

Wesleyan Family Academy

# Critical Consumption

# Exploring the World of Documentary Films

**Welcome Packet for January 14, 21 and 28, 2025**

**Virtual Course Zooms**

- films to screen and consider before our sessions
- short readings about documentaries

**Developed by**

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01/14/2025 Documentary to Screen

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# The Thin Blue Line

Director, Errol Morris  
1988  
101 minutes

This documentary will allow us to address several topics including:

- Defining documentary film
- Cinematic language and classifying documentaries (background material provided herein)\*
- True crime documentaries



[https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/6/69/The\\_Thin\\_Blue\\_Line\\_poster.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/6/69/The_Thin_Blue_Line_poster.jpg)

**STREAMING**



**AMC+**  
with Prime Video Channels



**AMC+**  
with subscription



**IFC Films Unlimited**  
with Prime Video Channels



**Netflix**  
with subscription

**RENT/BUY**



**Prime Video**  
rent/buy from \$2.99

# The Thin Blue Line

Also on Criterion Channel

# The Filmmaker's Tools

The visual and auditory techniques a filmmaker uses to tell a story, evoke emotion and convey meaning on screen. Including:

### ■ cinematography

- How are things in the shot framed?
- What shots were used? From what angles?
- From whose point of view are we seeing material?

### ■ sound

- Is there dialogue, sound effects and or ambient sound?
- Music and its application

### ■ mise en scène

French term from theater that means putting or placing into the scene. It includes all elements seen by the camera and how they are staged:

- Sets and props
- Costume and makeup
- Lighting

### ■ editing

- How individual shots are juxtaposed to create sequences and scenes
- What are the patterns?
- Types of cuts

### ■ performance

- Characters facial expressions, body language, voice

# Documentary Modes

Bill Nichols, an American film critic and theorist proposed in 1991 that there are six different documentary modes—expository, performative, observational, participatory, poetic and reflexive—each with its own specific characteristics. We will briefly discuss the modes for the three films we screen. For your reference, we have included a page from Nichols’s book that provides short descriptions of each mode.

“Documentary filmmakers select and arrange sounds and images in distinct ways using the techniques that constitute cinematic language. These forms did not preexist the cinema. The documentary modes, which developed from the 1920s onward, define the look and feel of the documentary film.”

Nichols, Bill, and Jaimie Baron. *Introduction to Documentary, Fourth Edition*, Indiana University Press, 2024. page 130

- Expository
- Performative
- Observational
- Participatory
- Poetic
- Reflexive

## Documentary Modes

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# Modes in Brief

### ■ Expository

- “The expository mode addresses the viewer directly, with titles or voices that tell a story, propose a perspective, or advance an argument. This direct-address approach is the mode’s most distinguishing characteristic” Nichols, p. 138

### ■ Performative

- “...performative documentary freely mixes the expressive techniques that give texture and density to fiction films (point-of-view shots, musical scores, renderings of subjective states of mind, flashbacks, freeze-frames, unusual camera angles, and so on) with oratorical techniques for addressing social issues that neither science nor reason alone can resolve.” Nichols, p. 144

### ■ Observational

- In observational mode filmmakers choose to capture lived experience with little interference or staging. Some think of this as “fly-on-the wall” filmmaking. The movement was originally termed “direct cinema” in the United States, but now it is universally known as “vérité” filmmaking, shortened from the French term “cinéma vérité.

### ■ Participatory

- “Here filmmakers overtly interact with their subjects rather than unobtrusively observe them. Questions grow into interviews or conversations; involvement grows into a pattern of collaboration or confrontation. What happens in front of the camera becomes a measure of the interaction between filmmaker and subject. The filmmaker’s interactions and the voice that emerges from them give us a distinctive window onto the world.” Nichols, p. 160

### ■ Poetic

- This modes stresses mood, tone, and affect much more than displays of factual knowledge, the unfolding of a story, or acts of rhetorical persuasion.” Nichols, p. 174

### ■ Reflexive

- “In this mode, rather than becoming wrapped up in the formal rhythms of a film or attending to a spoken commentary, we now focus on the filmmaker’s engagement with us.....Reflexive documentaries not only talk to us, they talk about talking. They speak about the problems and issues the various forms of representation raise. This intensified level of reflection on what is involved in representing the world distinguishes the reflexive mode from the others.” Nichols, p. 181

**Table 8.2.** Specific Qualities of Documentary Modes

Quality	Expository Mode	Performative Mode	Observational Mode	Participatory Mode	Poetic Mode	Reflexive Mode
An alternative to . . .	Fiction/avant-garde	Empirical, factual, or abstract forms of knowledge	Classic oration (exposition) and poetic expression	Classic oration (exposition) and passive observation	Fiction/exposition	Realist representations that ignore the formal process of representing the world or unquestioned social assumptions about the nature of the world
Limited by . . .	Didacticism	Personal point of view or vision may become too private or dissociated from more broad social perceptions	What occurs in front of the camera (hard to represent historical events)	May cede control and point of view to others; lose independence of judgment	Formal abstractions that lose touch with historical reality	Increased sense of formal abstraction, detachment; loss of direct engagement with social issues
Treats knowledge as . . .	Disembodied or abstract ideas, concepts, or perspectives independent of who shares them	Embodied; affective and situated; what we learn from direct experiential encounter rather than secondhand from experts or books	Tacit sense of what we learn by watching, listening, observing, and making inferences about the conduct of others	What we learn from personal interactions; what people say and do when confronted or engaged by others; what can be conveyed by interviews and other forms of encounter	Affective; new way to see and comprehend the world; see the familiar in a fresh way	Contextual; always framed by institutional constraints and personal assumptions that can be exposed and changed; asks what we learn when we ask how we learn
Sound is . . .	Expressive and creative, fully under the control of the filmmaker; often no indexical link to the image it supports; frequently takes voice-over form	Often relies on filmmaker's own voice to organize the film; stresses introspective, testimonial, essayistic forms of speech and dialogue; mixes sync and nonsync sound; uses ad-music and sound expressively	Tied to the image by the indexical link of synchronous recording; filmmaker gives up full control of sound to record what is said and heard in a given situation; refrains from adding additional sounds	Dialectic; stresses the speech between filmmaker and subject, especially in interviews; heavy reliance on sync sound but may also use voice-over and other sounds; filmmaker retains only partial control	Expressive; used for pattern and rhythm but with filmmaker holding a high degree of control, as in the expository mode	May metacommunicate about how communication takes place; talks about how we talk about something as well as sync or nonsync sound; may have any type of additional sound
Time and space are . . .	Discontinuous; uses images from many different times and places to illustrate a perspective or argument	Varies according to expressive goals; may stylize time and space to emphasize its affective dimension	Continuous; strong sense of continuity that links the words and actions of subjects from shot to shot	Continuous; may link present-tense time and space with historical time and space via archival footage and interviews	Discontinuous; uses images that build mood or pattern without full regard for their original proximity	Contextualized; draw attention to how time and space may be manipulated by systems of continuity or discontinuity
Ethical concerns include . . .	Historical accuracy and verifiability; represent others fairly and avoid making people into helpless victims; develop viewer's trust	Degree of honesty and self-scrutiny versus self-deception; misrepresentation or distortion of larger issues; risk of lapses into wholly idiosyncratic viewpoint	Passive observation of dangerous, harmful, or illegal activity can lead to serious difficulties for subjects; questions of responsibility toward subjects can become acute	Manipulate or goad others into confessions or actions they may regret; strong responsibility to respect rights and dignity of subjects; questions of deception and distortion arise	Use of actual people, places, and things without regard for their individual identity; may distort or exaggerate for aesthetic effect	Use or abuse subjects to pose questions that are those of the filmmaker and not the subjects
A voice characterized by . . .	Classic oration in pursuit of the truth and seeking to inform and move an audience	Strongly personal, engaged orator pursuing the truth of what it feels like to experience the world in a particular way	Patience, modesty, self-effacement; willing to let audience decide for itself about what it sees and hears	Engagement; strong investment in encounter with others or in presenting historical perspective	Expressive desire to give new forms and fresh perspectives to the world represented	Self-questioning, a voice of doubt—even radical doubt—about certainty or fixity of knowledge

01/21/2025 Documentary to Screen

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# Madonna: Truth or Dare

Director, Alex Keshishian

1991

120 minutes

This documentary will allow us to address several topics including:

- Popular culture on screen
- Observational mode documentaries
- The celebrity documentary

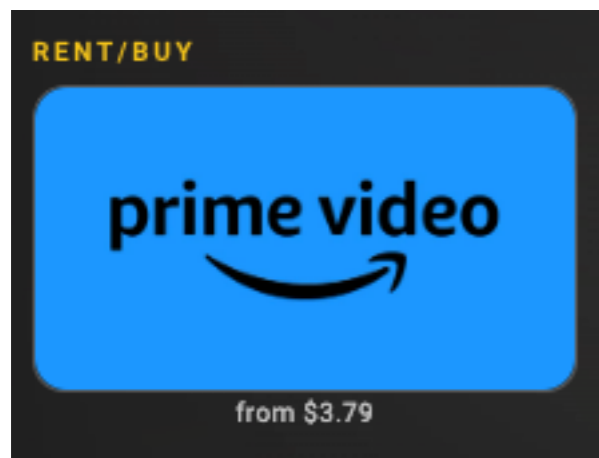


<https://filmartgallery.com/products/madonna-truth-or-dare>



Where to screen 01/21/2025 Documentary

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# Madonna: Truth or Dare

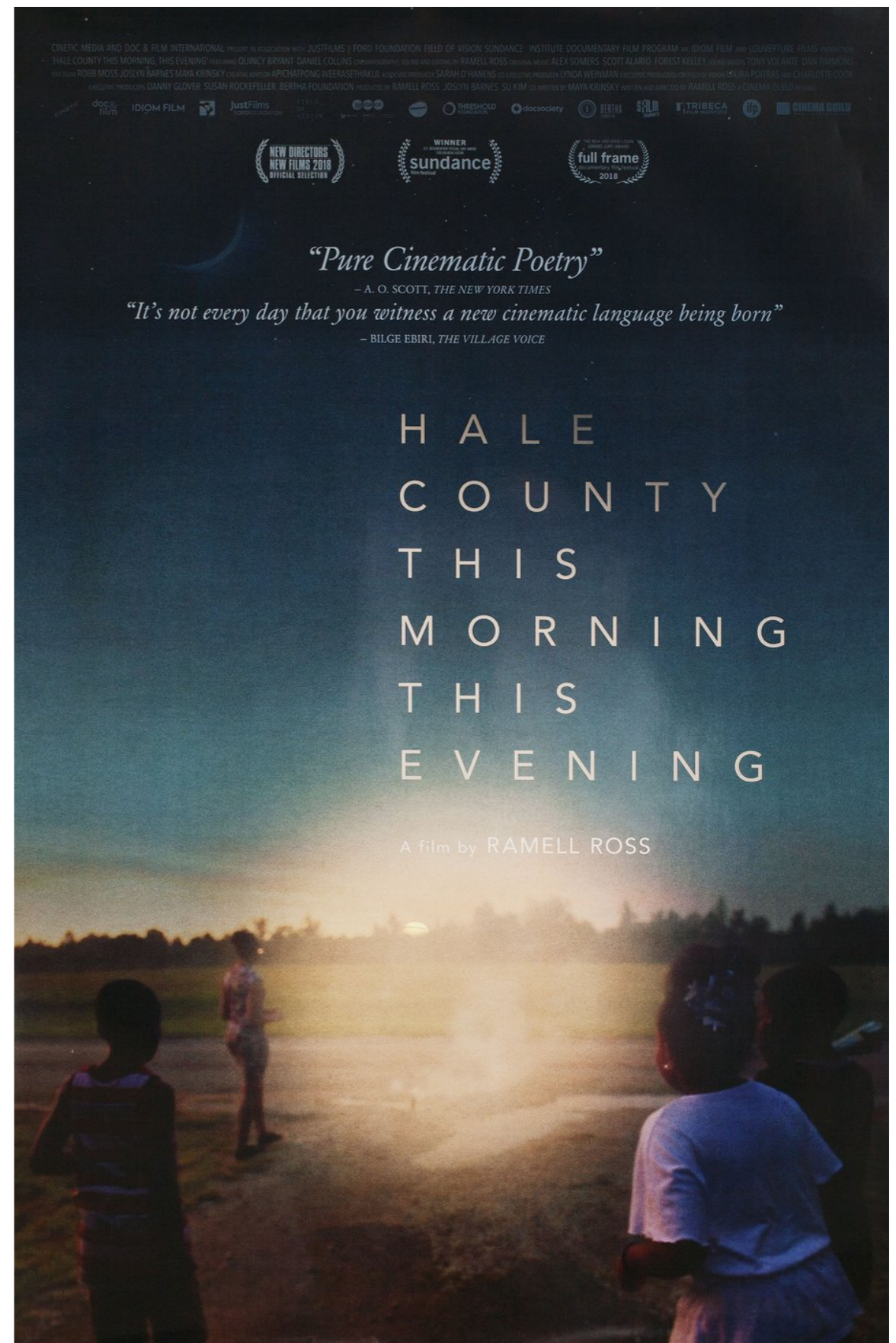
01/28/2025 Documentary to Screen

# Hale County This Morning, This Evening

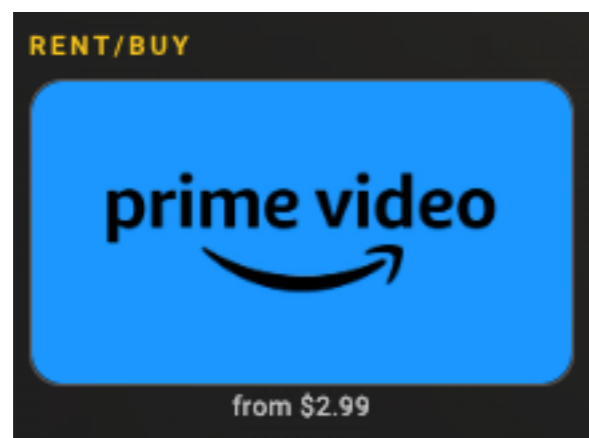
Director, RaMell Ross  
2018  
76 minutes

This documentary will allow us to address  
several topics including:

- Representing others on screen
- Storytelling
- Ethnographic filmmaking



<https://posteritati.com/poster/49413/hale-county-this-morning-this-evening-original-2018-us-one-sheet-movie-poster?>



# Hale County This Morning, This Evening

## **"Homework"**

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**Remember all filmmaking, including documentary, is a subjective undertaking like all creative work.**

**When you watch each documentary, notice how the filmmaker chose to present the story told on screen.**

- What is the story?
- What themes emerge?
- What cinematic choices were made to tell us the story?
- Which documentary mode(s)?

**See you in January!**

Tracy and Olivia