

## Documentaries as Creative Narratives

Jane O. Vinculado

Television Review  
of **Dekada '70**,  
**From Iraq With Love**,  
and **Mandirigma**  
(***I-Witness: The GMA***  
**Documentaries**, GMA)



Media practitioners are still debating what defines a television documentary. TV documentaries may be distinguished through ideology or style of execution and may generally be described as non-fiction productions with the real world as subject. Filmmakers generally use the word documentary to describe non-fiction productions, which aim to present some aspect of real life by actually showing it on screen (Kriwaczek, 1997).

The weekly television program *I-Witness: The GMA Documentaries* follows such a format. This program claims to be ‘the first and only full-length documentary series in recent Philippine TV history to exploit the power of the visual medium for investigative purposes and present reality in its “raw, unpainted and untainted form” (igma.tv, n.d.). Unlike other news magazine programs which tackle several topics divided in segments, *I-Witness* focuses on only one story per episode and has a different narrator/documentarist per week. This allows the documentarists a longer time to research, write, shoot and edit their stories, as well as a longer time to explore and present them. They also have relative freedom in deciding the content and style of their features.

The GMA documentaries had a special run of selected episodes at the University of the Philippines (U.P.) Film Institute Cine Adarna (formerly U.P. Film Center). The documentaries shown were categorized into themes according to the topic and orientation of each documentary.

One category included the titles *Dekada '70*, *From Iraq With Love* and *Mandirigma* which were shown on December 10, 2003. These focused on the different stories of Filipinos in the Martial Law Period, before the recent War in Iraq and in the present armed conflict in the Philippines.

*Dekada '70* by Howie Severino allows viewers a peek at the different stories of several people during Martial Law in the 70s. It starts with the story of a cameraman and his quest for the missing propaganda documentary on then President Ferdinand Marcos entitled "The Real Macoy" of which he was the cinematographer. What happens next is a slew of stories and perspectives on the period by artists, writers, filmmakers and journalists. Through the devise of presenting different art forms like plays, experimental films and poems, the stories of the lives of victims and survivors unfold to reveal existing and unfinished stories. Howie Severino includes his own tale of the period and how he survived to tell his story, probably because of the sacrifice of those who are still missing and presumed dead.

*From Iraq With Love*, also by Severino, reveals the lives of Iraqis in the initial phase of the current war in the country. It starts with the different stories of several Iraqis whom Severino meets while he travels around the country. In this episode, he travels around Iraq with no mention of the country. It seems like he walks, drives and hitches to wherever the people and the stories lead him. He meets bakers, delivery boys, vendors, painters and other common people as he reveals the similarities of the Iraqis to Filipinos and of several places in Iraq to locations in the Philippines. He even claims that he feels safer in Iraq than in some areas in Manila. His interactions with the Iraqis lead him to meet Filipinos living in Iraq who tell their own stories. He reveals their lives, their families, their fears and their hopes. Per request of these Filipinos, he looks for their families in the Philippines to bring gifts to them. The fears, loneliness and love of these families are revealed as Severino tells of his exchanges with the Filipinos.

Finally, *Mandirigma* by Maki Pulido relates three stories of women in different groups involved in armed struggle. Pulido

explains their stories through her own thoughts and experiences. The first shows the struggle of a *mujahedin* (warrior) of the Bangsamoro Islamic Women Auxiliary Brigade of the Moro International Liberation Front. The second is from the point-of-view of the military or the eyes of Lt. Debra Castillo, the Battery Commander for Cotabato. Third is the story of Ka Joy of the New People's Army. The parallelisms in these women's lives are juxtaposed. Their similarities despite their differences and their differences despite their similarities are highlighted. Pulido uses her life story as a means to further tell the story of these women.

The treatment of these documentaries, while non-fiction in nature, employs the elements of narratives that Allen (1987) calls the Rhetorical Mode. This is evident as the narrator/documentarists directly address their audiences and present the texts to them. In all of the episodes, the narrators are clearly shown as the narrators of the program and are given the liberty to decide on how their story will unfold, instead of a predetermined structure required of other television formats. This style allows the audiences to clearly make the connection between the narrator and the documentary.

In the case of the two documentaries by Severino, the stories do not show a distinct direction and construction. The documentary follows the flow of the stories of the subjects instead of a narrative predetermined by the narrator. To some degree, his stories have a seemingly unstructured narrative style. This is a bit more apparent in *From Iraq With Love* than in *Dekada '70*. For the latter, Severino employs a clearer structure, especially when he uses other documentaries, experimental films and plays as a way to establish the narrative. In the case of *Mandirigma*, Pulido structures her documentary following a more obvious format for the stories, usually with the same visual style and line of questioning for her subjects. However, she still allows for some flexibility depending on the stories of her subjects. She constantly assesses and analyzes what she observes and experiences and explains these to the audience.

The documentaries are also similar, since the narrators and characters provide semantic codes for the narratives in the stories. Barthes (1975) calls this the “Voice of Person” where the characters may reveal characteristics and features about himself/herself that “[carry] the story forward, [create] new events or new developments” (Watson, 2003). The narrators go hand-in-hand with the subjects to provide some understanding of their participation in their own life stories and the story in the documentary. The story unfolds as one story is revealed and then the subjects connect it to another storyline and/or character and then the thread continues. The characters reveal their stories while the narrators decide the direction of the storyline. This results in a richer narrative by the subjects and less control by the storyteller.

*Dekada '70* used several materials including films, poems and plays to provide a richer story and to reveal multi-layers of meaning. While Severino is the main storyteller, the interviewees and the other narrative forms direct the flow of the documentary towards its end-result. As one person is being interviewed and his/her story revealed, his/her works are also presented to reveal another aspect of this person. The layering of these stories functions as a way to bind them together and establish a distinct flow, at the same time making possible the revelation of the subjects. Severino also presents his own story related to the period and shows how this story is connected to those of his subjects.

From *Iraq with Love*, on the other hand, almost completely allows the characters to chart the direction of the documentary through their individual stories. Severino follows one narrative direction until it brings him to another direction and then to the other. The semantic codes are valuable for narratives in that they are instrumental in bringing about the unfolding of the stories (Watson, 2003). In this case, the revelations come more from the subjects rather than the narrator. However, Severino helps in revealing the characters as he provides his own insights into the actions of the subjects and the possible outcomes of their stories.

In *Mandirigma*, the narrator takes a more active role in deciding the way the story unfolds and how the characters are revealed. Pulido establishes the characters and setting, the questions the subjects will answer and the analysis of their situations. The subjects are allowed the opportunity to reveal their stories as they relate their own struggles, fears and dreams. Pulido, however, uses her own life stories to relate her subjects to her audience and how they affect her own struggles as well, constantly making the connection between her subjects and herself as the storyteller. This provides her with the dual role of revealing both her characters and herself and their relationship to one another.

The style of allowing the characters to direct the flow of the documentary is more effective than structuring the narrative. Through the expositions in his stories, Severino presents a richer narrative and the actual connection between narrator and characters is achieved. Nevertheless, care should be taken with this lack of structure as there is a danger that the connection between the sequences may not be established.

In some instances, there is confusion in *From Iraq With Love*, when new characters are presented without proper identification. Establishing their importance to the flow of the story makes it easier to connect the situations with the characters. In *Mandirigma*, on the other hand, Pulido also allows her characters the opportunity to reveal themselves. But her more structured style sometimes disconnects the characters from the audiences. The thread between the stories is more a product of post-production rather than the slow development and exposition of the narratives. Her documentary is framed towards a particular end and putting the narratives together sometimes appears awkward. Documentaries should be allowed to flow with as little structure as possible but with proper distinctions and identifications.

There are also several limitations to a structured style. The documentary may follow the direction of the narrator, but is also limited by it. The story can only go towards the direction decided

by the narrator or the flow of the characters' lives. It does not provide the thorough research and in-depth analysis expected in documentaries. It only allows the audiences a peek into the insights of the narrators on the subject at hand.

On the other hand, there also seems to be a problem in the way *I-Witness* describes how the documentaries are revealed in their program. They claim that their program “presents reality in its raw, unpainted and untainted form” (igma.tv, n.d.). However, through his/her analysis, the narrator plays a huge part not only in presenting the story but in directing its flow as well. The narrator is an integral part of the story-telling and not merely a bystander as the story unfolds. Relating his/her own life to the stories of their subjects is also a means by which the narrator affects the outcome of these narratives.

A television documentary provides an opportunity to present the lives of characters and situations with the end-goal of having them understood and appreciated by its audiences. The freedom of the narrator in *I-Witness* to explore and relate his/her own stories, independent of a very structured format, allows for variety in styles and appeals. Even as there is still much debate on what really is a television documentary, *I-Witness* may be on its way to defining and laying the groundwork for the television documentaries in the Philippines.

## References

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*Jane O. Vinculado is an assistant professor at the Broadcast Communication Department of the University of the Philippines College of Mass Communication in Diliman.*