring to the forefront the idea of objectivity, as there are now real world consequences for the subjects of the film. Some court cases have been able to block the use of the film, while others were unable to block it from being shown. This seems to hold documentary films to a higher standard and perhaps call for more objectivity to be used in such circumstances. However, as documentary films become more popular, it seems likely that filmmakers will add their own position into the film to capture audiences.<sup>56</sup> It is important to consider the possibility that documentary films will be able to be used to decide legal cases. If this is the case, documentary films may have to be held to a higher standard in order to achieve accuracy.<sup>57</sup> However, they may be helpful in uncovering the truth of a situation, which is what the legal system should strive to do, anyway.

In many ways, *The Farm: Angola USA* and *Into the Abyss* do look at the legal system through a critical lens. Each film highlights areas of weakness in the legal system.<sup>58</sup> From this, and given that prison reform is a current topic of debate, prisoners lives are made accessible beyond prison doors. Researchers are provided with information and can use it when it is needed.

Documentary films do not always have to be groundbreaking and critical of society. It may even be the case that the best documentary films are those that allow the audience to draw their own conclusions (Rabiger, 2004).<sup>59</sup> Rabiger articulates this idea when he suggests that documentary films are “showing the familiar in an unfamiliar

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid

<sup>56</sup> Ibid

<sup>57</sup> Ibid

<sup>58</sup> Garbus, Stack, Rideau. *The farm: Angola, USA*. n.p.: n.p., 1998. / Herzog, W and E Nelson. *Into the abyss*. [Video/DVD] USA: IFC Films, Sundance Direct, 2011.

<sup>59</sup> Rabiger, M. In Focal Press (Ed.), *Directing the documentary* (Fourth Edition ed.) Taylor & Francis. n.p.: n.p., 2004.

way.”<sup>60</sup> Due to this, the viewer’s awareness is raised, and this may often facilitate action. Documentaries may not specifically call for something to be done, rather they allow for the viewer to want to take action. This is not to say that the filmmaker does not have a specific intent when creating the documentary film. Most likely, they have a passion about the subject and they would like for the viewer to also be moved and impassioned.<sup>61</sup> This factor is what allows filmmakers to be artists and allow for their own expression.

Some critics argue that documentary films are simply propaganda that is used to sway a subject to believe precisely what the filmmaker believes. In some cases, this may be true. John Grierson, an influential figure in the foundation of documentary films, whom even coined the term, felt as though documentary films were propaganda rather than aesthetic.<sup>62</sup> Documentary films are able to implement ideas in a way that is convenient and easy for most people to follow and understand.<sup>63</sup> Because many people believe that they are being presented with facts, they then are able to be persuaded to believe something, which is the ultimate goal of propaganda. Rabiger believes that people use propaganda to condition the audience so that they believe what they are told. There will be clear signs of this, as the facts will be slanted in one specific direction.<sup>64</sup> However, it can be argued that documentary films do not intend to do this, at least many of the more respected documentaries. There is a contract with the audience that there is not a slanting of the facts in one direction.<sup>65</sup> Due to some filmmakers abusing the power of documentary films and a lack of clear definition into what is a documentary film and

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid: 4

<sup>61</sup> Ibid

<sup>62</sup> Barsam, R. *Nonfiction film, A critical history*. New York: E.P. Dutton & Co. Inc, 1978.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid

<sup>64</sup> Rabiger, M. In Focal Press (Ed.), *Directing the documentary* (Fourth Edition ed.) Taylor & Francis. n.p.: n.p., 2004.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid

what is not, some feel as though there is a stigma attached to documentary films in that they commonly misinform viewers and push sociopolitical agendas.<sup>66</sup> This idea is not necessarily accurate, though.

Successful documentaries are typically characterized by a good story with moving characters. In this sense, documentaries are similar to other stories, whether they are other fiction films or folk stories passed on through different generations. However, documentaries typically rely on the structure of cause and effect.<sup>67</sup> This allows the viewer to be drawn in and be able to follow along in a familiar set up to them, while the story is unfolding and developing. Human development is typically key to the art of documentaries, whether it be the entire point of the work or a minimal feature. Watching a person struggle through life can be an effective way to engage the viewer and an especially useful tool to move them.<sup>68</sup> Ultimately, the viewers become a jury when watching a documentary film, as they are typically presented with contradictory evidence and have to decide whether or not they support the message provided by the filmmaker. This ability is useful, similarly to presenting both sides of an argument can be helpful to feel more grounded in the ultimate decision that a person makes on the topic.

The filmmaker also has a responsibility to the subjects in their films. The people being filmed are real people, in real life situations. They have feelings and emotions. The filmmaker has to respect these emotions and walk a fine line if they ever question their subject, as this may affect the direction of the film and could possibly effect whether or not the subject allows them to continue with filming. A filmmaker also must respect the way that the subjects are portrayed in the film and should try to be as accurate as

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid

<sup>67</sup> Ibid

<sup>68</sup> Ibid

possible, as there may be real world complications for this person once the film is made public.<sup>69</sup> Sometimes, even portraying a person in a positive light can affect them, as they may gain fame or popularity. There are also more serious instances, where people are viewed in a damaging light. Family relationships and personal relationships may be filmed, which may later be analyzed by critics. This can be hard and creates problems for the subjects, even if the cause was not directly what was portrayed during the film.<sup>70</sup>

There is also the idea that a filmmaker is supposed to let events happen as they would have if they were not filming. This can sometimes be a hard agreement to abide to. In *Home*, directed by Jeff Togman, there is a relationship that is formed between Jeff and Sheree Farmer, the main protagonist, through her trust in him as a filmmaker and as a person.<sup>71</sup> There are times when she speaks directly to him, and one can tell that there is a friendship that has developed throughout the filming process. At one point, she even asks Jeff to speak with a man to ensure that she is being treated fairly and he does so for her. *Home* describes Sheree's journey and steps she must take in order to become a member of a new community with many financial benefits for her, as well as safety benefits for her children as compared to their current home. She is reluctant to make the move. Seeing that this is a good opportunity for her, there is an instance in which Jeff helps her to try to get closer to making a decision about moving into the new home, by simply asking her if there is anything that will convince her that this is the right thing to do and somewhat serving as a voice of reason. Although he does this, he does not take matters into his own hands and push her to try to meet the deadline to be able to move into the

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<sup>69</sup> Bouis, A. W., & Rosen, R.. (2006). On Ethics. In *Woman with a Movie Camera* (pp. 213–215). University of Texas Press.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid

<sup>71</sup> Togman, J. *Home*. [Video/DVD] Manhattan: Kikker Arts LLC, 2005.

home, which she ultimately does not. He could have informed her about other benefits that she would receive and help her to get her paperwork in on time, but he does not do so. This seems to present a struggle and Jeff tries to stay out of the situation as best he can, but yet does not ignore the responsibility that he has as a filmmaker to build the subject's trust.<sup>72</sup> One can imagine that this would be a fine line to walk.

The director of the film has certain duties and responsibilities to the audience so that the film is effective and representative of the message that is trying to be portrayed. The filmmaker must be aware of the surroundings, as the goal is to capture relevant actions. They must also be willing to allow their emotions on the subject to develop as the story grows, and they also must be aware of how their emotions will be depicted through the medium they are using.<sup>73</sup> This is not easily mastered and requires hard work to be able to achieve the ability to capture subjects in an artful, interesting way. Simply, great filmmakers do not achieve their successes by chance, rather it is hard work and mastering of the art that allows for moving documentary films.

There are many components involved in making a documentary film. Over time, the field has grown and evolved to be able to produce documentaries that are the standard in the present day. Although there is a certain obligation to provide an objective argument, there are times that the director's passions can be portrayed, and the work may be edited to make the viewer feel inclined to agree with the filmmaker. However, it is ultimately up to the viewer how they interpret the film. Documentary films capture reality that cannot be depicted through words alone and perhaps they may even be able to stand on their own without being aided by supplemental material.

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid

<sup>73</sup> Rabiger, M. In Focal Press (Ed.), *Directing the documentary* (Fourth Edition ed.) Taylor & Francis. n.p.: n.p., 2004.

## CAN DOCUMENTARY FILMS BE A SOCIAL SCIENCE

Science can be studied in many ways. Over time, some ways prove to be more effective than others. For example, the telescope revolutionized the way that astronomers were able to view the world. They no longer had to look at the solar system using only their bare eyes, as they now had the ability to see with much greater clarity what was happening within the solar system in the sky. Perhaps this is an analogy to the social sciences and the camera. Social sciences often study humans, interactions, and specific behaviors. Predominantly, the field sends people in to witness a situation and record with pencil and paper what they observe. This is valuable because society is learning more about different people and events, and this is the goal of the field. However, could a camera revolutionize the way the field operates? Why should one write something on paper that becomes an account of what they saw rather than just recording what they saw, so everyone else can see it, too?

Mead discusses this phenomena in relation to the study of human beings and traditions, which is referred to as ethnology.<sup>74</sup> Mead mentions how many people were sent in to record via paper and pen what was happening in civilizations and to capture different dances and rituals that people were engaging in throughout history through writing. The dances that were witnessed were rare and they were seen as the last bits of evidence of activities for certain cultures. These cultures' rituals then would only be preserved for future generations through the writings of those that observed the phenomena in person. Perhaps someone may miss a key element in a ritual and this part

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<sup>74</sup> Mead, M. Visual anthropology in a discipline of words. n.p.: n.p., 2003.

of the culture will be lost in history forever if this group of people were ever to become extinct.<sup>75</sup> Scientists believed that there had to be a better way to capture the phenomena.

Important details in society do not have to be missed, though, as Mead suggests. Perhaps the person that is writing the notes on the different civilizations can just record what is happening with a camera. This will allow the preservation of the dances and rituals to be seen exactly as they are happening. By recording events with a camera rather than recording events by pencil and paper, tradition can continue accurately.<sup>76</sup> There stands to be a great benefit if this is to occur.

There is concern that people may adjust the way they are behaving if a camera is involved, and Mead addresses this issue. Looking at the universe through a telescope will not impact the way that the planets behave, but this may not be the case for human beings or other creatures that can change their behavior, which is a true concern when one is attempting to document the reality of a situation.<sup>77</sup> Although people may alter their behavior, there are ways that this can be avoided or the effects can be minimized. For example, if one is to leave a running camera, perhaps people will forget that the camera is on them and they will behave normally.<sup>78</sup> This happens in *The Farm: Angola USA*. The camera is left on when a board of people are evaluating a case for parole, and the men express their true opinions about the person they are evaluating. They do not say flattering things, but they then realize that the camera is on and stop talking. For a moment, a glimpse of reality is seen because they left the camera rolling for such a long

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid

<sup>76</sup> Ibid

<sup>77</sup> Ibid

<sup>78</sup> Ibid

period of time and the men forgot it was there.<sup>79</sup> This glimmer of reality provided great impact for the work.

The films that are created for the purpose of preserving science or other ideas do not need to be perfect and have sound and light crews. They simply may only need a camera that sits on a stand or that the researcher can hold in their hand to take away the important message or depiction of that situation.<sup>80</sup> Since this article was written, technology has greatly advanced. Most people have the ability to record video through their phones, so the act of recording has become even easier. Many people have grown in their ability to use technology.

People and civilizations may express doubts of sharing their intimate rituals and lifestyles with other people. This is to be expected. However, it is also worth noting that these people should consider the alternative. It may be the case that if these rituals are not recorded, they will be lost forever.<sup>81</sup> This could be much worse than allowing someone to view their daily rituals and lives.

Through the view of ethnology, Mead considers the value of recording events in order to have them forever for history to learn from and share with ancestors in the future. Clearly, there is use for film in the study of ethnology. This may also be the case with documentary films of any type. Instead of getting a second hand interpretation of events, documentaries allow for people to see events and people interact as they typically would, or at least this is the goal. This can allow for many people to observe events and use their own interpretation to decide what has happened.

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<sup>79</sup> Garbus, Stack, Rideau. *The farm: Angola, USA*. n.p.: n.p., 1998.

<sup>80</sup> Mead, M. *Visual anthropology in a discipline of words*. n.p.: n.p., 2003.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid



Although some feel though there may be value in social sciences using film to depict what is happening, some feel as though documentaries and film should only be used in addition to research that is presented via paper or some other way. Ruby suggests that films must include certain aspects in order to be considered scientific.<sup>82</sup> Filmmakers must be held to the same standards that other ways of making accounts are held in the sciences. Some of the necessities required for films to be considered legitimate are that the primary concern of the work is to explore a culture (when specifically talking about ethnographic work), the work must be described as having implicit or explicit goals (as this will affect the way the work should be taken), the work should disclose the method that the author used to record the work, and finally, the work should display a level of lexicon that is specific to the field.<sup>83</sup> All of these suggestions would greatly help to make the work much more legitimate for Ruby and many others that also agree. This seems to follow logically, as most papers published in scientific journals are held to this standard. The question then becomes, are documentary films losing any realness that is captured by having to explain everything away with science. Perhaps the goal of documentaries is not to go into deep conversation using language only those in the field understand. The goal of documentary films may be a way for a wide range of people to become familiar with something that they were not previously exposed to. Documentary films are not in scientific journals, so perhaps they do not need to be held to the same standard.<sup>84</sup>

Within the discipline of filmmaking, there are already festivals and movie debuts, so in a sense, the films are held to a certain standard in order to gain entrance into these

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<sup>82</sup> Ruby, J. "Is an ethnographic film a filmic ethnography?." *Studies in the Anthropology of Visual Communication* 2 (1975)

<sup>83</sup> Ibid

<sup>84</sup> Moore, M. "(2014), Michael Moore's 13 rules for making documentary films." (retrieved January 21, 2016).

festivals. However, it is always useful to learn the way that the director learned of filming a subject and the approach that he was aiming for with his or her film, so Ruby may be getting at an idea that could be useful when the film has a scientific aspect and desires to be recognized as a documentary film.<sup>85</sup>

Documentary films may be more useful as a supplement to the social sciences rather than an actual social science in itself. Ruby suggests that documentary films are a useful tool that explain surroundings but they do not describe the how or why part of the scientific question.<sup>86</sup> Due to this, Ruby does not feel that films meet the scientific criteria as described above to be considered a social science. Without background explanation, documentaries cannot stand alone. According to Ruby, they need written explanation, so documentaries are not their own discipline.<sup>87</sup> They should not be taken as truth, either, as they do not meet all of the standards required for this to be the case.

The idea of truth is prevalent in society, law, and in the sciences. Perhaps truth is not always met in these fields and needs help to be further examined.<sup>88</sup> Musser describes truth as being present in documentary films. He suggests that people build their truth through being presented evidence and then deciding what they want to believe. This is how the law attempts to determine truth, as well as science. Given that many people perceive that documentary films portray truth, it is important to examine how this may be the case.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Ruby, J. "Is an ethnographic film a filmic ethnography?." *Studies in the Anthropology of Visual Communication* 2 (1975)

<sup>86</sup> Ibid

<sup>87</sup> Ibid

<sup>88</sup> Musser, C. "Film truth, documentary, and the law: Justice at the margins." *University of San Francisco Lab Review* (1995): 984.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid

Musser specifically examines areas in which the legal system may fail to present truth and where documentary films may bring about this truth.<sup>90</sup> This can help documentary films to develop as a science because it is bringing about new evidence and providing value to the scientific and social community. Musser compares the ability to let someone explain their story freely on camera rather than questioning them (as would often be the case in the legal system). When given the chance to freely express their side of the story or tell events, a person is much more likely to reveal more information or inconsistencies. Due to this, there have been instances in which the legal system may have gotten decisions wrong and through further examination of documentary films, the truth was able to be uncovered.<sup>91</sup> If society ultimately aims to get at the truth, and documentary films can get at the truth, it would appear to be important to incorporate documentary films into different disciplines or start its own discipline so that the truth can be obtained.

Although it may not be clear if documentary films should be considered a social science, there is certainly value in taking what they present seriously. Documentary films may allow the preservation of society and even clarification for the legal system. These are very powerful effects and they validate that there is worth in documentary films. A major concern is whether or not documentary films can stand alone or whether they need supplemental material in order to be fully understood. As with anything that has not been created yet, it is always important to be open minded as to how the field may progress. Perhaps there will be researchers in the future that will study the different aspects of

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid

<sup>91</sup> Ibid

documentary films, whether it be how they are made or the message they are trying to get across.

Often times, certain disciplines use documentary film to clarify and help make something very clear or present it in a new perspective. History classes can use documentaries to give a visual meaning to the events that are being described. This allows for an even better understanding of the event. Psychologists show recordings of experiments that have been performed and described on paper so that one can fully grasp the idea of the entire phenomena. Although these are broad examples, it may be the case that disciplines already use the documentaries to further get the point across and aid the message within their discipline. There is already proven value in documentary film, so the question becomes whether or not documentary films should be a supplement to the sciences or if there is enough credibility and use for documentaries to become a discipline in itself.

Although documentaries are strong enough to eventually become their own discipline, at the present time it would be most useful to create documentary films that can fit into other disciplines as a complement to existing research. Then, researchers within those fields will be able to use documentary films as a way to investigate their particular discipline further.

Documentary films will be particularly useful for those that hold the antipositivists' view of how to gather scientific data and to arrive at conclusions. The films can be analyzed to characterize and understand behavior across many different fields in addition to the methods that are already currently used today. The documentary film would simply become another tool that can be used to arrive at data, just like

statistical models in political science and surveys in psychology. They can be extremely useful for scientific fields and they have proven to be useful.

To practically incorporate documentary films into existing fields, documentaries may need to be broken up by subject matter at first. Just as a political scientist can focus on the economy or a psychologist can focus on cognitive behavior, a social scientist in any discipline can focus on documentary films. In doing so, many of the doubts in that the filmmakers are not properly trained to be in such an important situation can be addressed, and this can also allow for the level of skill of the filmmaker to rise in relation to documentary films. However, this is not to say that those that create documentary films without proper training have produced useless work. There will become a standard within each discipline as to what is of value and what is not, even if that changes over time. By incorporating documentary films into already existing disciplines, there will be greater use and exposure. Those within and studying the field can turn to documentary films when trying to learn of or explore further a particular topic. Additionally, it can be offered as a class similar to statistics. Documentary films can be used in all disciplines to assist in understanding phenomena. Perhaps as more and more documentaries are filmed and are more widely used to further knowledge instead of being viewed as partisan and as propaganda, documentary film creation and study can come to form its own discipline. It is hard to deny that documentaries bring about emotion and different stories and facts are able to come to light due to the information that they provide. Documentary films are increasingly becoming popular and used in academic settings. Regardless of how they are specifically used at the current time, it is most crucial that students are exposed to this new technology that eventually may revolutionize the way that science is studied. There

is value in documentary film, which has been demonstrated over time, so all that is left to do is to draw a large audience so that this new tool in science sparks interest and can be used to further knowledge.

## CONCLUSION

The future of documentary films appears to be a bright one. Influential thinkers are considering the benefits and laying out a guideline for the best way for the field to move forward.<sup>92</sup> This will be useful when the field attempts to standardize film making and become widely accepted as a form of scientific study. Just as any other field has had to develop over time, documentary film as a field of its own is making its mark on the academic community, and it is in these impressions that acknowledgement of value and growth will happen. Colleges and universities are teaching classes about what documentary films are and how they can be used to further research, particularly for those that believe the social sciences should use the antipositivist method. The more exposure and interest sparked in the field, the more likely that people will follow along with the idea that documentary films can eventually become their own discipline, as this is likely the goal of those whom are closely involved in the making of documentary films.

The field is still working out exactly how it will be organized, but it is reasonable to assume that it will continue to receive attention and eventually flourish. At the present time, though, it is worth noting that the field needs to build a loyal base of supporters, as well as develop influential films that are recognized as valuable for society. *An*

*Inconvenient Truth*, for example, has publicized the issue of global warming, which is an important discussion in today's political climate, and should be for everyone in society as

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<sup>92</sup> Mead, M. Visual anthropology in a discipline of words. n.p.: n.p., 2003./

Ruby, J. "Is an ethnographic film a filmic ethnography?." *Studies in the Anthropology of Visual Communication* 2 (1975):

a whole.<sup>93</sup> *Food Inc.* has highlighted much of the problems with food, which is another relevant problem, especially in America that has been highlighted in a unique way due to the use of documentary films.<sup>94</sup> This progress will be critical for the field, as those that are closest to the creation of documentary films are convinced of their worth, but the sway in public opinion is what will eventually solidify the making of documentary films as a social science in and of itself.

Finding that the antipositivists use the best methods to understand the social sciences, as well as defining documentary films, which are distinct from any other type of film, can help to answer whether or not documentary films constitute a social science. The answer to this question, I have found, is not fully able to be determined at this time. Certainly there is enough material and criteria that are able to be used in order to develop the field, but there needs to be consensus first. Documentary films as a field of study is on its way through various stages. The early stage of creating some of the first films, critiquing those films, as well as enhancing the experience for the viewer has been successfully completed. The middle stage of building a library of work and debating the specifics of technique, as well as the value they bring, have also been debated. A consensus has not been reached among all scientists as to what is needed to improve the field, and although this would be ideal, it is not necessary for the field to move forward. The final stage consists of educating the masses and developing interest in the field. Given that this paper is being written as a senior thesis at an accredited university, there is movement towards this already. Documentary films as a field of study is on a journey that is almost complete. There is much to be gained from educating oneself through the

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<sup>93</sup> Laurie, D, L Bender and S Burns. *An inconvenient truth*. [Video/DVD] United States: Paramount Classics, 2006.

<sup>94</sup> Kenner, R and E Pearlstein. *Food, inc.* [Video/DVD] United States: Magnolia Pictures, 2009.

use of documentary films, and once this is acknowledged, the term documentary films may be no different than term psychology or political science. Creation of a field is a difficult challenge, but one that can be achieved if there is enough research available and scientists interested in studying the phenomena.