

ABSTRACT

**for the Doctoral Thesis by Banu Kuandykovna Ramazanova entitled
«Transformation of Documentary Film Production in the Digital Age:
Challenges and Opportunities in Emerging Practices and Distribution Models»
submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) in the field of 8D02184 -
Directing film and TV**

Relevance of the Research Topic

Since the late twentieth century, documentary cinema has undergone a series of global transformations that have redefined its production methods, aesthetic boundaries, and cultural role. Initially shaped by the ethos of public service and objectivity tied to broadcast television, the genre began to shift with the rise of the internet in the early 1990s, which decentralised production and altered audience relations. A more decisive change occurred in the 2000s, when platforms like Netflix and HBO Max introduced new economic and narrative models-encouraging hybrid forms, subjective authorship, and techniques such as animation and reenactment. These developments expanded the scope of nonfiction storytelling, placing documentary at the centre of contemporary media culture. Alongside these commercial shifts, the emergence of specialised festivals, co-production markets, and digital technologies such as AI and VR enabled new participatory and immersive formats (Nichols 23-32; Gaudenzi 71-89).

These global developments provide the critical backdrop for understanding the contemporary challenges and possibilities facing Kazakhstan's documentary sector. While the country attained political sovereignty following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, its documentary film industry continues to operate within inherited models of production and state-sponsored commissioning. Major institutions-including the Kazakhfilm Joint Stock Company named after Shaken Aimanov and the State Centre for Support of National Cinema-continue to prioritise works with ideological, commemorative, or pedagogical functions, often privileging national cohesion over aesthetic innovation. This has resulted in a documentary landscape that is simultaneously well-funded and institutionally stagnant, with limited space for independent voices, experimental practices, or transnational integration. Independent filmmakers frequently confront an array of structural constraints: insecure funding mechanisms, underdeveloped distribution pathways, and exclusion from global co-production frameworks. In this context, the relevance of the present dissertation is twofold. First, it offers a systematic theoretical analysis of how global transformations in documentary cinema-technological, institutional, and aesthetic-can inform strategies for revitalising national documentary practices in post-Soviet contexts. Second, it addresses a critical gap in scholarship: the lack of sustained academic inquiry into the structural and creative conditions of Kazakhstani nonfiction film production in the digital era. Rather than offering a descriptive overview, this study constructs a conceptual framework for evaluating how national cinemas like Kazakhstan's can meaningfully engage with international models while preserving cultural specificity and ethical responsibility.

By identifying the points of friction between global innovation and domestic constraint, this dissertation provides a critical apparatus for understanding the uneven integration of Kazakhstani documentary into broader circuits of circulation, influence, and authorship. Drawing on comparative case studies, institutional analysis, and archival research, it advances policy-relevant recommendations and envisions a hybridised model of documentary development: one that balances public funding with creative autonomy, and one that positions Kazakhstani voices as active participants in the evolving discourse of global nonfiction cinema. The study's broader aim is not only to map the terrain of contemporary documentary transformation, but to offer a concrete vision for how Kazakhstan might reposition its documentary sector within this landscape-both as a national cultural practice and as a contributor to international documentary thought.

Research Object

This study examines documentary films produced in Kazakhstan between 1991 and 2024, including works by Kazakhfilm named after Shaken Aimanov, films funded by the State Centre for Support of National Cinema, and independent productions. Together, these works reflect key developments in narrative style, production models, and institutional frameworks that have shaped Kazakhstani documentary cinema since independence.

Research Subject

This research undertakes a comparative analysis of evolving production practices, genre conventions, and distribution models in global documentary cinema, examined in relation to the development of Kazakhstan's national documentary sector from 1991 to 2024.

Research Aim

The primary aim of this research is to critically examine the digital transformation of global documentary filmmaking and evaluate the extent to which these innovations have been reflected in the Kazakh context. Building on this analysis, the dissertation offers strategic recommendations to modernise and strengthen Kazakhstan's documentary cinema infrastructure.

Research Tasks:

- To trace the historical progression of documentary cinema, from early formats to contemporary digital nonfiction practices.
- To analyse the impact of digital technologies on documentary production methodologies and narrative structures.
- To investigate the emergence of innovative forms in nonfiction cinema, including genre hybridisation, subjective authorship, and aesthetic experimentation.
- To assess the influence of the post-truth media environment on documentary objectivity and examine the ethical challenges it poses to narrative construction.
- To compare the regional trajectories of documentary transformation in the United States, Europe, and Asia.
- To evaluate the global shift toward digital distribution, with particular attention to the rise of streaming platforms and transmedia documentary ecosystems.

- To identify the mechanisms driving the mass popularisation of true-crime and hybrid investigative nonfiction formats.
- To appraise the scope and pace of Kazakhstan's adaptation to global innovations in documentary filmmaking.
- To scrutinise the effectiveness of Kazakhstan's institutional frameworks-such as Kazakhfilm named after Shaken Aimanov and the State Centre for Support of National Cinema-in supporting documentary production.
- To uncover the technological, structural, and financial impediments confronting Kazakhstan's contemporary documentary sector.
- To formulate strategic recommendations for modernising the infrastructure, financing mechanisms, and distribution practices of Kazakhstani documentary cinema in alignment with international standards.

Degree of Study of the Research Topic

Within the framework of this dissertation, an extensive range of scholarly works addressing both the global evolution and national development of documentary cinema has been critically examined. The review begins with foundational historiographies that trace the genre's industrial emergence and public-service mission. Early works such as Evgeny Teplyts's *History of Cinematic Art* (1928-1933), Georges Sadoul's *General History of Cinema* (1958-1963), Georgy Aristarkh's *History of Film Theories* (1966), and Rostislav Yurenev's *A Short History of Cinematic Art* (1997) situate documentary's origins within the intersecting contexts of technological innovation and ideological function (Teplyts; Sadoul; Aristarkh; Yurenev).

Building on this historical foundation, theorists of the digital era have reconceptualised nonfiction cinema's aesthetic, narrative, and epistemological frameworks. Bill Nichols's *Introduction to Documentary* and Michael Renov's *Theorizing Documentary* recast the documentary as a discursive, performative, and authorially mediated practice shaped by digital tools and interpretive multiplicity (Nichols; Renov). Erik Barnouw's *Documentary: A History of the Non-Fiction Film* remains foundational in outlining the global evolution of documentary as a form shaped by social and political utility (Barnouw). Dave Saunders, in *The Routledge Film Guide to Documentary*, offers a critical survey of stylistic and ideological developments across the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, situating digital practices within a continuum of nonfiction storytelling (Saunders). Stella Bruzzi's *New Documentary: A Critical Introduction* and Brian Winston's *Claiming the Real* further interrogate the redefinition of genre boundaries and ethical frameworks in response to digital innovation and shifting media cultures (Bruzzi; Winston). Ralph Keyes's *The Post-Truth Era* provides an essential context for understanding how contemporary nonfiction cinema grapples with the erosion of public trust and the crisis of verifiability in the digital media landscape (Keyes).

Questions of convergence and interactivity have been central to works such as Henry Jenkins's *Convergence Culture*, Kate Nash's studies on interactive documentary, and Thomas Austin and Wilma de Jong's *Rethinking Documentary*, all of which explore how participatory media ecologies have reshaped traditional nonfiction frameworks (Jenkins; Nash; Austin and de Jong). The digitalisation of

production and distribution is elucidated in the work of Jo Bardoel and Leen d'Haenens, while Antoine Michaud, Kyung Hyun Kim, and Paul Levy examine the incorporation of virtual and augmented reality into contemporary nonfiction practices (Bardoel and d'Haenens; Michaud; Kim; Levy). Michelle Freeman and Manohla Dargis's *Documentary Across Platforms* and Nora Stone's *How Documentary Went Mainstream* assess the structural and narrative shifts prompted by streaming platforms and transmedia systems (Freeman and Dargis; Stone). Additional studies by Lauren Harper, Siegfried and Renner, and Poe further trace the ongoing expansion of nonfiction boundaries, highlighting creative hybridisation and formal experimentation (Harper; Siegfried and Renner; Poe).

Turning to the Soviet and post-Soviet contexts, seminal contributions from Jay Leyda *Cinema: A History of the Russian and Soviet Film*, and Peter Kenez *Cinema and Soviet Society*, foreground realist aesthetics, montage theory, and the ideological apparatus underpinning state-sponsored documentary traditions (Leyda; Kenez). In the Kazakh context, foundational studies by Kairat Siranov *The Beginning of a Great Journey*, Baurzhan Nogerbek *Captured Memory, The Always Relevant Genre*, Kulsara Aynagulova's *Documentary Cinematic Art of the 1960s-1970s*, Gulnar Abikeyeva *Messengers of Change*, and Sergey Pavlov *Documentary Cinema in Post-Soviet Kazakhstan*, have provided valuable insight into the national sector's historical trajectory, institutional frameworks, and representational strategies. Archival data from Kazakhfilm named after Shaken Aimanov and records from the State Committee for Cinema further contextualise the production patterns and state priorities that have shaped Kazakhstan's documentary output in the post-independence period (Kazakhfilm; State Committee for Cinema).

Despite the breadth of this scholarly field, key analytical gaps remain. Few studies approach documentary cinema as a fully integrated media-industrial system or interrogate how digital innovation is reshaping production infrastructures, funding mechanisms, and distribution strategies at the national level. This dissertation addresses that gap by undertaking a comparative, theoretically informed analysis of global and Kazakhstani nonfiction filmmaking, grounded in archival research and institutional documentation. Through this framework, it examines structural constraints and advances strategic recommendations for modernising Kazakhstan's documentary sector in response to the broader transformations redefining global documentary cinema.

Research Methods

This dissertation employs a qualitative, interdisciplinary methodology that synthesises historical analysis, comparative inquiry, case-study research, qualitative content analysis, and source criticism. Collectively, these approaches establish a robust, multi-layered analytical framework for examining the evolution of documentary filmmaking both globally and within Kazakhstan between 1991 and 2024.

- **Historical Analysis.** At the foundation of this study lies a diachronic historical method that traces the evolution of documentary cinema from its roots in reportage-based nonfiction to its current digitally mediated and aesthetically diverse forms. In the Kazakhstani context, this analysis sheds light on both

continuities and ruptures in production cultures, ideological imperatives, and distribution systems-particularly those catalysed by the collapse of the Soviet Union and the subsequent transition to national sovereignty.

- **Comparative Analysis.** Comparative analysis serves as a critical instrument for juxtaposing global trajectories of documentary transformation with national developments in Kazakhstan. By systematically identifying convergences and divergences across production practices, aesthetic forms, and distribution models, this method elucidates how Kazakhstani documentary cinema interacts with broader transnational trends.
- **Case-Study Methodology.** A purposive case-study approach facilitates close analysis of selected documentary films from both international and Kazakhstani contexts. Films are selected based on thematic resonance, formal innovation, production conditions, and distribution strategies. Through these case studies, the research evaluates how individual works exemplify, resist, or reconfigure dominant paradigms in contemporary documentary cinema.
- **Qualitative Content Analysis.** Qualitative content analysis is employed to examine the narrative and stylistic strategies through which Kazakh documentaries construct social reality, negotiate questions of authenticity, and respond to digital mediation. Using thematic coding and interpretive close reading, the study analyses film texts, production reports, and archival materials to uncover embedded semantic structures and assess the extent of local adaptation-or resistance-to global documentary conventions.
- **Source Criticism.** Source criticism provides a methodological foundation for evaluating the reliability and ideological positioning of primary documents, including archival records, production reports, governmental decrees, and institutional policies. This approach enables a reconstruction of the regulatory, financial, and institutional architectures that have shaped Kazakh documentary filmmaking across the post-Soviet period.

By integrating these five methodological components into a coherent research design, the dissertation achieves both analytical depth and critical breadth. It offers a comprehensive account of the aesthetic, institutional, and technological forces that have enabled-or constrained-the transformation of Kazakhstan's documentary sector in the context of global digital cinema

Scientific Novelty of the Work

This dissertation offers a comprehensive and multi-dimensional contribution to the field of documentary film studies, with a particular emphasis on the evolution of Kazakhstan's national documentary sector in the context of global digital transformation. It addresses longstanding gaps in scholarship by reconceptualising documentary cinema not merely as an auteur-driven or narratively constructed form, but as an integrated industrial, technological, and institutional system. In doing so, it challenges traditional frameworks that have often prioritised stylistic analysis and directorial intention, offering instead a system-level understanding of nonfiction filmmaking in the digital era.

A central innovation of this study lies in its original comparative framework, which systematically juxtaposes global developments in documentary production, financing, and distribution with Kazakhstan's selective adaptation and, at times, structural stagnation. This approach enables the identification of both convergences and disjunctures, revealing how national practices are embedded within-but also constrained by-transnational dynamics. The dissertation draws on a unique corpus of primary sources, including detailed financial records, institutional archives, production reports, and policy documents obtained from Kazakhfilm named after Shaken Aimanov, the State Centre for Support of National Cinema, and other governmental and independent bodies. This data, much of which is used in academic research for the first time, allows for a historically grounded, empirically rich assessment of Kazakhstan's documentary sector-its capacities, limitations, and developmental trajectories.

In analysing this material, the dissertation formulates a set of strategic recommendations aimed at dismantling the structural, institutional, and ideological barriers that continue to limit Kazakhstan's participation in the global documentary resurgence. These proposals seek to support the modernisation of national infrastructure, diversify financing mechanisms, and enhance the international visibility of Kazakhstani nonfiction cinema. In doing so, the study not only contributes to the transformation of domestic practice but also offers a foundation for future system-level research on national cinema industries operating in post-Soviet and postcolonial contexts.

Another key contribution of this dissertation is its focus on the emergence of a new generation of Kazakhstani documentary filmmakers-particularly women-who are redefining notions of authorship, reconfiguring audience engagement, and leveraging alternative platforms to circumvent institutional constraints. By centring these voices, the research engages with recent feminist and decolonial currents in global film theory, while also drawing attention to the shifting gender dynamics within Kazakhstan's nonfiction sector.

This study also interrogates the implications of platformisation, festival ecosystems, and cross-border co-production models for the structuring of documentary production and circulation. It maps the extent to which global distribution infrastructures-particularly streaming services and transmedia environments-have impacted the workflows, aesthetics, and economic viability of documentary filmmaking, both internationally and within Kazakhstan. In this way, the dissertation situates Kazakh documentary cinema not in isolation, but within the broader matrix of global cultural production and media policy.

Importantly, the research advances the idea of documentary cinema as a tool of soft power and cultural diplomacy for Kazakhstan, arguing that strategic alignment with global documentary trends can serve both artistic and geopolitical objectives. By framing nonfiction cinema as a site of cultural negotiation and international dialogue, the dissertation contributes to wider discussions on cultural policy, media globalisation, and national image-making. Methodologically, the dissertation establishes a hybridised research model that combines historical analysis, comparative study, qualitative content analysis, case-study methodology, and source

criticism. This interdisciplinary approach not only ensures analytical rigour but also provides a replicable template for future research in film and media studies.

In addition, the dissertation makes an original contribution by incorporating Kazakh-language and Russian-language scholarly sources into English-language discourse, thereby bridging a critical gap in international film scholarship. These materials-often overlooked or inaccessible in Western academic contexts-enrich the theoretical and empirical basis of the study and contribute to a more inclusive and multilingual understanding of documentary cinema.

Finally, the study contributes to decolonial film scholarship by interrogating how Kazakhstan's documentary infrastructure continues to reflect Soviet-era frameworks while also identifying emergent practices that signal a gradual assertion of cultural and institutional autonomy. By examining these contradictions, the dissertation provides insight into how national cinemas in post-socialist contexts navigate the tension between inherited systems and evolving creative independence. Taken together, these contributions advance both the scholarly understanding of global nonfiction cinema and the practical conditions shaping its development in Kazakhstan, offering a critical foundation for future interdisciplinary research at the intersection of film studies, cultural policy, and post-Soviet transformation.

Main Provisions to be Defended

- Identifies a cyclical historical pattern in documentary cinema, wherein phases of technological innovation-marked by expanded aesthetic, narrative, and production capacities-are followed by periods of formal retrenchment that reinforce established conventions.
- Demonstrates how the incorporation of digital tools-including non-linear editing systems, high-definition digital cinematography, online distribution platforms, and emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence, virtual reality, and augmented reality-has transformed storytelling modalities, diversified production workflows, and reshaped audience engagement.
- Analyses the rise of creative documentary practices characterised by genre hybridisation, overt authorial subjectivity, and formal experimentation, which have contributed to new paradigms within nonfiction cinema and recalibrated audience expectations.
- Examines how the emergence of a post-truth media environment has destabilised traditional frameworks of documentary objectivity and factual authority, prompting a re-evaluation of ethical considerations and narrative strategies across the field.
- Conducts comparative analysis across the United States, Europe, and Asia to trace differentiated trajectories in the adoption of digital technologies, public and private funding mechanisms, audience-building strategies, and institutional support infrastructures.
- Investigates the global shift to digital distribution, driven by the proliferation of streaming platforms and the maturation of transmedia ecosystems, which has reconfigured the economic foundations of documentary cinema and altered consumption patterns.
- Assesses the cultural and commercial implications of the widespread popularisation of true-crime series and hybrid investigative formats, which have propelled

documentary cinema into mainstream public consciousness and reshaped genre perception.

- Argues that Kazakhstan's adaptation to global documentary transformations has been cautious and inconsistent, limited by persistent ideological paradigms, minimal formal diversification, and institutional resistance to creative and technological innovation.
- Reveals that key support institutions-Kazakhfilm named after Shaken Aimanov and the State Centre for Support of National Cinema-have not sufficiently modernised their production methodologies, funding structures, or distribution strategies, hindering innovation and international competitiveness.
- Demonstrates that between 1991 and 2024, Kazakhstan's documentary production has largely remained confined to legacy production logics, characterised by partial technological integration and a lack of sustained access to global distribution networks.
- Advances a series of strategic recommendations-ranging from infrastructural modernisation and funding diversification to cross-border co-production facilitation and enhanced creative autonomy-to support Kazakhstan's full participation in the global resurgence of nonfiction cinema and to amplify its cultural presence on the international stage.

Scientific and Practical Significance of the Research

The practical significance of the dissertation lies in its systematic and empirically grounded analysis of documentary production in Kazakhstan, extending beyond textual or thematic concerns to interrogate the material structures, financing models, and distribution strategies underpinning the sector. Drawing upon extensive primary data—including production reports, internal archival documentation, and funding records from Kazakhfilm named after Shaken Aimanov and the State Centre for Support of National Cinema—the dissertation demonstrates that, despite formal state support, Kazakhstan's documentary sector has remained largely tethered to outdated Soviet-era production logics, thematic planning models, and fragmented distribution systems that are increasingly incompatible with the demands of the digital global marketplace. This structural inertia has severely limited the sector's capacity for innovation, international co-production, and creative diversification.

By critically analysing global transformations in documentary cinema—including the impact of digital technologies, the rise of platform-driven distribution models, the emergence of hybrid and participatory documentary forms, and the ethical challenges of the post-truth era—the dissertation situates Kazakhstan's experience within a broader comparative framework. This reveals not only points of stagnation but also potential vectors for reform and renewal. The research argues that modernising Kazakhstan's documentary sector requires a fundamental rethinking of state policies, financing mechanisms, production practices, and distribution infrastructures, moving away from ideological instrumentalisation towards models that prioritise creative autonomy, technological innovation, thematic diversity, and international integration. The dissertation's strategic recommendations—for the establishment of research and development stages in production, the diversification of thematic plans, the expansion of production budgets, the creation of Central Asian co-production treaties, the

institutionalisation of distribution networks for documentaries, and the development of educational programs specifically for documentary directors—are intended to serve as a roadmap for cultural policymakers, industry stakeholders, academic researchers, and independent filmmakers alike. In this regard, the research contributes not only to scholarly debates but also offers practical tools for revitalising Kazakhstan’s cultural industries in the twenty-first century.

Ultimately, this dissertation underscores the urgency of recognising documentary cinema as a critical instrument of cultural authorship, public discourse, and soft power projection, positioning Kazakhstan not merely as a passive recipient of global documentary trends but as an active and distinct participant in shaping the future of non-fiction media internationally