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**TRANSFORMATION OF DOCUMENTARY FILM PRODUCTION IN  
THE DIGITAL AGE: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES IN  
EMERGING PRACTICES AND DISTRIBUTION MODELS**

*A dissertation*

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>Table of Contents</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Terms</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>1 . Reframing Reality-Historical Foundations and Digital Disruptions</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>in Nonfiction Cinema</b>	<b>17</b>
1.1 The Decline and Transformation of Traditional Documentary Cinema: A Critical Examination of Challenges, Adaptation, and Resilience in the Digital Era	17
1.2. Rethinking Genres: Creative Documentaries and the Redefinition of Aesthetic and Narrative Boundaries	28
1.3 Transforming the Documentary Landscape: Technological Innovations: The Impact of AI, VR, and AR on Documentary Storytelling	35
1.4. Shaping Consciousness in the Post-Truth Era: Analysis of Truth, Objectivity, and Ethical Quandaries in Contemporary Documentary Discourse	42
Conclusion for Chapter I	45
<b>2. The Dynamics of Change: Challenges and the Impact of Key Cinematic Regions US, Europe, and Asia in Shaping Contemporary Documentary Cinema</b>	<b>47</b>
2.1. Documentary Cinema in the United States: Technological Innovation, Streaming Platforms, and Global Documentary Consumption	49
2.2 Documentary Production and Distribution in Europe: Policy Support, Public Broadcasting Shifts, and Festival-Driven Ecosystems	60
2.3 Documentary Production in Asia and Emerging Markets: Innovation, Access, and the Rise of Regional Voices	68
2.4. Global Crossroads: Hybridization of Production Practices and the Fragmentation of Distribution Models	78
Conclusion for Chapter II	80
<b>3. The Landscape of Documentary Cinema in Kazakhstan: Historical Trajectories, Structural Developments, Contemporary Narratives, and Emerging Challenges</b>	<b>82</b>
3.1. From Soviet Legacy to National Narratives: A Historical Overview of Kazakh Documentary Cinema	82
3.2 The Integration of Technology and Creativity in Kazakh Documentaries: Challenging Traditional Production Systems and Navigating New Frameworks in Contemporary society	106

3.3. Between Global Trends and Local Voices: Kazakhstan's Engagement with International Documentary Paradigms	112
Conclusion for Chapter III	122
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>124</b>
<b>Bibliography</b>	<b>130</b>
<b>Filmography</b>	<b>135</b>
<b>Appendix A. Data for Produced films by National Film Studio 'Kazakhfilm' named after Shaken Aimanov from 1990-2019</b>	<b>138</b>
<b>Appendix B. Data for State Support for National Cinema 'Kazakh Cinema' from 2019-2023</b>	<b>155</b>

## TERMS

### **Artificial Intelligence (AI)**

A collective term for computational systems that employ machine learning algorithms, neural networks, and natural language processing to execute tasks traditionally requiring human intelligence. Within documentary production, AI enables automated data annotation, intelligent archival retrieval, algorithm-driven editing workflows, and the generation of audiovisual narratives-prompting critical reflection on questions of authorship, epistemic authority, and ethical transparency.

### **Augmented Reality (AR)**

An interactive framework in which computer-generated perceptual information-visual, auditory, or haptic-is overlaid onto the user's direct experience of the physical world. In nonfiction media, AR applications embed dynamic contextual layers within real environments, fostering participatory audience engagement and recontextualising spatial narratives.

### **Co-Production**

A collaborative financing and creative model whereby two or more production entities-often spanning different national jurisdictions-pool resources, fiscal incentives, and artistic expertise. This transnational arrangement diversifies funding sources, cultivates intercultural dialogue, broadens distribution potential, and facilitates negotiation across cross-border regulatory regimes.

### **Creative Treatment of Actuality**

John Grierson's foundational principle defining documentary as the "creative treatment of actuality." The concept foregrounds the inherent paradox between objective representation and selective interpretation, acknowledging that editorial decisions, framing strategies, and narrative structures mediate recorded reality to yield meaningful cinematic expression.

### **Deepfakes**

AI-generated synthetic media that convincingly simulate real individuals' appearances, voices, or actions using neural networks such as Generative Adversarial Networks (GANs). In documentary contexts, deepfakes challenge the genre's traditional reliance on indexicality and verifiability, raising ethical concerns around authenticity, audience manipulation, and the ontological status of the audiovisual document.

### **Distribution**

The institutional and technical systems through which documentary films are delivered to audiences, encompassing theatrical exhibition, festival circulation, broadcast licensing, physical media, and digital platforms (SVOD, TVOD, AVOD). Distribution strategies-spanning festival programming, platform algorithms, and transmedia

promotion-are pivotal in shaping a film's financial performance, audience reach, and cultural resonance.

### **Docudrama**

A hybrid genre that combines empirical research and factual reportage with dramatized reenactments, scripted dialogue, and staged cinematography. By synthesising documentary evidence and fictional techniques, docudramas navigate the boundary between factual integrity and narrative persuasion, inviting viewers to interrogate notions of veracity and representation.

### **Docutainment**

A melding of documentary aesthetics with entertainment imperatives, in which non-fiction works are designed to inform while also eliciting strong affective engagement. Docutainment harnesses narrative arcs, character development, and high production values-akin to popular media-to optimise viewer retention and expand audience reach.

### **Expository Mode**

Bill Nichols's theorisation of a documentary form characterised by authoritative voice-over narration, didactic argumentation, and evidentiary support through archival footage and expert testimony. This mode asserts an ostensibly objective stance, guiding the audience toward a predetermined interpretive framework.

### **Global Circuits**

A concept articulated by Dina Iordanova to describe the transnational networks of production, distribution, and exhibition that transcend national-cinema paradigms. Global circuits emphasise the fluid movement of capital, culture, and content, situating documentaries within a complex web of globalised media exchange.

### **Hybrid Documentary**

An experimental form that intentionally blurs conventions of fiction and nonfiction, incorporating elements such as performative enactment, subjective voice-over, animation, interactive interfaces, and archival collage. Hybrid documentaries draw attention to the constructed nature of representational truth and encourage viewers to reflect critically on the ontology of documentary form.

### **Platformization**

The process by which digital streaming platforms and algorithm-driven distribution systems (e.g., Netflix, Amazon Prime Video) reconfigure the industrial logics of documentary production, financing, and consumption. Platformization involves the integration of data analytics, recommendation algorithms, and modular content design to maximise viewer engagement within global digital ecosystems.

### **Pop Documentary (Pop-Doc)**

A subgenre of nonfiction cinema that blends documentary fact with entertainment-

driven narrative conventions-such as sensational storytelling, heightened emotional appeal, and charismatic personalities-to maximise mass-market engagement. Pop-docs often employ dramatic reenactments, rapid editing rhythms, stylised sound design, and cross-media promotion, thereby prioritising audience retention and viral potential over strict adherence to observational or expository modes.

### **Postmemory**

Marianne Hirsch's term describing the intergenerational transmission of collective trauma, wherein descendants experience vivid recollections of events they did not personally witness. In documentary praxis, postmemory informs films that excavate inherited narratives of conflict, displacement, or historical rupture through mediated personal testimonies.

### **Post-Truth**

A cultural and epistemological condition in which emotional appeal, ideological alignment, and narrative persuasion outweigh the authority of objective facts and evidence. Within nonfiction media, the post-truth era destabilises traditional truth claims and demands new ethical frameworks rooted in reflexivity, transparency, and relational credibility rather than the myth of neutrality.

### **Streaming Platforms**

Digital distribution services (e.g., Netflix, Amazon Prime Video, Disney+) that deliver on-demand audiovisual content via internet protocols. In the documentary sector, streaming platforms have transformed production financing-through commissioning models, co-investment, and revenue-sharing agreements-and audience reach, utilising data-driven recommendation algorithms, global release strategies, and adaptive content formatting to optimise viewer engagement and platform loyalty.

### **Virtual Reality (VR)**

An immersive media environment delivered via head-mounted displays and spatial audio, enabling users to inhabit fully synthetic worlds or reconstructed historical sites. VR documentaries employ 360-degree cinematography and interactive spatial storytelling to intensify sensory immersion and foster empathetic engagement with subject matter.

## INTRODUCTION

Over the past three decades, documentary cinema has undergone profound transformations driven by digital technologies, participatory media cultures, and the global dominance of streaming platforms. These forces have reshaped not only the production and distribution mechanisms of nonfiction film, but also its aesthetic vocabularies, ethical considerations, and institutional structures. In this shifting environment, traditional notions of objectivity, evidentiary coherence, and the documentary's claim to truth have been increasingly destabilised, giving rise to hybrid forms, platform-specific narratives, and algorithmically segmented audiences. As the field becomes more globalised and technologically embedded, new opportunities—as well as new vulnerabilities—emerge for national cinemas negotiating these changes. In this evolving landscape, Kazakhstan presents a particularly revealing case. Despite significant public investment—most notably through the Kazakhfilm named after Shaken Aimanov and the State Centre for Support of National Cinema—the domestic documentary sector has, until recently, yet to fully embed itself within global currents of innovation. Thematic conservatism, Soviet-inherited production models, and rigid institutional structures have limited its capacity for creative reinvention. Meanwhile, distribution frameworks remain underdeveloped, hindering both international exposure and domestic outreach. Nevertheless, over the past decade, a new generation of Kazakhstani filmmakers—particularly female directors—has begun to redefine the landscape. Through independent practices, digital-first strategies, and cross-border collaborations, they are positioning Kazakh documentary cinema as a space for cultural, political, and aesthetic intervention in the global conversation.

This dissertation critically examines the structural transformations, challenges, and emergent possibilities shaping documentary cinema today, with a particular focus on Kazakhstan's shifting engagement with international currents. Chapter I outlines the historical and theoretical foundations of the documentary's transformation in the digital era, with attention to technological shifts, hybridised genres, and ethical concerns in a post-truth context (Nichols 15-32; Renov 123). Chapter II maps the contemporary nonfiction landscapes of the United States, Europe, and Asia, exploring key industrial realignments and aesthetic evolutions. Chapter III provides a focused case study of Kazakhstan, tracing the institutional legacies, production constraints, and emergent practices that define its documentary field. Through archival research, film analysis, and comparative context, this chapter highlights how new creative models are allowing Kazakhstani documentaries to re-enter global circuits. The conclusion synthesises these findings and offers strategic recommendations for fostering a sustainable, internationally connected documentary sector in Kazakhstan. Drawing upon global models while attending to local specificities, it proposes a hybrid framework balancing state support with creative independence and international dialogue. Ultimately, this study argues that the future of Kazakhstani documentary lies not only in responding to global transformations, but in contributing meaningfully to the ongoing redefinition of nonfiction cinema in the twenty-first century.

## **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 docu-

mentary 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

### **Defence and Publication**

The dissertation, titled *Transformation of Documentary Film Production in the Digital Age: Challenges and Opportunities of Emerging Practices and Distribution Models*, was presented and discussed at an extended session of the Department of Screen Arts Directing at the Temirbek Zhurgenov Kazakh National Academy of Arts. Following rigorous scholarly review, it was unanimously recommended for public defence. Key findings of the research have also been disseminated in the form of a peer-reviewed article published in an international journal indexed by Scopus.

### **Structure of the Dissertation**

The doctoral dissertation comprises an Introduction, three main chapters (each concluding with a set of intermediate findings), eleven subsections, a General Conclusion, a Bibliography, a Filmography, and an Appendix.



## **1 . Reframing Reality-Historical Foundations and Digital Disruptions in Nonfiction Cinema**

### **1.1 The Decline and Transformation of Traditional Documentary Cinema: A Critical Examination of Challenges, Adaptation, and Resilience in the Digital Era**

Documentary cinema traces its origins to the very inception of film itself. In the 1890s, Auguste and Louis Lumière's actualités-brief, unmediated glimpses of everyday life, exemplified by *Workers Leaving the Factory* (1895)-embodied what Bill Nichols would later conceptualise as the "actuality mode," thereby establishing cinema's archival, evidentiary, and observational potentials (British Film Institute; Nichols 3). Commercially, these early nonfiction experiments proved remarkably lucrative: the Lumières' Salon Indien screenings in Paris, initially accommodating 120 viewers, rapidly expanded to twenty daily showings, generating revenues of up to 2,500 francs per day and demonstrating the mass appeal of cinematic representations of the real (Sadoul 27). By 1897, the cinématographe had begun offering audiences an unprecedented sense of "seeing the world," reinforcing film's perceived credibility and dispelling residual associations with mere illusion or fairground trickery (Sadoul 28). Early nonfiction productions appeared under varied designations-documentaires, actualities, topicals, interest films, expedition films, and travelogues-yet all shared a unifying emphasis on documenting lived experience and situating film as a vehicle for empirical knowledge (Sadoul 29). This commitment to actuality laid the groundwork for the later emergence of observational and expository documentary modes, while simultaneously initiating long-standing debates over cinematic truth and constructedness. However, by the early 1900s, fiction innovators such as Georges Méliès and Edwin S. Porter began to exploit editing and narrative continuity to craft narrative illusions, thereby relegating pure actuality to the margins of cinematic innovation and audience expectation (Sadoul 31). It was not until the 1920s that the term "documentary" formally entered critical discourse. Scottish theorist John Grierson coined the term in his description of Robert Flaherty's *Moana* (1926) as "the creative treatment of actuality," a seminal formulation that encapsulates the enduring tension between fidelity to real events and creative intervention (British Film Institute; Renov 5). Although Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* (1922) is often celebrated as the first feature-length documentary, it notably departed from strict observational practice by incorporating staged reenactments-such as orchestrated hunting scenes and a purpose-built half-igloo designed to accommodate lighting constraints-thereby illustrating from its inception the methodological, ethical, and aesthetic compromises inherent in documentary feature production (British Film Institute; Renov 12). Thus, the documentary form was born simultaneously as a site of evidentiary aspiration and creative construction, a paradox that would continue to shape its evolution across the twentieth and twenty-first centuries

The methodological choices evident in *Nanook of the North* (1922) mark a decisive turning point in the evolution of documentary production. Flaherty's film demonstrated that nonfiction cinema could construct a compelling narrative arc without fully relinquishing its claim to authenticity, thus prefiguring John Grierson's 1932 definition of documentary as "the creative treatment of actuality" (Grierson). At the same time, *Nanook* exposed enduring tensions at the heart of the form: between factual depiction and dramatic storytelling, between cultural documentation and mythologisation, and between the ethics of representation and the imperatives of audience engagement. As Erik Barnouw observes, although documentary cinema entered a period of relative decline in the late 1920s-eclipsed by the spectacular aesthetic advances of narrative fiction films-Flaherty's explorer-documentarist model preserved nonfiction's cultural vitality and popular appeal by foregrounding narrative construction, affective resonance, and emotional engagement as central, if contested, features of the documentary form (Barnouw 30). The legacy of *Nanook* extends far beyond its immediate historical moment. By consciously integrating staged sequences, character-driven arcs, and romanticised depictions of Inuit life, Flaherty laid the groundwork for a tradition of nonfiction filmmaking that embraces interpretative storytelling alongside observational fidelity. His approach simultaneously opened pathways for creative nonfiction and introduced ethical ambiguities that remain salient today. The selective portrayal of indigenous culture, the implicit paternalism of the narrative frame, and the dialectic between documentation and dramatization anticipated critical debates that continue to shape contemporary documentary theory and practice (Nichols). Thus, *Nanook of the North* not only launched the first feature-length documentary tradition but also inaugurated the fundamental paradoxes-between truth and construction, representation and mediation-that would define the genre's ongoing evolution across subsequent decades.

Dziga Vertov's practice in the Soviet Union articulated a radical counterpoint to Flaherty's romanticised model of documentary. In his 1923 *We: Variant of a Manifesto*, Vertov declared that the "kino-eye" enables "truth unmediated by language or theatre," insisting that the camera, unlike the human eye, could reveal facets of material reality inaccessible to subjective perception (Vertov 3). Rejecting staged scenes, narrative scripting, and emotionalised dramatisation, Vertov embraced what he termed "life caught unawares," championing spontaneous observation and the editor's decisive role in constructing cinematic truth through rhythmic montage. This philosophy reached its apex in *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929), an audacious montage of Soviet urban existence that dispenses with actors, intertitles, and traditional plots in favour of a dynamic, self-reflexive vision of social life captured through the technological apparatus of the camera (Barnouw 63). Sergei Eisenstein's theoretical framework, developed contemporaneously, similarly emphasised montage as the structural engine of cinematic meaning. In *Film Form: Essays in Film Theory*, Eisenstein contends that "the collision of independent shots generates intellectual and emotional resonance," foregrounding the dialectical juxtaposition of images as a method for activating audience cognition and ideological critique (Eisenstein 24). His concept of the "montage of attractions"-the deliberate sequencing of shots to provoke maximum emotional and intellectual impact-parallels Vertov's vision of film-truth, positing that

cinema's transformative power lies not in passive recording, but in the synthetic, analytical reconfiguration of reality. Together, Vertov and Eisenstein positioned documentary not as a neutral window onto the world, but as a constructed, interventionist art form capable of revealing deeper social and political truths through formal innovation.

The coexistence of Flaherty's interpretative narratives and Vertov-Eisenstein montage aesthetics by the late 1920s reveals a core paradox at the heart of documentary practice: although both models profess a commitment to capturing reality, each depends fundamentally on authorial intervention-on decisions about what to film, how to frame it, and how to assemble images into meaning-bearing sequences. In both cases, reality is not passively recorded but actively constructed. As Bill Nichols argues, documentary from its inception has embodied "the paradoxical performance of the real," negotiating between transparency and mediation through processes of creative selection, framing, and narration (Nichols 47). Thus, even the earliest traditions of documentary cinema reflect a dynamic tension between the indexical promise of film and the inevitable subjectivities embedded in its production and reception. This foundational ambivalence would continue to shape documentary's evolution throughout the twentieth century and into the digital era.

The first major cycle of technological innovation in cinema-emerging during the 1920s-served as the foundational catalyst that radically expanded both the production capacities and narrative possibilities of documentary filmmaking. Dziga Vertov's concept of the "kino-eye" and Sergei Eisenstein's theory of dialectical montage introduced new techniques for capturing and assembling reality, inaugurating a phase of formal experimentation that shaped seminal nonfiction works such as John Grierson's *Night Mail* (1936) and Pare Lorentz's *The Plow That Broke the Plains* (1936) (Grierson; Lorentz). This era demonstrated that technological advances in filming and editing could unlock new aesthetic grammars and narrative rhythms, establishing a dynamic interplay between material invention and creative practice that would characterise subsequent transformations in the field. However, this initial flourishing was soon tempered by the appropriation of documentary techniques for propagandistic purposes, as seen in Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* (1935) and Frank Capra's *Why We Fight* series (1942-1945), where cinematic innovation became subordinated to ideological objectives (Riefenstahl; Capra). After World War II, a second technological revolution-the development of portable cameras, synchronous sound recording, and later, non-linear editing-would similarly spark a new cycle of narrative innovation and formal autonomy. As Lev Manovich later observed, the rise of software-based production further decentralised authorship, turning the personal computer into a "cultural meta-medium" that redefined the conditions of cinematic creation (Manovich). This dissertation identifies these successive cycles-beginning with the montage revolution-as structural through-lines connecting early experimental nonfiction to the contemporary digital renaissance, demonstrating that technological innovation has functioned not merely as a tool but as a recurring catalyst for documentary reinvention.

The advent of television marked the second pivotal cycle in documentary cinema's technological and institutional evolution. Much like the montage innova-

tions of the 1920s that catalysed aesthetic breakthroughs, the post-World War II expansion of broadcast infrastructure fundamentally redefined how nonfiction content was produced, distributed, and consumed. As theatrical documentaries struggled to maintain commercial viability, television introduced new structural conditions: continuous programming schedules, broad domestic reach, and public or corporate funding models that stabilised production while simultaneously imposing standardised aesthetic and rhetorical conventions (Barnouw 112). This systemic realignment enabled unprecedented mass access to nonfiction cinema but entrenched formal constraints, privileging linear storytelling, authoritative exposition, and predictable generic forms. John Corner characterises this post-war period as the "institutionalisation" of documentary on the small screen, where the imperatives of clarity, accessibility, and regular scheduling eclipsed the avant-garde experimentation of earlier decades (Corner 89). Bill Nichols similarly argues that television reconfigured both the ethical positioning and epistemological expectations of the viewer, transforming documentary into "the kinetic medium of collective spectatorship" and embedding nonfiction storytelling into the habitual rhythms of everyday domestic life (Nichols 45). These developments exemplify a broader structural pattern that this dissertation identifies as cyclical: moments of technological innovation initially catalyse aesthetic and narrative expansion, only to be followed by phases of formal retrenchment shaped by institutional logics and industrial norms. This cyclical model-linking documentary's historical transformations to successive media-technological revolutions-constitutes the core theoretical framework developed throughout this chapter and revisited in the dissertation's concluding analysis. Before television became the dominant distribution channel for nonfiction media, documentary films in both the United States and Europe were primarily circulated through cinema-based systems. During the 1930s and 1940s, theatrical shorts and mid-length features often preceded fictional screenings in cinemas or were distributed through educational and institutional networks. In the United States, government-sponsored works like Pare Lorentz's *The Plow That Broke the Plains* (1936) and *The River* (1938) were designed for public exhibition in schools, town halls, and community centres, positioning documentary as a tool for civic education and New Deal ideology. In Britain, the General Post Office (GPO) Film Unit under John Grierson similarly embraced cinema as a national pedagogical platform, producing films like *Coal Face* (1935) and *Night Mail* (1936) that were shown in local theatres and later through mobile projection units. These films were part of a broader vision of documentary as a cultural and informational public service, structured around event-based, curated screenings. However, with the post-war rise of television, this cinematic model of distribution was rapidly displaced. As domestic broadcast infrastructure expanded, documentaries were absorbed into the regular rhythms of television programming, gradually transforming from discrete cultural events into serialised, routine components of daily media consumption. The shift did not merely alter documentary's audience reach and accessibility; it redefined the industrial and aesthetic conditions under which nonfiction cinema was produced, circulated, and received.

Television's consolidation in the post-war period decisively restructured the aesthetic, institutional, and cultural role of documentary cinema. In the United States,

CBS's *See It Now* (1951-1958), created by Edward R. Murrow and Fred Friendly, marked a critical transition from cinematic nonfiction to television-based documentary storytelling. As one of the first series to establish long-form, issue-driven programming within prime-time broadcast schedules, *See It Now* demonstrated that nonfiction could achieve both journalistic rigor and popular appeal on a mass scale (Aufderheide). By the mid-1950s, CBS had allocated approximately 10% of its news division budget to documentary production, affirming nonfiction's strategic institutional value (Edgerton). Parallel developments unfolded in the United Kingdom, where the BBC's *Panorama* (1953-present) redefined audience expectations for regular current-affairs programming, drawing more than five million weekly viewers and embedding documentary practice within the rhythms of everyday media consumption (BBC Archives). Similar models emerged elsewhere, notably Canada's *This Hour Has Seven Days* (CBC, 1964-1966), which combined investigative reporting with formal innovation. Collectively, these programmes codified a standardised mode of televised documentary: presenter-led, visually illustrative, and governed by the editorial imperatives of objectivity, balance, and accessibility (Winston). Institutional integration within network news divisions reinforced documentary's evolving public role as a medium of mass information, while simultaneously constraining its aesthetic and narrative possibilities. Thus, the trajectory inaugurated by television exemplifies the broader cyclical dynamic traced in this dissertation: technological and institutional innovation initially expands nonfiction's expressive capacities, only to be followed by phases of formal consolidation shaped by dominant industrial logics.

Stylistically, the dominant documentary grammar of the television era coalesced around what Bill Nichols terms the "expository mode"-a form characterised by an authoritative, disembodied "voice of God" narrator, linear causality, and a coherent rhetorical argument, reinforced through archival imagery, talking-head interviews, and didactic voice-over commentary (Nichols, 2017). This model privileged clarity and accessibility over ambiguity or formal experimentation, embedding documentary within the communicative imperatives and public-service mandates of broadcast television. Yet the transition to television was not merely aesthetic; it fundamentally expanded documentary's social legitimacy and everyday reach. By the early 1960s, more than 90% of American households owned a television set (U.S. Census Bureau), and major nonfiction works such as Edward R. Murrow's *Harvest of Shame* (1960)-which exposed the systemic exploitation of migrant farm labourers-could reach tens of millions of viewers through a single national broadcast. In Britain, the BBC's factual programming explicitly aligned itself with the Reithian principles of public service: to inform, educate, and entertain. Flagship programmes such as *Panorama* and *Tonight* reinforced documentary's civic function, shaping public opinion and constructing a shared national narrative through a carefully curated balance of reportage and editorial authority (Scannell and Cardiff). However, this institutional embrace also imposed systemic constraints. Television's industrial demands prioritised regularity, predictability, and broad accessibility. Documentaries were reformatted to fit rigid hour-long slots, tailored to advertiser sensitivities, and crafted to appeal to mass audiences. As Brian Winston observes, the genre's incorporation into television rendered it "respectable-and dull" (Winston 151).

The early promise of aesthetic experimentation gave way to formulaic conventions: authoritative voice-over scripts, talking-head interviews, and illustrative, non-disruptive editing patterns. Flagship programmes such as the BBC's *Civilisation* (1969) and Thames Television's *The World at War* (1973) were meticulously produced and culturally significant, yet their formal conservatism reinforced perceptions of documentary as an educational obligation rather than a site of creative innovation (Corner, 1996). In the United States, commercial pressures were even more acute. By the 1970s, major networks increasingly relegated documentaries to undesirable "death slots" and steered clear of controversial topics that might alienate sponsors (Edgerton). Filmmaker Dai Vaughan lamented that "almost all serious documentary is now produced for television," suggesting that the genre's cinematic vitality had been subsumed into the bureaucratic norms of broadcast production (Vaughan 66). Retired BBC commissioners similarly reflected on an era dominated by cautious, formulaic works, over-reliant on narration and conventional reporting techniques (Corner, 1996). The broader cultural perception of documentary shifted: it was now serious but uninspired, institutionally entrenched but narratively inert. As Nichols and Winston both contend, this moment encapsulates a paradigmatic cycle within documentary history-where technological innovation (in this case, broadcast infrastructure) initially catalysed formal expansion, only to be followed by institutional standardisation and aesthetic retreat.

Even as television documentary achieved cultural centrality, a countercurrent of formal innovation emerged through the rise of observational cinema. In the United States, Direct Cinema-pioneered by Robert Drew, Richard Leacock, D.A. Pennebaker, and the Maysles brothers-sought to escape what Drew termed "lecture logic," rejecting the expository mode in favour of spontaneous, unscripted engagement with reality (Barnouw). Armed with lightweight 16mm cameras and synchronised sound recording equipment, these filmmakers aimed to capture events as they unfolded, dispensing with narration, staged interviews, or overt editorial framing. Drew's *Primary* (1960), chronicling the Wisconsin Democratic primary contest between John F. Kennedy and Hubert Humphrey, epitomised this ethos, immersing viewers in the immediacy of political life without rhetorical scaffolding. Concurrently in France, *cinéma vérité* emerged through the experiments of Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin. In *Chronique d'un été* (1961), they explored the reflexive relationship between filmmaker and subject, foregrounding the performative and dialogic dimensions of non-fiction production (Renov, 1993). While Direct Cinema pursued fly-on-the-wall transparency, *cinéma vérité* embraced the unavoidable influence of the camera, treating interaction as constitutive rather than contaminating. Both movements resisted television's didactic formalism, reclaiming documentary as a site of spontaneity, uncertainty, and ethical complexity. Films such as Pennebaker's *Dont Look Back* (1967) and Frederick Wiseman's *Titicut Follies* (1967) expanded observational aesthetics, employing handheld camerawork, ambient sound, long takes, and fragmentary editing to reassert documentary's cinematic potential. By the late 1960s, elements of observational grammar had begun to filter into institutional television practice, subtly reshaping broadcast documentary from within even as broader structural constraints remained largely intact.

In tandem with observational strategies, the period also witnessed the emergence of the personal and essayistic documentary, expanding nonfiction's formal and rhetorical range. Filmmakers such as Werner Herzog and Agnès Varda introduced subjectivity, poetic narration, and first-person presence as legitimate modes of engagement. Varda's *Daguerréotypes* (1975) seamlessly combined sociological observation with autobiographical reflection, while Herzog's corpus infused nonfiction material with philosophical speculation, stylised voice-over, and staged provocation. This turn toward self-reflexivity was further extended by works such as Ross McElwee's *Sherman's March* (1986) and Michael Moore's *Roger & Me* (1989), where irony, humour, and authorial presence disrupted the conventions of impartial reportage and positioned the filmmaker's subjectivity at the centre of meaning production (Nichols, 2017). These films not only challenged dominant paradigms of objectivity but diversified the emotional, epistemological, and rhetorical vocabulary of documentary cinema. Parallel to these aesthetic developments, the late 1960s and 1970s also marked the politicisation of documentary practice. As global protest movements proliferated, nonfiction film became a medium of advocacy and resistance. In the United States, Emile de Antonio's *In the Year of the Pig* (1968) offered a scathing historical indictment of U.S. involvement in Vietnam, while *Winter Soldier* (1972)-produced by the Vietnam Veterans Against the War-foregrounded testimonial and witnessing as radical acts of truth-telling. These politically charged documentaries eschewed neutrality in favour of ideological clarity and moral urgency, reasserting the genre's activist potential at a moment when mainstream television documentary was increasingly circumscribed by institutional conservatism. Outside the Western mainstream, the radical aesthetics of Third Cinema offered an even more revolutionary vision of documentary's political possibilities. Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino's manifesto *Toward a Third Cinema* (1969) articulated a militant, activist filmmaking practice dedicated to decolonisation, collective consciousness-raising, and social transformation. Their seminal film *The Hour of the Furnaces* (1968) eschewed traditional narrative cohesion in favour of agitational montage, rhythmic intertitles, and confrontational sound design, explicitly designed not for passive spectatorship but for active political mobilisation (Rich 23). Deprived of access to mainstream theatrical distribution, these works circulated through alternative exhibition networks-community centres, trade unions, student groups, and underground collectives-demonstrating documentary's enduring utility as a mode of counterhegemonic intervention. Although some elements of this radical energy were later absorbed into reformist institutions-such as Channel 4's *Workshop Declaration* initiatives in the United Kingdom (1982) and PBS's *POV* and *Independent Lens* series in the United States-mainstream broadcast documentary largely retained its conservative formal and ideological parameters (Aufderheide; Winston). Nevertheless, the radical, personal, and observational modes cultivated during this period laid the essential groundwork for the genre's eventual renewal in the digital era. These aesthetic and political insurgencies created a documentary tradition capable of resisting institutional homogenisation, a tradition that would be crucially reactivated once technological innovation again unsettled the dominant media ecologies at the end of the twentieth century. The absorption of documentary into the infrastructure of televi-

sion thus represents the second full arc in the cyclical pattern that this dissertation traces: a technological breakthrough catalyses formal and industrial innovation, followed by a phase of institutional consolidation that, over time, narrows aesthetic range and redefines public function. Television's rise in the postwar era expanded documentary's cultural reach, embedded it within national information systems, and enabled its widespread public legitimisation. Yet this very institutionalisation-through routinised formats, editorial constraints, and commercial pressures-gradually led to narrative stagnation and formal conservatism. As in the earlier montage revolution, where the technical innovations of the 1920s gave way to the didactic rigidity of wartime propaganda, the broadcast era brought both a flourishing and a containment of documentary possibility. This chapter has argued that the television documentary, while central to nonfiction's survival and mainstream recognition, also exemplifies how technological infrastructure can shape-and ultimately delimit-the artistic and epistemological ambitions of the genre. In the chapters that follow, the analysis turns to the next rupture: the digital paradigm, in which emerging tools and decentralised networks would once again reconfigure documentary form, authorship, and systems of circulation.

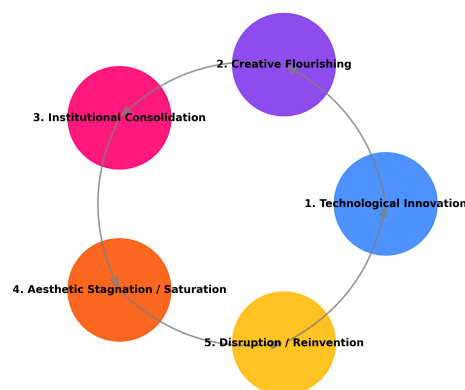
By the late twentieth century, documentary cinema stood at a critical crossroads, defined by sharp contradictions between institutional prestige and popular marginalisation. On one hand, documentaries had attained unprecedented cultural legitimacy, widely recognised as serious contributions to journalism, education, and public service media. Public broadcasters, national film boards, and philanthropic foundations routinely financed documentaries addressing urgent social, environmental, and political issues; nonfiction works garnered prestigious awards, became fixtures in academic curricula, and were integrated into civic discourse (Aufderheide 2007). On the other hand, the general public often perceived documentaries as dutiful rather than desirable-worthy but uninspiring, to be consumed for enlightenment rather than for aesthetic pleasure or emotional engagement. Theatrical releases remained rare and commercially precarious, further marginalising nonfiction from mainstream popular culture and reinforcing the division between "serious" documentary and "entertaining" fiction cinema. Consequently, despite its institutional consolidation, documentary cinema struggled to maintain cultural dynamism, highlighting the urgent need for formal innovation, technological rejuvenation, and expanded distribution models-developments that would only materialise with the onset of the digital era.

The funding environment of the late twentieth century contributed significantly to the structural dynamics that constrained documentary innovation. Most nonfiction productions during this period depended heavily on commissions from television networks, grants from government arts agencies, or institutional sponsorship from journalistic organisations-sources that, while essential for survival, often imposed implicit expectations regarding tone, form, and subject matter (Aufderheide 2007). Broadcasters commissioning documentaries typically demanded works that conformed to standardised broadcast slots, adhered to journalistic norms of balance and decorum, and minimised formal experimentation to maintain audience accessibility. Similarly, philanthropic foundations and NGOs supporting social-issue documentaries often prioritised clear advocacy messaging over works that pursued aesthetic or narrative



complexity. In this environment, filmmakers with more cinematic or hybrid visions frequently encountered substantial barriers to funding or were compelled to compromise their artistic ambitions in order to meet commissioning requirements (Nichols 2017). The career trajectories of filmmakers such as Errol Morris and Ross McElwee exemplify these structural tensions. Morris's *The Thin Blue Line* (1988), a groundbreaking investigation into a miscarriage of justice that incorporated stylised reenactments, dramatic lighting, and an original score by Philip Glass, deviated sharply from the conventions of broadcast journalism. Unsurprisingly, Morris was unable to secure funding from major American networks; the film was ultimately completed with support from Britain's Channel 4 and private investors, achieving critical success through film festivals and the art-house circuit rather than mainstream broadcast channels (Winston 1995). Similarly, McElwee's Sherman's *March* (1986)-a deeply personal, essayistic exploration of autobiography, historical memory, and romantic longing-initially struggled to find broadcast support due to its unconventional structure and subjective voice, only gaining recognition after winning major festival awards. These examples underscore the persistence of a broadcast-centered industrial model that, despite the genre's expanding cultural legitimacy, privileged informational content and standardised formats over cinematic exploration. Even as documentaries were valorised for their civic utility, they remained largely confined within aesthetic conventions designed to fit the communicative logic of twentieth-century mass media. By the close of the century, the need for a new infrastructural and technological rupture-one that could liberate documentary from these institutional constraints-had become increasingly evident.

Cyclical Model of Technological Transformation in Documentary Cinema



**Figure 1.1.** Cyclical Model of Technological Transformation in Documentary Cinema.

Nevertheless, the late 1980s and early 1990s revealed early signs of an incipient documentary renaissance. Films that defied the formal and tonal expectations of traditional broadcast documentary demonstrated a latent appetite among audiences for more dynamic, emotionally resonant nonfiction storytelling. Michael Moore's

*Roger & Me* (1989), which fused satire, personal intervention, and social critique, achieved notable commercial success, proving that documentary could not only entertain but also mobilise mass audiences through theatrical exhibition. Steve James's *Hoop Dreams* (1994), an epic longitudinal chronicle of two African-American teenagers' athletic and personal aspirations, garnered extraordinary critical acclaim and impressive box office revenue, decisively challenging the assumption that nonfiction cinema lacked mainstream viability. Similarly, D.A. Pennebaker and Chris Hegedus's *The War Room* (1993), which captured the inner workings of Bill Clinton's 1992 presidential campaign, offered a new model for character-driven, observational political storytelling that was both immediate and cinematic.

Although these titles remained exceptions rather than the norm, they collectively signalled a pivotal shift. Documentary filmmakers were beginning to reclaim cinema-not merely television-as a primary site for creative nonfiction, expanding both the aesthetic possibilities and the commercial horizons of the genre. This reorientation was facilitated by the gradual reopening of theatrical spaces to documentary exhibition, bolstered by independent theatres, art-house circuits, and major festival platforms such as Sundance and the Toronto International Film Festival, which increasingly spotlighted nonfiction works as critical components of their programming. Simultaneously, structural changes in the broader media ecosystem offered new alternative venues. In the United Kingdom, Channel 4's commissioning model-explicitly prioritising experimentation, diversity of voice, and independent authorship-offered a counterbalance to the BBC's more traditional, expository formats (Winston 1995). In the United States, the rise of premium cable networks such as HBO, A&E, and Discovery during the 1990s opened additional spaces for creative nonfiction, offering filmmakers greater editorial latitude and audiences content that departed from the didacticism of conventional broadcast documentary. Thus, while documentary cinema in the late twentieth century remained constrained by entrenched institutional norms, these emergent pathways indicated the possibility of a new creative resurgence-one that would be fully realised with the digital technological transformations of the coming decade.

Crucially, this transitional era also witnessed the emergence of new distribution technologies that fundamentally redefined audience access to documentary cinema. The proliferation of home video formats-first VHS, and later DVD-allowed documentaries to circulate far beyond their original broadcast or theatrical windows, cultivating extended word-of-mouth trajectories and enabling long-tail audience engagement. Educational institutions, public libraries, and grassroots organisations became crucial nodes in this decentralised distribution network, while specialty distributors such as First Run Features and Women Make Movies established dedicated channels for politically engaged and underrepresented voices. Simultaneously, the advent of the World Wide Web in the mid-1990s further expanded documentary's promotional and communicative capacities, creating new digital spaces for community organising, grassroots advocacy, and, eventually, direct-to-audience streaming initiatives. As Patricia Aufderheide notes, these developments marked a "partial liberation" of the documentary form from the rigid formal and institutional constraints inherited from the broadcast era (Aufderheide, 2007). Building on this, Chuck Tryon has observed that

the convergence of home media, digital access, and niche marketing strategies fostered the rise of a new cinephile documentary culture—one operating across both physical and virtual spaces, challenging traditional hierarchies of distribution and reception (Tryon, 2009). In sum, the closing decades of the twentieth century posed a profound paradox for documentary cinema. On the one hand, the genre achieved unprecedented institutional legitimacy, firmly established within the spheres of education, cultural production, and journalistic discourse. On the other hand, its aesthetic innovation remained partially stifled by the legacy of broadcast-era formatting and funding models, limiting the full exploration of new expressive potentials. Yet the cumulative impact of theatrical resurgence, premium cable expansion, home video circulation, and nascent digital infrastructures laid crucial groundwork for a deeper systemic rupture. The stage was thus set for the digital revolution of the early twenty-first century—a transformation that would radically reconfigure documentary aesthetics, production methodologies, financing structures, and patterns of global circulation, reshaping the field in ways previously unimaginable.

Entering the twenty-first century, documentary cinema encountered a rapidly shifting media landscape, defined by unprecedented technological innovation, deregulated global markets, and the decentralisation of production tools. The proliferation of affordable digital video technologies—such as MiniDV and early HD formats—in the late 1990s and early 2000s dramatically lowered barriers to entry, while the emergence of nonlinear editing software like Final Cut Pro and Avid democratized post-production workflows, offering filmmakers greater creative autonomy than ever before. Simultaneously, the maturation of the internet into a powerful distribution and exhibition platform disrupted the entrenched hierarchies of broadcast television, enabling direct-to-audience engagement through web-native distribution models. At the industrial level, global markets for nonfiction film expanded markedly through the growing prominence of international festivals, the rise of cross-border co-productions, and the emergence of specialised theatrical distributors focused on independent documentary. This evolving digital ecosystem rewarded formal and thematic innovation. No longer constrained by the one-hour broadcast mould, filmmakers explored increasingly diverse formats: full-length theatrical features, serialised docuseries, web-native experiments, and immersive multimedia projects that blurred the boundary between cinema and interactive experience. Notable box office successes such as Michael Moore's *Bowling for Columbine* (2002) and *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004), Jeffrey Blitz's *Spellbound* (2002), Morgan Spurlock's *Super Size Me* (2004), and Davis Guggenheim's *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006) demonstrated documentary cinema's capacity to function simultaneously as mass entertainment and as a catalyst for public discourse. These films, amplified through festival buzz, strategic DVD marketing, and the early digital download economy, became cultural events in their own right, signalling the genre's newfound viability across both theatrical and home-viewing contexts.

The late 2000s and early 2010s witnessed an even more profound inflection point with the rise of streaming services. Platforms such as Netflix, HBO, and Amazon Prime began commissioning and acquiring high-profile documentaries, offering global releases and algorithmically prominent placement. Multi-part true-crime series

such as *Making a Murderer* (2015), *Wild Wild Country* (2018), and *Tiger King* (2020) exemplified a new synthesis of suspense-driven storytelling, mass accessibility, and documentary form, effectively dissolving the once-clear boundary between nonfiction, journalism, and serialised fiction. Concurrently, artistically ambitious works such as Ari Folman's animated *Waltz with Bashir* (2008) and the BBC's ultra-high-definition *Planet Earth* (2006) demonstrated how new digital visual technologies could expand nonfiction aesthetics, marrying formal innovation with technological sophistication. Lev Manovich has argued that the contemporary documentary form has been fundamentally reshaped by what he terms "cultural software"-the ubiquitous integration of computational processes into all stages of media production, from editing workflows and metadata tagging to interactive platform design (Manovich, 2001). This integration not only streamlined production but fundamentally altered the representational capacities and narrative possibilities of nonfiction cinema.

As a result, audience expectations evolved in tandem. Documentaries were no longer perceived solely as educational artefacts but as culturally potent works capable of aesthetic innovation, emotional resonance, and complex narrative construction. Recognition by major institutions-such as the Academy Awards for *Searching for Sugar Man* (2012) and *Free Solo* (2018)-further solidified the genre's mainstream legitimacy, marking a decisive shift in its public status. Nonetheless, challenges persisted. Funding structures remained fragmented across grants, pre-sales, streaming commissions, and crowdfunding platforms, while ethical concerns regarding reenactment, digital manipulation, and algorithmically tailored content delivery complicated traditional claims to truth and objectivity. Yet the genre's adaptive capacity proved decisive. As Brian Winston (2020) astutely observes, the emancipation from traditional broadcast constraints enabled documentary filmmakers to "reimagine the form itself." From the Lumière brothers' actuality films to the globally streamed, algorithmically curated docuseries of the 2020s, the historical evolution of documentary cinema reveals a cyclical dynamic: phases of technological disruption, followed by institutional adaptation and creative reinvention-each cycle redefining how reality is recorded, constructed, and circulated.

## **1.2. Rethinking Genres: Creative Documentaries and the Redefinition of Aesthetic and Narrative Boundaries**

These works often blur ontological boundaries, producing a heightened reality that paradoxically deepens the viewer's emotional and epistemological engagement. One of the most striking manifestations of this trend is the emergence of hybrid documentary forms that synthesise nonfictional frameworks with animated, dramatized, or performative elements. As Ramazanova and Chernykh argue in their study of animadoc-a hybrid phenomenon at the crossroads of documentary and animation-such works "expand the limits of factual representation while preserving a fundamental commitment to conveying authentic emotional and experiential truths" (Ramazanova and Chernykh 17). Far from undermining documentary credibility, hybridisation offers new pathways for articulating subjectivity, memory, trauma, and internal states often inaccessible to conventional observational methods. The move toward hy-

bridization and subjectivity has also fostered new ethical and epistemological challenges. By abandoning the conventional markers of neutrality-such as third-person narration, linear causality, and observational detachment-creative documentaries foreground the constructedness of representation and invite viewers into an active, interpretative relationship with the text. This shift demands a new critical vocabulary, one that accounts for the productive tensions between fact and fiction, authenticity and artifice, witnessing and performance. As Bruzzi suggests, "truth in documentary is always partial, contingent, and shaped by the processes of mediation and narrative construction" (Bruzzi 2006, 9).

In this context, the creative documentary emerges not as a deviation from non-fictional norms but as their contemporary reinvention-an adaptive response to evolving technologies, audience expectations, and cultural sensibilities. Through aesthetic innovation and formal hybridity, these works sustain documentary cinema's traditional mission of exploring reality, even as they radically transform the means through which that exploration is achieved.

Contemporary creative documentaries build upon these early traditions, extending them into new thematic and technological domains. Films such as Viktor Kossakovsky's *¡Vivan las Antipodas!* (2011) or Gianfranco Rosi's *Notturmo* (2020) construct experiential realities through lyrical montage and visual metaphor, prioritizing immersion and affect over linear explanation. In these works, narrative progression is subordinated to sensory evocation; meaning emerges associatively, through the viewer's emotional and interpretative engagement with the cinematic experience. This aesthetic strategy echoes what Ramazanova and Abikeyeva have described as the "poeticisation of the real" in contemporary creative documentary, wherein subjective perception and artistic intuition become primary vehicles for conveying deeper cultural and existential truths (Ramazanova and Abikeyeva 2021, 4). A parallel strategy within the creative documentary arsenal has been the incorporation of staged reenactments-not as mere illustrative supplements but as core narrative devices that reconfigure how viewers relate to historical and testimonial material. Unlike conventional docudramas that attempt to invisibly recreate past events, creative documentaries often foreground the constructedness of reenactments, making the act of performance itself a subject of reflection. Joshua Oppenheimer's *The Act of Killing* (2012) stands as the most audacious exemplar of this approach. In this film, perpetrators of the 1965-66 Indonesian mass killings are invited to reenact their crimes through cinematic pastiche, employing Hollywood genres ranging from musicals to gangster films. Rather than offering a traditional exposé or confessional narrative, Oppenheimer constructs a labyrinthine mise-en-scène in which fantasy, memory, guilt, and denial collide.

*The Act of Killing* destabilizes any simple opposition between documentary and fiction, challenging viewers to grapple with the psychological and political mechanisms through which historical violence is internalized and mythologized. As Renov suggests, reenactment in such contexts "dramatizes not only the events themselves but the enduring psychic traces and ideological residues that such events leave behind" (Renov 2004, 114). Oppenheimer's method invites ethical scrutiny, particularly concerning the responsibilities of the filmmaker towards both subjects and audi-

ences. Yet it also reveals the unique capacities of creative documentary practice to interrogate trauma, complicity, and collective memory in ways that traditional observational approaches may be ill-equipped to achieve. Through its analysis of these hybrid strategies-poetic evocation, performative reenactment, reflexive self-staging-this chapter argues that creative documentary has emerged not as a marginal deviation from nonfiction's core project, but as one of its most vital contemporary articulations. In an era increasingly characterised by mediated realities and contested truths, creative documentary's embrace of constructedness offers a critical, self-aware mode of engaging with the real: one that foregrounds ambiguity, subjectivity, and the ethical complexities inherent in representing the world through cinematic means.

Contemporary creative documentaries build upon this legacy by integrating lyrical strategies into the very architecture of nonfiction storytelling. Films such as *Leviathan* (Castaing-Taylor and Paravel, 2012) immerse the spectator in disorienting, sensorially charged experiences of industrial fishing, utilising abstract imagery and asynchronous sound design to evoke an experiential, rather than expository, truth. As Laura Rascaroli observes, the poetic documentary "proposes an ethics of subjectivity, privileging affective modes of knowledge over empirical verification" (Rascaroli 2009, 36). Closely linked to the poetic turn is the resurgence of reenactments within creative documentary. Far from functioning as secondary illustrative devices, reenactments in contemporary practice are often highly self-aware, stylised, and integral to a film's thematic exploration. Early theorists viewed reenactment with suspicion, associating it with the erosion of documentary authenticity. However, Stella Bruzzi has reframed reenactments as performative acts, through which "truth is generated rather than revealed" (Bruzzi 2006, 151). Reenactments enable subjects to relive, reinterpret, or even resist the narratives imposed upon them, collapsing the division between testimony and embodiment. The practice of reenactment fundamentally complicates documentary's indexical claims. As Jane Gaines suggests, "reenactment enacts the possibility that there is no unmediated memory, only memory staged and restaged" (Gaines 1999, 85). This acknowledgment opens space for a richer, more layered engagement with historical and emotional realities, particularly in contexts where direct archival or observational records are unavailable or inadequate. It is within this expanded documentary framework-foregrounding performance, subjectivity, and reflexive mediation-that *The Act of Killing* (Oppenheimer, 2012) must be situated. The film not only exemplifies the radical aesthetic and ethical possibilities inherent in contemporary creative documentary practice, but also exposes the profound tensions that arise when representation, memory, and political violence converge in the cinematic form.

The creative documentary thus advances toward a model of performative historiography, wherein subjects do not merely recall the past but actively reconstruct it through dramatization. As Michael Renov emphasizes, performance in documentary is not a betrayal of reality but a means of accessing its psychic and affective dimensions: "the performative documentary embraces the impossibility of 'capturing' reality unmediated, instead acknowledging its own subjectivity as an ethical stance" (Renov 2004, 122). The embrace of poetic construction and reenactment marks a profound epistemological shift from earlier documentary paradigms grounded in visual evi-

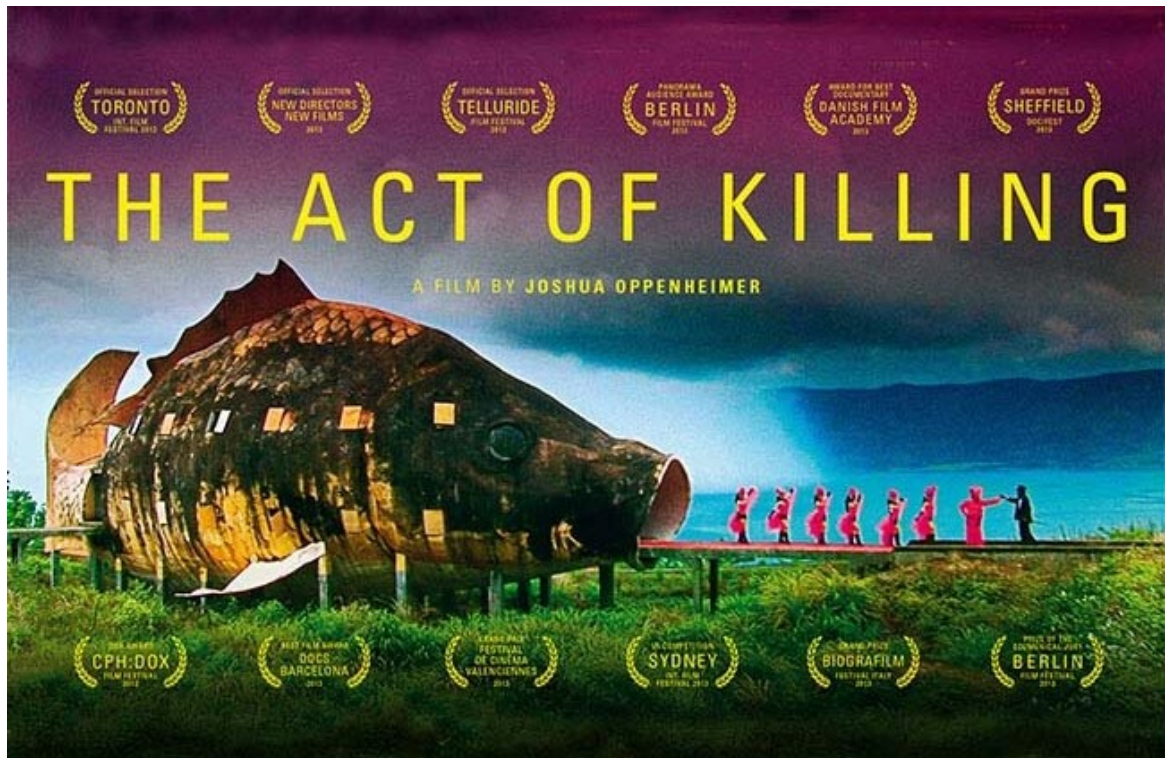
dence and observational neutrality. Rather than diminishing nonfiction cinema's capacity to engage with the real, hybrid strategies illuminate the complexity, contingency, and constructedness of truth itself. They reposition creative documentaries as dynamic forms that do not merely represent reality but actively mediate and negotiate it—often reaching emotional or psychological truths inaccessible through traditional observational methods.

The expansion of hybrid documentary forms inevitably challenges the ontological boundaries that have traditionally separated nonfiction from fiction. Creative documentaries do not merely embellish reality; they interrogate the very conditions under which reality is constructed, mediated, and understood. As Trinh T. Minh-ha provocatively asserts, "there is no such thing as documentary in itself; it is always part fiction, part fact" (Minh-ha 1990, 76). By foregrounding aesthetic invention, subjective perspective, and performative strategies, contemporary creative documentaries acknowledge the impossibility of unmediated representation and reposition nonfiction film within a broader continuum of cultural and artistic expression.

Brian Winston has raised critical concerns about this epistemological shift. He argues that the move toward increasingly fictionalized documentary modes risks severing nonfiction cinema's traditional tether to evidentiary realism, potentially eroding the genre's political and ethical force (Winston 1995, 43). In Winston's view, documentary's authority historically derives from its indexical relationship to the pro-filmic event—the material guarantee that what is represented actually occurred before the camera. When documentary embraces overt aestheticization or fictionalization without clearly marking the boundaries of artifice, it may undermine its social utility as a medium of truth claims and historical witnessing. However, other theorists offer a more expansive account of truth in creative nonfiction. Patricia Aufderheide contends that documentary's legitimacy does not reside solely in its factual transparency, but rather in the ethical contract it forms with audiences—a tacit agreement about the real-world stakes and intentions of the film (Aufderheide 2007, 3-7). From this perspective, creative documentaries that blur reality and invention do not necessarily betray nonfiction's core values; instead, they reframe the viewer's engagement, inviting more active, critical modes of spectatorship. This reframing aligns closely with what Stella Bruzzi terms the performative documentary: a mode in which the process of filmmaking itself—the acts of staging, reenacting, narrating—is explicitly foregrounded as part of the documentary's meaning (Bruzzi 2006, 185). Rather than conceal the mechanisms of mediation, performative documentaries expose them, emphasizing the subjective, collaborative, and constructed nature of the truths they present. Moreover, the blurring of fiction and nonfiction boundaries must be situated within broader cultural and technological contexts. Michael Renov notes that the postmodern condition has destabilized notions of objective truth across all media, leading to a "blurring of documentary and fiction not simply at the formal level, but at the level of epistemology and ethics" (Renov 2004, 14). In an era marked by media saturation, digital manipulation, and competing narratives of reality, the creative documentary's hybrid aesthetics can be seen as a necessary response—an attempt to engage with the complexities of contemporary truth-making rather than retreat into outdated models of evidentiary objectivity. Thus, while the erosion of rigid genre distinctions may provoke anx-



ieties about authenticity, it simultaneously offers new opportunities for nonfiction cinema to explore layered, multidimensional truths. By embracing fiction's expressive capacities-its ability to evoke memory, emotion, and interiority-creative documentaries expand the horizons of what nonfiction can represent and how it can intervene in cultural and historical discourses. The result is not a diminishment of documentary's power, but its reinvention for a more pluralistic, contested, and reflexive media landscape.



**Fig. 1.2.** Official poster for 'The Act of Killing' (dir. Joshua Oppenheimer, 2012).

Joshua Oppenheimer's *The Act of Killing* (2012) stands as a landmark demonstration of the creative documentary's radical capacity to blur aesthetic, ethical, and epistemological boundaries. Through a deeply unsettling fusion of reenactment, spectacle, and self-reflexivity, the film interrogates the aftermath of Indonesia's 1965-66 anti-communist purges-not through the testimony of victims, but by enlisting perpetrators themselves to restage their crimes in the cinematic genres of their choosing. In doing so, *The Act of Killing* foregrounds many of the core strategies associated with contemporary creative nonfiction: the hybridization of form, the destabilization of factual realism, and the performative engagement with memory, trauma, and historical accountability.

At the heart of *The Act of Killing* lies a profound paradox: the very men responsible for mass killings-Anwar Congo and his associates-eagerly collaborate with Oppenheimer to dramatize their acts of violence, casting themselves as heroic figures inspired by Hollywood gangster films, westerns, and musicals. These reenactments are flamboyantly artificial, yet the emotions they provoke are disturbingly real. As Jane Gaines observes, reenactment in documentary "performs memory itself as a dynamic, unstable, and often politically charged act" (Gaines 1999, 91). In *The Act of Killing*,



reenactment functions not merely to reconstruct past events but to expose the psychic processes of denial, rationalization, and, ultimately, fragile self-awareness among the perpetrators. The staged performances destabilize the boundary between confession and performance, forcing both participants and viewers to confront the dissonance between historical fact and subjective memory.

The film's structure oscillates between observational sequences-capturing the mundane present-day lives of Anwar and his peers-and stylised, self-authored performances that spectacularise their violent past. This constant movement between modes fractures traditional documentary realism, producing what Stella Bruzzi describes as a "negotiated reality": a space in which performativity itself becomes the primary means of accessing truth (Bruzzi 2006, 192). Rather than offering direct testimony or archival evidence, the film invites viewers to witness the ways in which historical violence is remembered, mythologised, and repressed through acts of creative self-presentation. Crucially, *The Act of Killing* does not present reenactments as transparent windows onto the past. Instead, it exposes their artifice, often cutting between behind-the-scenes preparations, the staged sequences themselves, and the perpetrators' reactions upon viewing their performances. This reflexivity destabilises the boundary between reality and performance, foregrounding the idea that historical memory is always already mediated through narrative, fantasy, and cinematic form. Alisa Lebow, writing on reflexive documentary, emphasises that films which "lay bare the constructedness of their own making" allow audiences to interrogate "the conditions of production of historical and personal knowledge" (Lebow 2008, 27). In Oppenheimer's work, reflexivity is not merely an aesthetic flourish but an ethical imperative, forcing both subjects and spectators to confront the complicity of storytelling in processes of forgetting and myth-making.

Ethically, the film has sparked considerable debate. Nicholas de Villiers suggests that *The Act of Killing* implicates the spectator within the spectacle of violence, requiring viewers to navigate the tension between fascination and moral revulsion (de Villiers 2012, 123-25). The film refuses the comfort of moral distance; it draws viewers into the perpetrators' cinematic fantasies even as it relentlessly reminds them of the horrific realities underpinning those narratives. This ambiguity crystallises a broader challenge faced by performative documentaries: how to balance affective engagement with critical distance, emotional resonance with ethical responsibility. Moreover, *The Act of Killing* exemplifies how creative documentary strategies can serve as a form of trauma work. E. Ann Kaplan, in her analysis of trauma and memory, notes that trauma often resists straightforward narrative representation, emerging instead through fragmentation, nonlinearity, and symbolic displacement (Kaplan 2005, 36-39). In Oppenheimer's film, trauma surfaces not through confessional testimony but through the disjunctions between performance and affect. While Anwar Congo initially revels in his cinematic self-mythologising, over time the reenactments destabilise his self-image, culminating in moments of visible distress-most notably his retching on the rooftop where he once executed victims. Here, performance does not merely illustrate past violence; it triggers an embodied, unsettling confrontation with repressed guilt.

This convergence of performance, memory, and bodily affect exemplifies what Michael Renov identifies as the performative documentary's ability to "evoke subjective experience and interior states through aesthetic strategies rather than through evidentiary documentation" (Renov 2004, 122). In *The Act of Killing*, the performative reenactments paradoxically yield access to emotional and psychological realities that would likely remain inaccessible through conventional interview-based approaches. Rather than offering closure or redemption, the film leaves the viewer with an acute sense of history's unfinished violence—an affective resonance that lingers long after the credits roll. The hybridity of Oppenheimer's method also reflects a broader transformation in the ethical imagination of contemporary documentary. As Thomas Waugh argues, postmodern nonfiction increasingly embraces "ambivalence, fragmentation, and uncertainty" as productive aesthetic and political strategies, rather than viewing them as failures of form (Waugh 2011, 7). By eschewing linear exposition and evidentiary realism, *The Act of Killing* stages a confrontation not simply with the factual history of genocide, but with the psychological structures of fantasy, denial, and myth-making that sustain its ongoing cultural legibility. In this sense, Oppenheimer's film radically redefines what documentary can be: not merely a record of past atrocities, but a performative arena where memory, trauma, and ideology are enacted, negotiated, and destabilised. The creative documentary's disruption of traditional aesthetic and narrative conventions thus marks not merely a stylistic innovation, but a profound epistemological shift in nonfiction cinema's engagement with reality itself. By embracing hybrid modes, performative strategies, and reflexive storytelling, contemporary documentary exposes the constructedness of representation and opens new spaces for ethical, emotional, and historical inquiry. Works such as *The Act of Killing* exemplify how documentary has evolved into a site of aesthetic and moral experimentation—where the boundary between fiction and nonfiction is neither rigidly policed nor naively collapsed, but actively interrogated as part of the film's ethical project. Yet this redefinition of genre, rooted in aesthetic hybridity and performative authenticity, is not the final frontier of nonfiction's evolution. Emerging technological innovations—particularly those involving artificial intelligence, virtual reality, and augmented reality—are poised to further transform the documentary landscape, destabilising foundational assumptions about presence, embodiment, authorship, and indexicality. As filmmakers increasingly harness these new tools, the very modalities through which reality is constructed, experienced, and contested continue to proliferate, propelling nonfiction cinema into unprecedented aesthetic, ethical, and epistemological terrains.

The reconceptualisation of documentary genres in recent decades marks not a crisis of nonfiction cinema's legitimacy, but a profound expansion of its aesthetic, epistemological, and ethical horizons. Creative documentaries—through hybridisation, performative reenactments, poetic structuring, and reflexive self-exposure—have decisively moved beyond classical paradigms of evidentiary realism. Rather than returning to mythologised ideals of objectivity, contemporary documentary filmmakers acknowledge the inevitable mediation of reality and harness that mediation as a space of critical and imaginative possibility. This shift is not speculative; it is already manifest across contemporary nonfiction cinema. Films such as Joshua Oppenheimer's

*The Act of Killing* (2012) and *The Look of Silence* (2014) use performative reenactment to interrogate collective memory and historical trauma. Kirsten Johnson's *Caméraperperson* (2016) weaves fragments of unused footage into an autobiographical meditation on the ethics of image-making. Khalik Allah's *Black Mother* (2018) blurs the line between documentary, lyrical essay, and spiritual invocation through its layered, non-linear structure. Experiments such as Sam Green's *A Thousand Thoughts* (2018) incorporate live narration and musical performance into the documentary experience, collapsing boundaries between cinema, performance, and collective memory. More recently, works like *Faya Dayi* (Jessica Beshir, 2021) and *All Light, Everywhere* (Theo Anthony, 2021) demonstrate how hybrid and speculative nonfiction approaches are becoming central, rather than peripheral, to the field's most daring explorations. Looking ahead, the future of documentary cinema will be characterised by even greater hybridity, aesthetic pluralism, and technological experimentation. Immersive nonfiction projects using virtual reality (such as *Notes on Blindness: Into Darkness*, 2016), interactive web-native documentaries (such as *Hollow*, 2013), and AI-assisted archival reconstructions are already reshaping how stories are told and experienced. Far from eroding the political and ethical power of nonfiction, these new forms create expanded opportunities to engage audiences emotionally, intellectually, and viscerally. Documentary's evolving grammar reflects the complexities of a post-truth, media-saturated world, where the negotiation of reality demands new representational strategies. The genre's vitality today depends not on rigid boundaries between fact and fiction, but on its capacity for reflexivity, affective resonance, and ethical inquiry. Creative documentaries—through their blending of fact, memory, imagination, and intervention—are forging a nonfiction cinema that is more responsive to contemporary realities, more participatory in its ethics, and more open to aesthetic reinvention. In this sense, the creative documentary does not mark a departure from nonfiction's core ambitions; rather, it extends and reimagines them for the twenty-first century.

### **1.3 Transforming the Documentary Landscape: Technological Innovations: The Impact of AI, VR, and AR on Documentary Storytelling**

The early twenty-first century has witnessed a radical transformation in nonfiction cinema, driven by technological innovations that have reconfigured production practices, distribution networks, and audience interactions. Affordable digital video technologies, the proliferation of online platforms, and the emergence of new audiovisual formats have collapsed traditional boundaries between documentary, fiction, and artistic experimentation. As Cornelia Lund observes, contemporary practices are marked by a pronounced "elasticity," with nonfiction works moving fluidly across cinematic, artistic, and political spaces, fundamentally reshaping their aesthetic and epistemological dimensions (Lund, 2019). This shift is not merely stylistic but reflects profound structural changes in the ways reality is mediated, interrogated, and constructed through technological interfaces.

The global expansion of streaming platforms such as Netflix, Amazon Prime Video, and HBO Max has further accelerated these transformations. As Orankiewicz

and Bartosiewicz argue, digital distribution has fostered a proliferation of niche documentaries and globalized nonfiction narratives, while simultaneously subjecting them to algorithmic market pressures and intensifying competition for viewer attention (Orankiewicz & Bartosiewicz, 2024). The COVID-19 pandemic only deepened these tendencies, as remote production methods, hybrid festival formats, and transnational co-productions became normalized, reshaping both the economics and infrastructures of documentary filmmaking (Orankiewicz & Bartosiewicz, 2023). In parallel, advances in digital technologies have vastly expanded the formal and experiential possibilities of nonfiction storytelling. As Kim Nelson notes, the rise of "live documentaries" and interactive nonfiction experiences exemplifies a shift toward liveness, audience participation, and reflexive engagement, moving beyond the linear, passive modes of earlier documentary consumption (Nelson, 2023). These developments collectively signal that nonfiction cinema today operates not within fixed genre traditions, but within a constantly evolving ecosystem shaped by technological hybridity, transmedia logics, and participatory culture—a transformation that continues to redefine its cultural function, aesthetic range, and political potential.

Expanding upon these developments, Sandra Gaudenzi introduces the concept of the "living documentary," highlighting how nonlinear, emergent, and interactive storytelling enables audiences to actively co-author nonfiction narratives in real time, thereby challenging traditional models of linearity, stable authorship, and fixed meaning (Gaudenzi, 2019). This interactivity reframes the viewer not as a passive consumer but as an engaged participant within the documentary event, necessitating new ethical and aesthetic frameworks around agency, authorship, and narrative control. Beyond the democratizing influences of digital video and internet distribution, emergent technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI), virtual reality (VR), and augmented reality (AR) have begun to radically reshape nonfiction media. These innovations introduce not only new technical tools for production and exhibition but also disrupt longstanding conceptualizations of reality, indexicality, and audience engagement within documentary practice. The integration of VR and AR into nonfiction storytelling has enabled the creation of immersive, experiential narratives that fundamentally transform the spectator's position—from detached observer to embodied participant. Projects such as *Notes on Blindness: Into Darkness* (2016) and *Traveling While Black* (2019) exemplify these new affordances for spatial storytelling and affective empathy, extending documentary's historic project of representing lived realities into fully interactive, sensorially saturated domains (Murray, 2020). Concurrently, the increasing adoption of AI-driven systems—from automated editing platforms to synthetic deepfake technologies—raises profound ethical and epistemological questions regarding authenticity, manipulation, and the ontological status of audiovisual evidence (Chesney & Citron, 2019). This chapter examines the transformative impact of AI, VR, and AR on documentary aesthetics, narrative construction, and cultural function. It interrogates both the expansive creative horizons these technologies offer and the destabilizations they introduce to traditional standards of credibility, ethical transparency, and representational fidelity. Ultimately, the emergence of these new modalities signals not merely a technical evolution but a paradigmatic redefinition of

documentary's role in contemporary culture—a redefinition that demands urgent critical scrutiny.

The emergence of virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR) technologies has significantly expanded the expressive and experiential horizons of documentary cinema. Moving beyond the representational strategies of traditional audiovisual nonfiction, immersive documentaries offer audiences the opportunity to engage with stories spatially, sensorially, and interactively. This evolution constitutes a paradigmatic shift: from documentary as a linear, observational medium to documentary as an embodied, participatory encounter (Murray, 2020). Virtual reality documentaries employ 360-degree video capture and interactive environments to embed viewers within the diegetic space of the narrative. By enabling audiences to navigate, explore, and sometimes influence the unfolding of events, VR experiences generate new forms of empathetic engagement and spatial immersion that traditional two-dimensional documentaries could only approximate. Projects such as *Notes on Blindness: Into Darkness* (2016)—an immersive adaptation of John Hull's audio diaries documenting his progressive loss of sight—demonstrate how VR can reframe sensory experience, inviting users to inhabit alternative perceptual worlds (Murray, 2020). Similarly, Roger Ross Williams's *Traveling While Black* (2019) reconstructs historical spaces pivotal to African-American mobility rights, utilizing VR's immersive affordances to confront viewers with the lived realities of racial segregation and systemic discrimination. These works extend documentary's longstanding commitment to representing marginalized experiences, now deepened through technological embodiment. Augmented reality (AR) documentaries further destabilize traditional boundaries between digital and physical space, layering nonfiction narratives onto real-world environments. Although still less prevalent than VR works, AR projects have begun to explore novel approaches to documentary storytelling, including interactive museum exhibitions, location-based historical narratives, and mobile applications that fuse archival materials with contemporary urban landscapes. The integration of AR into documentary practice suggests new modalities for activating collective memory, facilitating archival retrieval, and staging site-specific interventions (Rose, 2018). Yet the incorporation of VR and AR into nonfiction storytelling also raises significant challenges. Persistent questions of accessibility, technological literacy, and audience inclusion remain salient, given the high costs of VR equipment and the relatively niche demographics currently reached by immersive works. Furthermore, as Nash (2012) cautions, the intense focus on sensory immersion risks displacing critical distance, potentially privileging experiential affect over sustained analytical engagement. Nonetheless, immersive nonfiction represents one of the most dynamic frontiers of contemporary documentary practice, offering unprecedented strategies for empathy, participatory engagement, and aesthetic innovation in an increasingly fragmented media ecology. In sum, VR and AR technologies have not merely expanded the formal repertoire of documentary cinema; they have catalyzed a fundamental reimagining of the relationship between storyteller, subject, and spectator. As immersive documentaries continue to evolve, they challenge foundational assumptions about nonfiction representation and open new epistemological and ethical trajectories

for the future of documentary as both an artistic practice and a socially engaged cultural form

*Notes on Blindness: Into Darkness* (2016), directed by Peter Middleton and James Spinney, stands as a landmark in the evolution of immersive documentary, epitomizing the capacity of virtual reality (VR) to fundamentally reconfigure nonfiction storytelling. Building upon the 2016 feature documentary *Notes on Blindness*, the VR project adapts John Hull's audio diaries chronicling his gradual loss of sight into an interactive, spatialized experience, inviting viewers to inhabit the perceptual world of blindness. Unlike traditional visual documentaries that rely on sight as the primary mode of engagement, *Into Darkness* subverts the ocular bias of cinematic experience. Utilizing spatialized sound, minimalistic 3D animations, and haptic audiovisual cues, the project disorients the viewer's sensory hierarchy, privileging auditory perception over visual dominance. As Sandra Gaudenzi articulates, immersive documentary experiences such as this create a "living documentary" environment where "the user's journey is emergent and co-constructed in real time" (Gaudenzi 2019, 163). *Into Darkness* exemplifies this ethos by eschewing linear narrative control: users navigate fragmentary sensory environments, reconstructing memory and meaning through embodied exploration.



**Fig. 1.3.** Promotional material for 'Notes on Blindness: Into the Darkness', VR experience produced by Ex Nihilo, ARTE France, and Archer's Mark, 2016

Crucially, the film does not simulate blindness as deprivation but reimagines it as a rich, alternative mode of perceiving the world. As John Hull himself emphasizes in his diaries, losing sight did not annihilate his reality but transformed it into a more intimate, textured, and affectively charged experience. The VR project translates this insight into formal strategies that immerse the viewer not merely in the protagonist's story, but in the very phenomenology of blindness. Theoretical frameworks around embodied cognition are particularly resonant here. As Vivian Sobchack has argued, cinema engages the viewer's "lived body" as a site of knowledge (Sobchack 1992), and VR documentaries intensify this somatic engagement by collapsing the distance between spectator and diegesis. In *Into Darkness*, the user's bodily presence—turning one's head to locate sound, straining to decipher blurred visual fields—becomes the

primary mode of storytelling. Ethically, *Into Darkness* offers a significant advancement over earlier documentary practices that risked objectifying disability. By centering the experiential dimension rather than framing blindness through external narration or visual spectacle, the project exemplifies a respectful, phenomenological approach to representing difference. It resists both sensationalism and sentimentality, crafting an empathetic connection grounded in sensory participation rather than visual pity.

Moreover, the VR experience engages with questions of memory, subjectivity, and sensory temporality. As Laura Marks notes in her work on haptic visuality, certain media forms foster an "intimate, embodied encounter with difference" by engaging senses beyond sight (Marks 2000, 183). *Into Darkness* operationalizes this haptic aesthetics, encouraging viewers to listen, imagine, and feel rather than merely see, thus expanding documentary's sensory and epistemological repertoire.

In positioning *Notes on Blindness: Into Darkness* as a case study, it becomes clear that VR documentary is not merely a technical novelty but a profound rethinking of nonfiction's representational ethics and aesthetic possibilities. It demonstrates how emerging technologies can shift documentary's engagement with reality from acts of visual exposition to experiences of embodied co-presence, reframing the spectator as a participant in the process of meaning-making.

Ultimately, *Into Darkness* exemplifies the potential of immersive documentary not only to transform storytelling forms but to cultivate new ethical and cognitive engagements with the complexities of lived experience.

Alongside immersive technologies, the rise of artificial intelligence (AI) has introduced profound new challenges and possibilities for documentary cinema. AI-driven innovations—from automated editing software to synthetic image generation and deepfake technologies—have expanded the technical toolkit available to nonfiction filmmakers. However, these developments also threaten to destabilize foundational assumptions about authenticity, indexicality, and truth that have historically underpinned the documentary tradition (Chesney & Citron 2019). The initial applications of AI within documentary production focused on technical efficiencies. Machine learning algorithms were deployed to assist in cataloguing vast archival collections, identifying patterns across raw footage, and even automating initial rough cuts (Winston 2020). These tools allowed filmmakers to streamline labor-intensive processes, particularly in large-scale historical and investigative projects, and suggested a potential democratization of documentary practice by lowering technical and financial barriers to entry. AI-based transcription services, facial recognition for metadata tagging, and smart archive retrieval systems have already accelerated post-production workflows, particularly for projects operating on limited budgets.

However, as AI capabilities evolved, more complex and ethically fraught applications emerged. Deepfake technology—the use of neural networks to synthesize highly realistic but fabricated audiovisual content—poses particular dangers to the credibility of documentary media. While some projects have cautiously explored the use of synthetic media for illustrative purposes, such as visualizing hypothetical reconstructions or lost historical footage, the broader implications for nonfiction storytelling are alarming. Unlike traditional reenactments, which typically signal their



constructed nature to the viewer, deepfakes can seamlessly blur fact and fabrication, collapsing the evidentiary distinction that has historically grounded the documentary form. As Daniel C. Hallin has argued, documentary's epistemological power has traditionally rested on a "contract of veracity" between filmmaker and viewer (Hallin 1992). Deepfakes imperil this contract by introducing audiovisual content that, while perceptually convincing, lacks any indexical tie to profilmic reality. Chesney and Citron (2019) warn that the proliferation of synthetic media may not only facilitate deliberate disinformation campaigns but could also foster a generalized "liar's dividend," whereby genuine evidence is more easily dismissed as fake. Filmmakers and scholars have begun to respond to these challenges through experimental works that consciously foreground the constructedness of AI-generated media. For instance, projects such as *In Event of Moon Disaster* (2020)-a deepfake-driven speculative documentary imagining an alternate history in which the Apollo 11 astronauts perished-use synthetic techniques not to deceive but to provoke critical reflection on the fragility of mediated truth (Nash 2020). This reflexive deployment of AI emphasizes transparency and audience agency, aligning with broader calls for a "post-verité" ethics in documentary practice (Renov 2020).

Nonetheless, the spectre of undetectable synthetic manipulation raises urgent questions about the future of nonfiction's social role. If the evidentiary basis of documentary becomes irreparably compromised, new frameworks of verification, transparency, and relational credibility will be required. As Erika Balsom notes, the task ahead is not to defend an impossible return to naïve realism but to "forge new ethical contracts between nonfiction media and their publics, grounded in reflexivity, contextualization, and a rearticulation of trust" (Balsom 2017, 44).

Scholars such as Bill Nichols have long emphasized that documentary relies on a "rhetoric of sobriety"-a tacit pact between filmmaker and audience that nonfiction images correspond to external reality (Nichols 2017). The incorporation of AI-generated or manipulated content fundamentally challenges this rhetorical contract, necessitating new ethical frameworks for transparency, disclosure, and critical engagement. Documentarians now face heightened responsibilities: to clearly indicate when AI interventions occur; to preserve rigorous standards of evidentiary integrity; and to develop narrative strategies that explicitly foreground the constructed nature of any synthetic materials employed. Yet, AI also offers opportunities for aesthetic and epistemological innovation within documentary cinema. Artists and filmmakers are beginning to explore how AI might be incorporated reflexively-not merely as a technical tool, but as a subject of inquiry, a storytelling agent, or even a collaborator in creative nonfiction experiments. Projects such as *In Event of Moon Disaster* (2019)-an MIT-backed documentary that imagines an alternative historical outcome using deepfake technology-demonstrate how AI can be harnessed critically to provoke reflection on media literacy, historical contingency, and the construction of political narratives (Nash 2021). Rather than eroding documentary's authority, such reflexive engagements foreground the stakes of mediated truth in a synthetic media environment. In summary, while AI introduces serious threats to the integrity of nonfiction storytelling, it also compels a necessary re-evaluation of documentary's epistemological foundations and aesthetic possibilities. The future of documentary authenticity will



depend not on resisting technological change, but on developing sophisticated, transparent, and ethically conscious strategies for negotiating AI's increasingly pervasive influence. As documentary cinema continues to evolve within digital and post-digital environments, emerging practices increasingly blur traditional boundaries between fiction and nonfiction, creator and audience, and narrative control and algorithmic suggestion. The rise of hybrid, participatory, and algorithmically informed documentary forms signals not merely a technological adaptation, but a profound redefinition of authorship, authenticity, and audience engagement in contemporary nonfiction storytelling.

Hybrid documentaries have gained particular prominence, merging observational reality with fictionalized reconstruction, animation, and performative techniques. Films such as *Flee* (2021), directed by Jonas Poher Rasmussen, exemplify this trend. *Flee* interweaves the refugee testimony of its protagonist with animated sequences that dramatize memory, trauma, and displacement, challenging conventional expectations of documentary visual form while maintaining a rigorous commitment to emotional and factual authenticity (Aufderheide 2021). Such works demonstrate how hybridization enables filmmakers to navigate complex ethical terrains, particularly when addressing issues of identity, vulnerability, and historical erasure. Participatory documentary practices have also expanded significantly, enabled by networked technologies that invite collective authorship and decentralized storytelling. Projects such as *Life in a Day* (2011, 2020), produced by Ridley Scott and directed by Kevin Macdonald, relied on crowdsourced video submissions from contributors across the globe, constructing composite portraits of daily life through collaborative narrative assembly. These initiatives extend documentary's democratic ethos, emphasizing pluralism, immediacy, and diversified perspectives (Rose 2018). Yet, they also raise new editorial and curatorial challenges regarding selection, authorship, and narrative coherence within massively participatory frameworks. In this evolving landscape, the future of documentary lies not in rigidly policing the boundary between fact and fiction, but in embracing a critical literacy about how nonfiction realities are constructed, mediated, and collectively negotiated.

Concurrently, the rise of interactive and algorithmic documentary forms has further complicated traditional narrative structures. Web-based projects such as *Bear 71* (2012), an interactive documentary tracking the life of a grizzly bear monitored via surveillance technology, invite users to navigate digital environments, thereby shaping their own nonfiction experiences (Murray 2020). As machine learning advances, experimental works have begun exploring algorithmically generated nonfiction encounters, dynamically tailoring content based on user preferences or behaviours. While still emergent, such practices suggest a future in which documentary form becomes increasingly personalized, adaptive, and decentralized. AI technologies are also being integrated into documentary storytelling in more ethically engaged ways. In *Welcome to Chechnya* (2020), directed by David France, deep learning techniques were employed to protect the identities of LGBTQ+ activists by superimposing digitally reconstructed facial masks, preserving the emotional immediacy of testimony while safeguarding personal security (France 2020). This application of AI illustrates how technological interventions, when critically deployed, can expand

documentary ethics and enable new modes of witnessing. These innovations collectively indicate that the future of documentary practice will be characterised by hybridity, interactivity, and algorithmic collaboration. They challenge traditional conceptions of fixed authorship, linear narrative, and singular truth claims, suggesting that documentary's vitality in the twenty-first century will depend not on rigidly preserving historical conventions, but on critically engaging with new technological affordances to imagine plural, immersive, and dynamic nonfiction worlds. As documentary cinema integrates emergent technologies-VR immersion, AI-driven creation, participatory frameworks-it simultaneously encounters profound epistemological and ethical challenges. The expansion of aesthetic possibilities has invigorated nonfiction storytelling, yet it has also destabilised traditional guarantees of authenticity, objectivity, and factual reliability. In an era increasingly defined by "post-truth" dynamics, where the boundaries between reality and fabrication are ever more porous, documentary filmmakers must navigate complex ethical quandaries regarding representation, manipulation, and audience trust. These tensions suggest that technological innovation alone cannot sustain documentary's cultural legitimacy; rather, a critical re-examination of the genre's foundational commitments to truth, evidence, and ethical engagement is urgently required. The following section explores how contemporary documentary discourse grapples with these challenges, analysing the evolving constructions of truth, objectivity, and ethical responsibility within an increasingly fragmented and contested media landscape.

#### **1.4. Shaping Consciousness in the Post-Truth Era: Analysis of Truth, Objectivity, and Ethical Quandaries in Contemporary Documentary Discourse**

Truth is no longer a stable foundation for nonfiction storytelling. In the words of Friedrich Nietzsche, "What is truth? A mobile army of metaphors, illusions that we have forgotten are illusions." (The Will to Truth and Its Discontents, 1895). In a world where truths are no longer accepted as given but challenged at every turn, we return to a more primal state: one where those who control the narratives control reality itself. In the post-truth era, the conditions that once underpinned the authority of documentary cinema-verifiability, factual coherence, and public trust-have fractured. Rather than existing as a shared reference point, factual narratives now compete within fragmented and polarised information ecosystems (Keyes 2004; McIntyre 2018). The documentary form, once aligned with the evidentiary power of the "*document*" now operates in an environment where the very epistemological value of the document is contested. Deepfakes, synthetic media, and algorithmically generated content have introduced profound instability into the truth claims documentary cinema has historically made. The visual image, once assumed to bear an indexical relationship to reality, is now susceptible to manipulation so seamless that its credibility can no longer be taken for granted (Chesney and Citron 2019).

The implications for documentary are substantial. Since its origins, nonfiction cinema has relied upon the ontological weight of the document-the photograph, the

unaltered moving image, the recorded voice-to secure its claim to truth. This reliance granted documentary its cultural authority and distinguished it from fiction.

Today, however, the emergence of deepfake technologies presents a direct and profound threat to this foundation. Deepfakes-AI-generated synthetic videos and audio that can seamlessly fabricate or alter reality-pose an unprecedented challenge to the credibility of visual media. For documentary cinema, which has long depended on the indexical bond between image and truth, this development is especially destabilising. A deepfake need not be crude or overtly deceptive to undermine public trust; its mere existence casts doubt on all recorded material, introducing a climate of epistemological uncertainty. The fear is no longer that falsehoods will be believed, but that truth itself will become indistinguishable from manipulation. As synthetic media becomes more accessible, the capacity to fabricate convincing yet entirely false narratives could be weaponised-not only to obscure facts, but to erode the very notion of verifiability. In such an environment, audiences may become either hyper-sceptical or dangerously credulous, swayed more by affect and ideology than by evidence. The burden on documentary filmmakers is thus doubled: they must not only present facts, but proactively defend the integrity of their media forms. This is no longer just an aesthetic concern, but a moral and civic responsibility. This challenge is not merely technological; it is epistemological. As Hannah Arendt warned, "the result of a consistent and total substitution of lies for factual truth is not that the lie will now be accepted as truth, but that the sense by which we take our bearings in the real world...is being destroyed" (Arendt 1971, 7). In documentary terms, this means that the genre must now operate without the historical guarantee that an image testifies to reality.

Yet documentary cinema has not passively ceded its authority. Instead, leading practitioners have actively engaged with the conditions of post-truth and constructed new ethical frameworks for nonfiction storytelling. Projects such as *Welcome to Chechnya* (2020) illustrate a paradigmatic shift: by using deepfake-style AI to protect the identities of vulnerable subjects, director David France reclaims synthetic media for ethical purposes, turning a potential threat into a protective intervention (France 2020). In doing so, the film signals that technological mediation does not inherently undermine documentary truth, but demands transparency, reflexivity, and moral intention. As Patricia Aufderheide notes, "in documentary, transparency is a goal but not a given" (Aufderheide 2007, 35). This insight underscores a critical repositioning of nonfiction cinema: not as a passive mirror to the world, but as an active constructor of ethically defensible truths. "A lie gets halfway around the world before the truth has a chance to put its boots on," Winston Churchill famously observed in *Democracy and the Battle for Truth* (1946). In politics, truth is often inconvenient, a thorn in the side of those who seek only power. But a society that abandons truth does not merely stumble; it collapses. The health of democracy depends not on the absence of falsehoods-they will always exist-but on the public's resilience against them. Documentary's evolving relationship with truth is thus not just an artistic concern, but a political imperative.

The documentary genre is thus experiencing not a crisis of obsolescence, but a reformation of its foundational premises. In place of an outdated belief in objectivity, a new ethic has emerged-one that privileges relationality, reflexivity, and the co-con-

struction of knowledge between filmmaker, subject, and viewer (Lebow 2018). As Bill Nichols reminds us, documentary "is not a reproduction of reality but a representation of the world we occupy and share" (Nichols 1991, 13). In an age of manipulated imagery and epistemic scepticism, it is precisely this representational ethic-anchored in transparency and accountability-that sustains documentary cinema's relevance. Importantly, the crisis of authenticity brought about by deepfakes and synthetic media has provoked a methodological reorientation. Documentaries now increasingly incorporate visible markers of authorship, indexical uncertainty, and production disclosure. Techniques such as breaking the fourth wall, showing the apparatus of production, and inserting the filmmaker into the narrative no longer signal narcissism but transparency. This reflexive mode functions both defensively and productively: it anticipates audience scepticism and invites critical engagement. As Kim Nelson argues, the most compelling nonfiction films of the post-truth era embrace a "cinemoetics of doubt," crafting films that stage rather than conceal the tensions of knowledge production (Nelson 2023). Recent works such as *Citizenfour* (2014), *In the Same Breath* (2021), and *Exterminate All the Brutes* (2021) exemplify this adaptive mode. These films combine investigative rigor with formal experimentation, often layering personal testimony with archival montage, animation, and hybrid aesthetics. They do not promise unmediated truth; rather, they offer transparency about the interpretive and constructed processes underlying their truth claims. As Jean Baudrillard provocatively stated, "we live in a world where there is more and more information, and less and less meaning" (Baudrillard 1981, 79). Against this backdrop, documentary must labour not only to inform but to restore the conditions under which meaning itself can emerge. Far from eroding documentary authority, the epistemological challenges posed by deepfakes and synthetic media offer an opportunity to reinvest the genre with philosophical and ethical urgency. Truth in documentary cinema is no longer a given but a practice-a laborious, collaborative, and politically situated process of constructing, testing, and presenting knowledge. In this context, the genre's resilience depends not on reclaiming lost objectivity, but on articulating new standards of truthfulness grounded in reflexivity, verification, and audience trust. As Karl Marx argued in *The Ideological Apparatus of Truth and Power* (1888), "The rise of misinformation is not an accident, but an extension of ideological control-a necessary tool for those who seek to maintain dominance in an era of uncertainty." In this light, documentary cinema in the digital age can be understood not as a retreat into relativism but as a critical practice negotiating truth claims within lived conditions of epistemological instability. Patricia Aufderheide rightly notes that "in documentary, transparency is a goal but not a given" (Aufderheide 2007, 35). Transparency must be actively built, through methodological rigor, ethical reflexivity, and a conscious acknowledgment of storytelling's constructed nature. Thus, the transformation of documentary filmmaking reflects deeper philosophical realignments regarding the nature of truth, the ethics of knowledge production, and the responsibilities of cultural narration. In embracing new aesthetic forms, technological affordances, and hybridised narrative strategies, documentary cinema asserts its resilience not by denying the complexities of representation, but by engaging them critically. Its future depends not on restoring lost illusions of objectivity, but on cultivating new forms of ethical and epistemological re-

sponsibility capable of sustaining credibility and collective inquiry amidst radical uncertainty.

## **Conclusion for Chapter I**

This chapter has traced the historical, technological, and epistemological foundations of documentary cinema, demonstrating that the genre evolves not through linear progression but through cyclical phases of disruption, codification, and renewal. Each cycle, initiated by technological advancement, produces temporary expansions of aesthetic possibility and narrative form, followed by periods of standardisation in which dominant modes and institutional structures reassert control. These recurrent shifts have continuously reshaped documentary's representational strategies, ethical frameworks, and social functions.

Technological innovation has consistently acted as a historical catalyst in the development of nonfiction cinema. The introduction of portable production equipment, synchronous sound, digital editing systems, and, more recently, algorithmic processing and immersive media, has transformed not only how documentaries are produced and consumed but also how they construct knowledge and engage audiences. As digital tools increasingly shape both the form and the logic of representation, the boundaries between medium and method have collapsed, embedding technological affordances directly into the epistemological assumptions of documentary authorship.

Parallel to these shifts, the rise of creative documentary practices has expanded the genre's expressive range. Documentary cinema has become a site of reflexive construction, where hybridisation, authorial subjectivity, and aesthetic risk-taking are no longer marginal but central to the form's evolution. These developments mark a departure from mid-century models based on neutrality, observation, or exposition, redefining documentary as a performative and dialogic mode of knowledge-making.

This chapter has also shown how contemporary nonfiction cinema operates within a broad and fluid spectrum of genres, platforms, and modes of address. Animated testimony, interactive formats, cross-media works, and algorithmically curated experiences exemplify how documentary has extended beyond the constraints of traditional audiovisual boundaries. Rather than signalling the dissolution of the genre, this expansion reflects its heightened responsiveness to the complexities of the digital cultural landscape.

At the same time, the contemporary moment is marked by an acute epistemological crisis. In the context of deepfakes, synthetic imagery, and automated content production, the documentary image can no longer rely on its indexical bond with reality. The very technologies once trusted to authenticate visual evidence are now capable of fabricating it with persuasive precision. This destabilisation has necessitated a reappraisal of documentary ethics, particularly in relation to trust, authorship, and the conditions of spectatorship. In response, nonfiction cinema has increasingly foregrounded its own constructedness. Rather than claiming transparency or neutrality, contemporary practices often embed reflexivity into their formal structure-through visible mediation, authorial presence, and discursive disruption. These strategies do

not aim to restore a lost objectivity but to cultivate a new contract of trust: one based on ethical coherence, critical literacy, and audience participation in meaning-making.

In conclusion, this chapter affirms that the future of documentary cinema lies not in the recovery of past certainties but in the reimagination of its role within a technologically mediated and ideologically fragmented public sphere. The genre's resilience will depend on its ability to engage with complexity, embrace formal pluralism, and maintain ethical responsiveness amid shifting cultural and informational terrains. This foundational framework sets the stage for the following chapter, which explores how regional documentary industries—specifically in the United States, Europe, and Asia—have responded to these global transformations by developing differentiated models of production, funding, and distribution within the contemporary nonfiction ecosystem.

## **2. The Dynamics of Change: Challenges and the Impact of Key Cinematic Regions US, Europe, and Asia in Shaping Contemporary Documentary Cinema**

The transformation of documentary cinema in the digital era is inseparable from broader shifts in global audiovisual production systems. Early developments in nonfiction filmmaking, concentrated in Europe and North America, now seem almost parochial when compared to the twenty-first century's decentralisation of documentary production. Today, industrial, aesthetic, and political realignments span continents. Documentary cinema no longer inhabits a stable position within national industries; instead, it moves through transnational flows of capital, technology, and audiences, shaped by increasingly hybridised production and distribution ecosystems. As Brian Winston observes, documentary has "always been shaped by technological change," yet in the digital era, "the speed and scale of these transformations have intensified to unprecedented degrees" (Winston 45).

This chapter examines the evolution of documentary production across three major regions-North America, Europe, and Asia-analysing the technological innovations, institutional policies, and emerging market dynamics that have reconfigured the contemporary documentary landscape. It treats these regions not as isolated entities but as participants in an interconnected global network, where infrastructures, funding mechanisms, aesthetic paradigms, and audience practices interact in complex and sometimes contradictory ways. As Dina Iordanova argues, "contemporary documentary exists within a system of global circuits," circuits that challenge traditional notions of national cinema and demand a reconceptualisation of documentary's industrial and cultural frameworks (Iordanova 8). In the United States, the convergence of independent production traditions with the rise of global streaming platforms has catalysed a redefinition of documentary's role within the cultural economy. Streaming giants such as Netflix, Amazon Prime Video, and Hulu have elevated documentary from a peripheral genre into a strategic pillar of global content strategies, reshaping both its economics and aesthetics. As Ramón Lobato notes, streaming services "have altered the spatial and temporal economies of media distribution," offering documentaries new visibility even as they embed them within corporate logics of algorithmic recommendation and branding (Lobato 112). At the same time, the collapse of traditional gatekeeping institutions-festivals, broadcasters, theatrical circuits-has opened opportunities for diverse voices but also exposed filmmakers to intensified precarity and volatility (Aufderheide 14). Nothing in this evolution has been simple; gains and losses coexist.

Europe, by contrast, has pursued a path more deeply rooted in public service broadcasting, cultural policy interventions, and a dynamic festival ecosystem. European documentary production remains heavily influenced by public funding bodies such as France's Centre national du cinéma et de l'image animée (CNC), the British Film Institute (BFI), and pan-European entities like Eurimages and the European Documentary Network (EDN). These frameworks reflect, as Ib Bondebjerg suggests, "a continuing European belief in the cultural and democratic value of documentary media" (Bondebjerg 22). Festivals such as IDFA, Sheffield DocFest, and CPH:DOX

serve not merely as exhibition spaces but as vital hubs for financing, networking, and distribution. Nevertheless, Europe is not immune to global pressures. The growing influence of streaming platforms and neoliberal media reforms have created tensions between public service missions and commercial imperatives (De Valck 63). As Kate Nash aptly points out, today's European documentary sector is marked by "negotiations between market logics and public interest objectives," forcing both filmmakers and institutions to rethink their strategies for sustainability and cultural impact (Nash 77).

In Asia, the evolution of documentary production reveals a distinct yet equally complex configuration. Across China, Japan, South Korea, and emerging regional hubs, documentary filmmaking reflects an intricate interplay between state authority, independent creativity, and technological innovation. While state-backed broadcasters like NHK and KBS continue to commission high-profile works, a vibrant independent sector has emerged, often operating in precarious or semi-legal spaces. As Chris Berry, Lu Xinyu, and Lisa Rofel note, "digital technologies have enabled alternative circuits of documentary production and circulation that are reshaping notions of authorship, audience, and activism" (Berry, Xinyu, and Rofel 5). Filmmakers leverage low-cost digital equipment and online platforms to challenge official narratives, foreground marginalised voices, and experiment with new forms. The proliferation of festivals such as DMZ Docs, the Yamagata International Documentary Film Festival, and the Chinese Independent Film Festival has nurtured a regional culture that is both deeply local and unmistakably global. As Ying Qian stresses, this "alternative public sphere" forged by independent documentary practice fosters "new forms of social imagination" critical to contexts where free speech remains constrained (Qian 214). Across these diverse geographies, documentary cinema has embraced hybridised production modes, blurring traditional binaries between fiction and nonfiction, theatrical and digital release, national and transnational frameworks. This phenomenon reflects what Thomas Elsaesser describes as the "disappearance of stable categories" in digital media, and a growing appetite for "hybrid truth-claims" that complicate notions of authenticity and objectivity (Elsaesser 89). At the same time, fragmented distribution models—where streaming platforms, niche broadcasters, VOD services, and festival circuits coexist uneasily—have redefined how documentaries reach audiences, destabilising old metrics of success and impact. The convergence of these trends signals a new era. It is one marked by unparalleled opportunities for global circulation, yet burdened with heightened challenges related to visibility, funding, and sustainability. As Patricia Aufderheide contends, "the future of documentary will depend less on technological affordances alone and more on how communities of practice—filmmakers, distributors, audiences—reshape documentary's social functions in a rapidly changing media ecology" (Aufderheide 19).

It is against this shifting backdrop that the United States, with its intertwined legacy of independent production and global platformisation, offers a particularly revealing case study. The next section examines how technological innovation, corporate platform strategies, and global consumption patterns have redefined documentary production and distribution within the American context.



## 2.1. Documentary Cinema in the United States: Technological Innovation, Streaming Platforms, and Global Documentary Consumption

Documentary cinema in the United States has long occupied a distinctive position, bridging commercial success and cultural significance. Unlike in Europe, where nonfiction film traditionally remained confined within public broadcasting and artistic institutions, American documentaries demonstrated enduring mass appeal. Blockbuster hits such as *Fahrenheit 9/11* (Michael Moore, 2004), which grossed \$222 million worldwide, and *March of the Penguins* (Luc Jacquet, 2005), earning \$127 million, established nonfiction storytelling as a viable force at the box office well before the rise of digital distribution. Yet these successes were exceptions, tied to topical urgency or extraordinary audience resonance; they did not yet signal a systematic industry transformation. More fundamentally, the American documentary tradition reflects a broader cultural embrace of technological democratization, entrepreneurial production models, and market-driven distribution strategies. Unlike regions where strong state institutions historically mediated media access, the U.S. film ecosystem fostered conditions under which independent creators could leverage emerging technologies to reach audiences directly. From the spread of affordable DV cameras in the 1990s to the first experiments with online distribution, nonfiction filmmaking in America evolved alongside-and often helped pioneer-the tools that would later disrupt traditional broadcasting hierarchies. As Patricia Aufderheide observes, "the independent documentary sector grew not despite but because of the lack of a strong public broadcasting system" (Aufderheide 45).

Nevertheless, the documentary audience that would eventually fuel the streaming revolution had already been carefully cultivated over decades by U.S. television broadcasters. Public institutions like PBS, with landmark series such as *Frontline* and *POV*, familiarised wide swathes of the American public with nonfiction narratives as legitimate cultural forms. Premium cable channels such as HBO further elevated the status of documentary storytelling through cinematic, investigative works aimed at broader audiences. CNN Films, founded in 2012, expanded this trend, demonstrating that documentaries could thrive within competitive news-entertainment landscapes. Streaming platforms did not invent a new audience; rather, they inherited and reconfigured one that was already primed for nonfiction engagement. As Kate Nash notes, "the popularity of documentary forms owed much to television's consistent support for nonfiction narratives over the twentieth century" (Nash 92). The establishment of modern streaming services can be traced back to the 1990s, a period marked by pivotal advances in digital media distribution. RealNetworks' *RealPlayer* (1995) and its broadcast of John Woo's *The Killer* (1992) were experimental first steps toward online film streaming. Yet it was only in the 2000s and 2010s, as broadband infrastructure matured and consumer habits shifted, that streaming became a genuinely viable mass medium. During its early years, Netflix itself primarily treated documentaries as peripheral content, focusing on feature films and scripted series to drive subscriber growth.

This perception, however, would undergo a radical change. American platforms, recognising both technological opportunity and a rising cultural appetite for

"truth-based" storytelling, began to reposition documentaries as core strategic assets. HBO, already a standard-bearer for quality nonfiction through films like *Paradise Lost* (1996) and *Capturing the Friedmans* (2003), demonstrated through the 2000s and 2010s—including with *The Jinx* (2015) and *Leaving Neverland* (2019) that documentary could command mass attention and critical prestige simultaneously. As Nash argues, HBO's nonfiction output proved that "documentary forms could inhabit the same cultural spaces as prestige television" (Nash 98). The launch of HBO Max in 2020 reinforced this trend, expanding nonfiction offerings to younger, more digitally native audiences. Yet it was the COVID-19 pandemic that crystallized these shifts. The unprecedented global lockdowns of 2020 and 2021 catalyzed an extraordinary surge in home media consumption. Audiences, confined to their homes, increasingly turned to streaming platforms not only for escapist entertainment but also for nonfiction content that spoke to the uncertainties of the moment. As Ramón Lobato notes, "platforms that had positioned documentary as serious, urgent, and intimate found themselves rewarded with record levels of engagement during the pandemic" (Lobato 154).

Netflix, in particular, seized this moment with unprecedented decisiveness. It did not merely capitalise on existing interest in documentaries—it mainstreamed the form itself. Through global hits such as *Making a Murderer* (2015), *Tiger King* (2020), and *The Social Dilemma* (2020), Netflix positioned documentary storytelling at the centre of popular culture, bridging traditional nonfiction formats with bingeable series structures and viral marketing campaigns. By embedding documentaries within algorithmically-driven recommendation systems and global branding strategies, Netflix transformed what had once been a semi-niche cultural practice into a mass phenomenon. Thus, while platforms like HBO helped reframe the prestige of nonfiction storytelling, and COVID-19 acted as an accelerant, it was Netflix that reengineered the cultural and economic value of documentary cinema in the digital era. Its model reveals how platform capitalism, audience analytics, and global scale have together reshaped nonfiction production, circulation, and audience perception in ways that continue to reverberate across the industry.

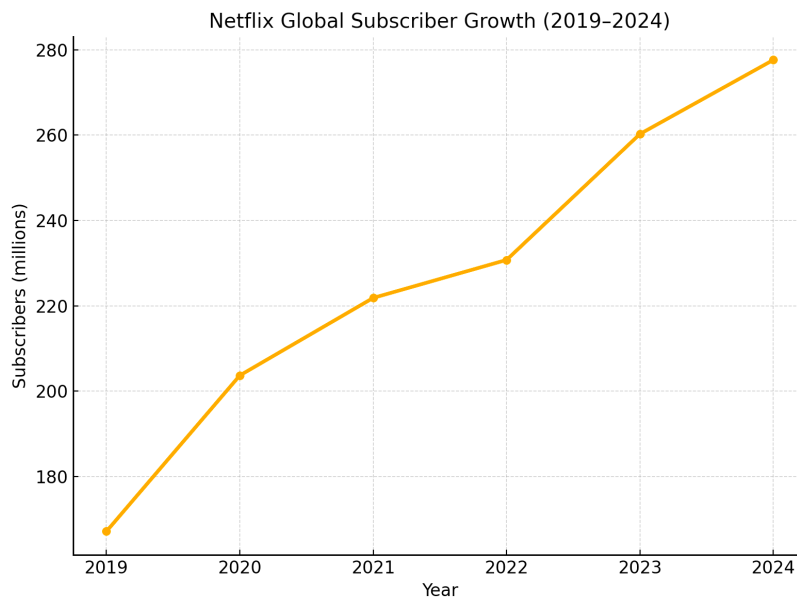
## NETFLIX

Netflix, originally founded as a DVD rental company in 1997, emerged from a quintessentially American media landscape dominated by Blockbuster Video, premium cable, and theatrical distribution. In its early years, Netflix operated with modest ambitions, licensing a catalogue of feature films and television series and largely relegating documentary content to the periphery. Skepticism from industry observers characterized its initial forays into streaming; few foresaw that it would profoundly reshape the economics, aesthetics, and cultural positioning of documentary cinema. Yet by the early 2010s, Netflix had begun acquiring high-profile independent nonfiction works such as *The Cove* (2009) and *Food, Inc.* (2008), offering new digital lifelines to films that often struggled for visibility in theatrical markets. The release of *The Square* (2013) and, more decisively, *Making a Murderer* (2015) marked a fundamental shift: Netflix moved from distributor to cultural architect, demonstrating that documen-

taries could command global audiences, dominate public discourse, and sustain serialized viewing patterns. What began as a homegrown platform catering to American mainstream tastes quickly scaled into a global phenomenon, with nonfiction storytelling at its core. By 2023, Netflix's annual content expenditure had reached \$17 billion, with documentary production no longer peripheral but integral to its global growth strategy. The company's strategic emphasis on nonfiction reflected a larger platform logic-transforming niche genres into mass phenomena through algorithmic amplification and binge-ready narrative design.

This shift toward original production further signaled that documentary had fully entered the mainstream of global entertainment culture. Rather than relying solely on acquisitions, Netflix rapidly expanded its slate of commissioned nonfiction originals, positioning documentaries as essential pillars of its content strategy. Early productions such as *The Ivory Game* (2016), which featured narration and advocacy involvement by Prince William, demonstrated Netflix's ability to secure not only cinematic quality but high-profile cultural endorsements. Other original documentaries—including *13th* (2016) by Ava DuVernay, *Chasing Coral* (2017), *One of Us* (2017), *The Bleeding Edge* (2018), and *Our Planet* (2019) narrated by Sir David Attenborough—showcased the platform's investment in a broad spectrum of nonfiction subjects, ranging from environmental activism to systemic injustice. These originals were not ancillary; they occupied prominent positions on Netflix's homepage, were promoted through major advertising campaigns, and often became critical cornerstones in Netflix's awards strategies, including nominations and wins at the Academy Awards, BAFTAs, and Emmys. As Nora Stone observes, "documentary's migration into platform originals has reshaped it into a prestige commodity, capable of conferring legitimacy, cultural capital, and global visibility upon streaming brands" (Stone). In this sense, Netflix's production of documentary originals cemented nonfiction storytelling as both commercially viable and culturally central—a profound reversal from its earlier marginalisation within media industries.

The commercialization of documentary filmmaking in the streaming era has profoundly altered its institutional foundations. No longer positioned as a subsidized cultural good, documentary now constitutes a media sector promising sufficient financial stability and growth potential to attract sizable and consistent private investment. Platforms like Netflix have demonstrated that documentaries can deliver robust subscriber engagement, long-tail profitability, and brand differentiation—outcomes traditionally associated with scripted entertainment. This financial recalibration has been accompanied by a cultural rebranding: labeling nonfiction works as "documentary films" rather than simply "documentaries" confers a higher degree of prestige, suggesting narrative sophistication, artistic ambition, and lasting cultural significance. As Stone further notes, "calling something a 'film' elevates its status, linking it to a tradition of cinematic artistry rather than journalistic reporting" (Stone). This shift is not merely semantic; it reflects deeper transformations in how documentary is produced, marketed, and consumed within platform economies.



**Figure 2.1.** The platform's strategic emphasis on nonfiction was paralleled by its steady growth into a global entertainment powerhouse. As Figure 1 demonstrates, Netflix expanded its subscriber base from 167 million in 2019 to nearly 278 million by 2024, reflecting a consistent trajectory of international scaling.

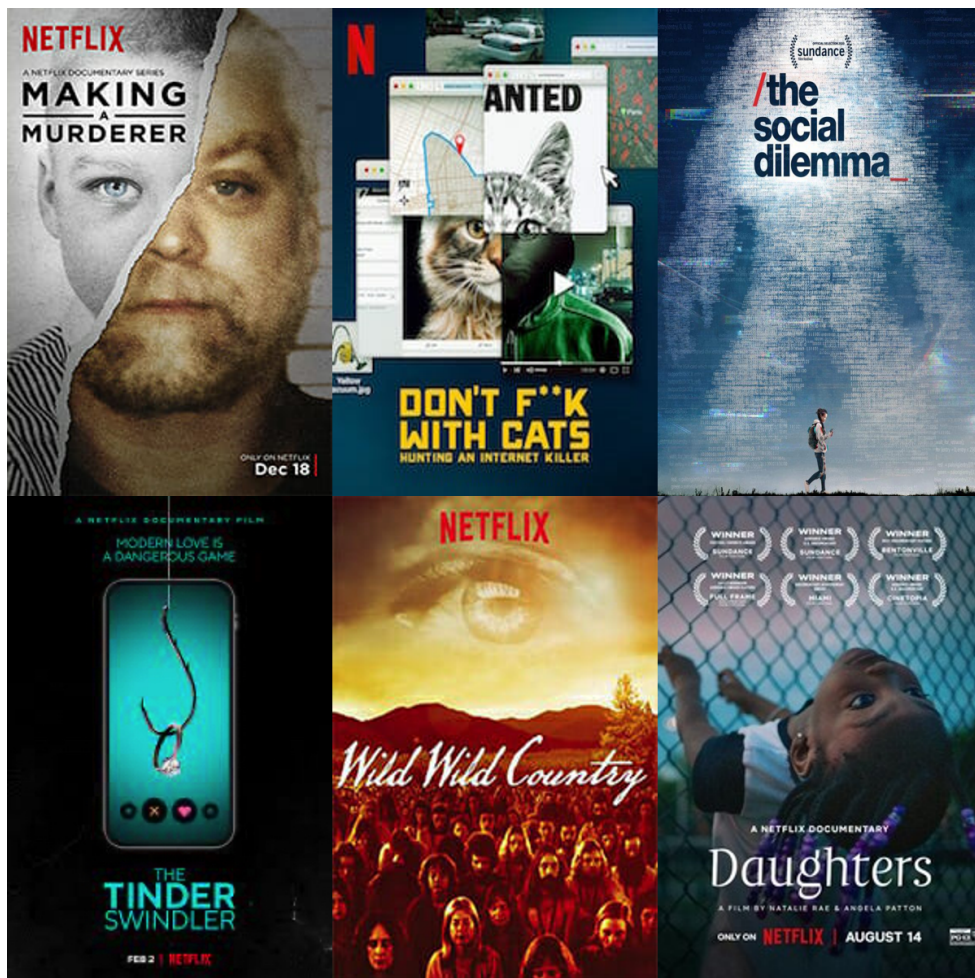
Netflix's engineering of the binge-watching phenomenon represented another decisive innovation. *Making a Murderer* (2015), released in a single ten-episode drop, captivated audiences not simply through its content but through its method of consumption—extended, immersive viewing sessions. As Binns (2021) notes, "the median Netflix binge session lasted 3.2 hours," a behavioural shift that documentary filmmakers rapidly internalized. Single feature-length arcs gave way to multi-episode sagas structured around cliffhangers, emotional peaks, and cumulative revelations. Titles such as *The Keepers* (2017), *Wild Wild Country* (2018), and *Tiger King* (2020) exemplified this transformation, blending investigative rigor with serialized suspense to maximise viewer retention and cultural impact. As Patricia Aufderheide (2018) suggests, nonfiction storytelling increasingly embraced "strategic narrative engineering," balancing factual integrity with the dramatic imperatives of binge consumption. Among the many transformations initiated by Netflix's nonfiction strategy, few have been as commercially consequential as the industrialization of the true crime genre. Initially a niche subcategory of investigative journalism and episodic television, true crime under Netflix evolved into a dominant content pillar, systematically engineered for audience retention. Early successes like *Making a Murderer* paved the way, but it was *Don't F\*\*k with Cats: Hunting an Internet Killer* (2019) that epitomized the new grammar of platform-led nonfiction: a three-part structure optimized for binge-watching, viral marketing, and cross-demographic appeal. According to Jenner (2024), Netflix's internal data identified true crime as a "super-genre," driving the highest retention rates across global markets. Investment in serialized crime nonfiction increased by over 37% between 2018 and 2022 (Netflix Investor Reports 2020), solidifying true crime as a strategic economic engine rather than a content category.

The dominance of the binge model did not simply alter viewer behaviours; it reallocated creative authority within the documentary production process. Where once filmmakers held primary narrative control, the structure of serialized nonfiction increasingly became calibrated around platform algorithms and commissioning editors, who dictated pacing, cliffhanger positioning, and episodic segmentation to maximise viewer retention. As a result, formal diversity narrowed: documentary projects that conformed to suspense-driven, character-focused, multi-episode arcs were prioritised, while slower, observational, or structurally experimental works were sidelined in favour of binge-optimised formats. Although premium cable networks such as HBO initially resisted this model-preserving the one-off prestige documentary as a weekly event-the gravitational pull of platform logic proved pervasive. By the early 2020s, even HBO had embraced serialized documentary releases, exemplified by multi-part productions such as *Allen v. Farrow* (2021) and *The Vow* (2020-2022). This shift confirmed that the algorithmic imperatives of streaming had decisively reshaped not only mass-market nonfiction storytelling but also the strategies of institutions historically associated with documentary prestige.

However, Netflix's true crime boom did not merely respond to audience appetites; it actively created and amplified a global cultural obsession with criminology, forensic psychology, and serial killer narratives. Documentaries such as *Conversations with a Killer: The Ted Bundy Tapes* (2019) and *Night Stalker: The Hunt for a Serial Killer* (2021) soon found scripted extensions in series like *Mindhunter* (2017-2019) and *Dahmer - Monster: The Jeffrey Dahmer Story* (2022), blurring the line between documentary and dramatization. As Binns (2021) argues, this "platform sensationalism cycle" leveraged crime's emotional shock value to sustain viewer engagement across genres and formats. The cultural effects were striking: amateur sleuthing, armchair criminology, and serial killer fandoms proliferated across Reddit forums, TikTok, and YouTube channels, mirroring the narrative structures cultivated by Netflix originals. As Aufderheide (2018) warns, "the risk is that the line between civic engagement and morbid consumption becomes increasingly blurred," as crime narratives are commodified for mass entertainment under the guise of social awareness. Beyond true crime, Netflix's expansion of docudrama hybrids signaled a more profound reengineering of the documentary form itself. Productions such as *The Social Dilemma* (2020), *Wild Wild Country* (2018), and *The Tinder Swindler* (2022) blended investigative reporting with scripted reenactments, aestheticizing factual storytelling through cinematic tropes. This strategy was not limited to American subjects; Netflix commissioned high-budget nonfiction series across global markets, transforming documentary into a scalable entertainment format. *Rise of Empires: Ottoman* (2020-2022) and *Alexander: The Making of a God* (2024) exemplify this new grammar of hybridization, combining expert testimony with battle reenactments and dramatic character arcs to appeal to international audiences. As Binns (2021) and Jenner (2024) note, Netflix engineered "new grammars of truth-performance," wherein factual content was shaped by the demands of emotional immersion, aesthetic spectacle, and global marketability.

The cumulative effect of these strategies has been the emergence of what might be termed docutainment: the systematic fusion of factual storytelling with the narra-

tive, aesthetic, and emotional structures of mass entertainment. This transformation recalls Sergei Eisenstein's early concept of the "cinema of attractions," wherein film sought to provoke visceral reactions through spectacle and affective stimulation (Eisenstein 1923). Yet in the streaming era, this spectacle is algorithmically optimized, designed not for ideological mobilisation but for sustained engagement within platform economies. As Nora Stone succinctly argues, "documentaries have become both art and product, prestige object and algorithmic bait" (Stone). Nonfiction storytelling today is thus suspended between competing imperatives: civic engagement and emotional spectacle, factual integrity and commercial entertainment, investigative urgency and audience gratification.



**Figure 2.2.** Representative posters of landmark Netflix documentaries (2015–2023), illustrating the mainstreaming and global popularisation of nonfiction storytelling under platform capitalism. Titles such as *Making a Murderer*, *Tiger King*, and *13th* exemplify the convergence of documentary ethics and entertainment logics in the streaming era

Netflix's transformation of the documentary field has undeniably expanded nonfiction's visibility, accessibility, and global reach. Yet it has also introduced new tensions, commodifying trauma narratives, privileging sensationalist forms, and reshaping the ethical landscape of nonfiction production. As Patricia Aufderheide notes,



streaming-era nonfiction often "trades the moral weight of serious subjects for emotional intensity," risking a drift toward spectacle over inquiry (Aufderheide 2012). The rise of global docutainment, while creatively generative, demands a critical reassessment of documentary's institutional role, its public service responsibilities, and its capacity to sustain epistemological and aesthetic integrity under the pressures of platform capitalism.

Critics and audiences alike have been taken aback by the seriousness with which Netflix approached documentary filmmaking, treating nonfiction not as ancillary content but as a core pillar of its cultural strategy. Recognition from prestigious institutions signaled this shift. Netflix achieved its first Oscar nomination for a documentary feature with *The Square* (2013) and later secured wins with titles such as *Icarus* (2017) and *My Octopus Teacher* (2020). These milestones underscored the platform's success in positioning documentaries as both commercially viable and critically celebrated. As John Corner argues, when documentary achieves mass success without losing its investigative or artistic ambitions, it redefines the genre's public relevance (Corner 2002). This seriousness has only deepened as Netflix expanded its global audience. Recent titles such as *American Symphony* (2023), directed by Matthew Heineman, offer intimate, artistically ambitious nonfiction storytelling. Chronicling musician Jon Batiste's creative journey amid personal upheaval, *American Symphony* earned an Academy Award nomination for Best Original Song at the 96th Oscars, affirming Netflix's ability to produce emotionally resonant, critically respected documentaries. Beyond the American context, Netflix Originals such as *The Remarkable Life of Ibelin* (2024), which holds a 97% approval rating on Rotten Tomatoes, and *How to Rob a Bank* (2024), boasting a rare 100% rating, demonstrate the platform's commitment to sustaining traditional documentary values—observational depth, narrative innovation, and ethical seriousness—even as they reach mass audiences. Other critically acclaimed titles, such as *American Nightmare* (2024), exemplify Netflix's efforts to chronicle systemic failures within institutions, adhering to nonfiction's historical role as a mode of social critique.

Rather than reducing documentaries to pure entertainment, Netflix has increasingly blurred the lines between art, journalism, and spectacle, creating works that appeal to both mass audiences and critical institutions. As Brian Winston suggests, the strength of documentary lies in its ability to "mediate between the informational and the emotional, between the journalistic and the artistic" (Winston 1995). Netflix's nonfiction catalog, particularly in recent years, reflects precisely this mediation—producing works that are narratively compelling yet socially and culturally resonant. Nonetheless, the expansion of documentary into mainstream global entertainment via Netflix also raises complex questions. Derek Paget warns that "the integration of documentary forms into entertainment logics risks undermining their claims to representational authority" (Paget 2011). As Netflix continues to consolidate its influence over nonfiction production and distribution, sustaining a balance between audience engagement and public service ideals will remain a central challenge. Thus, Netflix's embrace of documentary has reengineered nonfiction cinema not merely as a prestige object but as a global cultural force. The platform's ability to integrate traditional documentary ethics with the imperatives of platform capitalism marks one of the

most significant transformations in the history of nonfiction media—a transformation that carries both remarkable creative opportunities and profound ethical dilemmas for the future of the genre.

While Netflix's global platformisation of documentary storytelling constituted a major catalyst for nonfiction's mainstreaming, an equally critical force has been the institutional consolidation of documentary cinema within the United States. Over the past two decades, the U.S. has evolved into the single largest and most lucrative market for documentary films, reshaping both production incentives and distribution strategies. No longer relegated to the margins of independent cinema or public broadcasting, documentaries have become integral to the American entertainment economy, commanding significant box office revenue, critical prestige, and audience loyalty. This institutional transformation is evident across multiple domains. The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, once hesitant to recognise nonfiction beyond discrete documentary categories, now actively promotes documentary works as culturally and artistically significant contributions to cinema. Landmark wins for titles such as *20 Feet from Stardom* (2013), *Icarus* (2017), *Free Solo* (2018), and *My Octopus Teacher* (2020) reflect the increasing visibility and legitimacy of nonfiction storytelling within Hollywood's highest echelons. Moreover, the expansion of documentary categories at the Emmy Awards and the creation of high-profile nonfiction sections at major festivals—Sundance's U.S. Documentary Competition, Tribeca's Documentary Feature Competition, Telluride's Documentary Spotlight—have institutionalised documentary as a year-round cultural force rather than a seasonal or niche phenomenon. Market figures further corroborate this trend. According to the Documentary Organization of Canada and recent reports from the International Documentary Association, the United States accounted for over 45% of the global documentary market revenue in 2023, with streaming, limited theatrical releases, and prestige television collaborations driving substantial growth (Documentary Organization of Canada 2024; International Documentary Association 2024). As Thomas Austin notes, "the mainstreaming of documentary in the American context reflects not just a change in audience appetites but a profound structural repositioning of nonfiction within media industries" (Austin 2007). In this landscape, documentaries are no longer seen as ancillary or educational materials but as commercial and cultural assets capable of generating awards, critical acclaim, and sustained audience engagement. However, the institutional embrace of nonfiction also introduces new pressures. As Brian Winston cautions, the closer documentary comes to the centre of mainstream media economies, "the greater the risk that its critical, oppositional, or experimental functions will be eroded by commercial imperatives" (Winston 1995). The challenge facing contemporary documentary filmmakers is thus twofold: to leverage the unprecedented opportunities afforded by institutional recognition without surrendering the investigative urgency, formal innovation, and civic commitment that have historically defined the genre's public value.

## SUNDANCE

The evolution of documentary cinema into a major cultural and commercial force has been driven not only by technological and platform transformations but also by key



institutional catalysts. Chief among these is the Sundance Film Festival, which over the past three decades has redefined the global infrastructure for nonfiction storytelling. No longer merely a showcase for independent American cinema, Sundance has become a central engine for the discovery, financing, and dissemination of documentary films worldwide. Its influence extends beyond festival premieres, shaping aesthetic trends, market dynamics, and the career trajectories of a new generation of nonfiction filmmakers. As Vallejo (2020) observes, "documentary festivals have become hybrid spaces of discovery and commercialization, where artistic risk is increasingly calibrated to platform demand and transnational marketability." Situated at the opening of the film acquisition calendar each January, Sundance has emerged as the premier marketplace for nonfiction cinema, where films are strategically positioned for global distribution, awards contention, and cultural impact. In this context, Sundance operates not simply as an exhibition site but as a critical intermediary between independent documentary practices and the global entertainment economy, simultaneously sustaining creative experimentation and negotiating the pressures of market viability.

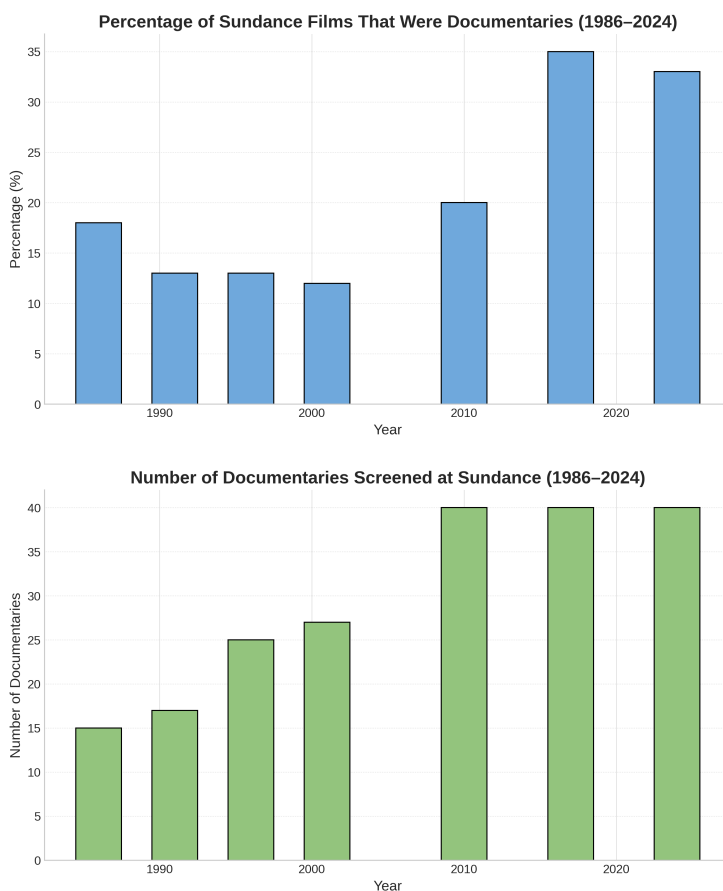
The institutional centrality of Sundance is evidenced in its extraordinary market outcomes. Between 2019 and 2024, approximately 65-70% of Sundance-premiered documentaries secured distribution deals—a rate unmatched by any other global festival (Documentary.org 2023). High-profile acquisitions further underscore Sundance's strategic role. In 2021, *Summer of Soul* (directed by Ahmir "Questlove" Thompson) was acquired by Searchlight Pictures and Hulu for a reported \$15 million, setting a new record for nonfiction sales at the festival (Filmmaker Magazine 2023). The previous year, *Boys State* (2020), a documentary exploring youth political dynamics in Texas, was purchased jointly by Apple TV+ and A24 for \$12 million, marking the largest documentary sale in Sundance history at that time. In 2019, Netflix's acquisition of *Knock Down the House*, chronicling Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's insurgent congressional campaign, for \$10 million followed a fiercely competitive bidding war (Quartz 2019). Earlier still, *Icarus* (2017), an exposé on Russian doping scandals, was sold to Netflix for approximately \$5 million, later winning the Academy Award for Best Documentary Feature. In 2022, *Fire of Love*, a visually poetic account of two French volcanologists, was acquired by National Geographic and NEON in a deal estimated in the low eight-figure range (Filmmaker Magazine 2023). These transactions illustrate not merely intensified competition but the elevation of nonfiction storytelling to the status of highly valued economic commodities within global media markets. Beyond the Festival itself, the Sundance Institute has played a critical role in institutionalising long-term support structures for documentary filmmaking. Through year-round initiatives such as the Sundance Documentary Film Program, the Documentary Edit and Story Labs, and the Creative Producing Labs, Sundance offers not merely a platform for finished works but an ecosystem of development, funding, and mentorship. Since its formal establishment in 2002, the Documentary Film Program has provided over \$25 million in grants to nonfiction projects globally, fostering a diverse range of voices and experimental approaches to storytelling (Sundance Institute 2024). In addition to financial support, Sundance's documentary track cultivates creative innovation through intensive lab experiences, where

emerging and established filmmakers alike engage in collaborative workshops focusing on narrative structure, visual experimentation, ethical frameworks, and audience engagement strategies. The Institute's strategic shift toward year-round pitching forums and international partnerships has further strengthened its role as a global catalyst for nonfiction production. Initiatives such as the Sundance Institute's Catalyst Forum connect documentary projects at early stages with impact investors and socially conscious funders, reflecting a broader transformation in documentary financing models toward mission-driven, socially engaged support networks. As Patricia Aufderheide and Peter Jaszi argue, such institutional ecosystems help sustain "a public sphere for documentary" that might otherwise be eroded by the volatility of commercial media markets (Aufderheide and Jaszi 2011).

The impact of Sundance's documentary support infrastructure is perhaps most visible in the careers of its alumni, many of whom have gone on to create some of the most critically acclaimed and culturally influential nonfiction works of the contemporary era. Notable graduates of the Sundance Documentary Film Program include Laura Poitras, whose *Citizenfour* (2014) won the Academy Award for Best Documentary Feature; Jehane Noujaim, director of *The Square* (2013), a seminal account of the Egyptian revolution; and Bryan Fogel, whose *Icarus* (2017) exposed the Russian state-sponsored doping scandal and similarly secured an Oscar. Other alumni such as Garrett Bradley (*Time*, 2020), Bing Liu (*Minding the Gap*, 2018), and Nanfu Wang (*One Child Nation*, 2019) exemplify the program's commitment to nurturing diverse voices and formally innovative approaches to storytelling. These filmmakers did not simply pass through the festival circuit; they developed their projects through Sundance's extensive lab system, receiving creative mentorship, editorial guidance, and strategic funding well before their films entered public view. As Joshua Glick notes, institutions like Sundance have come to "mediate the transition from independent vision to industrial success, ensuring that documentary's civic aspirations remain aligned, however uneasily, with the demands of global media circulation" (Glick 2018).

Beyond financial metrics, Sundance documentaries have profoundly shaped cultural conversations, public policy, and collective memory. *Hoop Dreams* (1994) redefined the possibilities of long-form verité storytelling, demonstrating that documentary could sustain feature-length narrative complexity without sacrificing observational depth. *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006) catalyzed global environmental activism, illustrating documentary's capacity to drive policy change. *Blackfish* (2013) led to corporate reforms at SeaWorld and significantly altered public perceptions of animal captivity (Opportunity Agenda 2020). More recently, *Navalny* (2022) amplified international attention to Russian opposition politics, blending investigative urgency with personal narrative. Documentaries such as *Paris Is Burning* (1991) and *Summer of Soul* (2021) have similarly reinserted marginalised histories into mainstream consciousness, demonstrating the genre's capacity for both social intervention and historical reparation. Several significant trends now characterise the post-2020 documentary production and distribution landscape, many of which crystallised through the prism of Sundance. The post-streaming boom correction has prompted platforms to become increasingly selective, prioritising true crime, celebrity profiles,

and music documentaries over more politically risky or formally experimental independent projects (Filmmaker Magazine 2023). Hybrid festival models, initiated in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, have broadened public access to festival titles but also diluted the high-stakes deal-making that once characterised in-person festival economies (Documentary.org 2023). The rise of episodic nonfiction formats, driven by changing audience consumption patterns and binge-driven streaming logic, has further reshaped nonfiction development pipelines, blurring distinctions between cinema, television, and digital series. Finally, the internationalisation of Sundance's documentary competition—marked by the increasing presence of films from India, Ukraine, and Russia—signals a broader globalization of documentary storytelling, positioning Sundance as a transnational launchpad rather than a solely American cultural event.



**Figure 2.3.** Documentary representation at the Sundance Film Festival, 1986–2024. The top graph shows the percentage of total films that were documentaries, indicating nonfiction's growing institutional presence. The bottom graph depicts the steady rise in the absolute number of documentaries screened, reflecting nonfiction's expanded cultural and industrial role within independent cinema.

However, the increasingly commercialised environment surrounding Sundance documentaries also generates critical tensions. As Patricia Aufderheide argues, the festival economy "encourages forms of storytelling calibrated to market imperatives, which may limit the range of formal experimentation and oppositional politics traditionally associated with documentary" (Aufderheide 2012). Stella Bruzzi similarly warns that "documentary's aesthetic risk-taking is often constrained by institutional

expectations for intimacy, character-driven narrative, and emotional resolution" (Bruzzi 2006). These pressures are particularly acute for filmmakers from marginalised backgrounds or politically sensitive regions, whose works must now navigate both aesthetic and commercial expectations in order to secure visibility and distribution. Yet despite these constraints, Sundance remains a resilient site of nonfiction innovation. Recent premieres such as *The Territory* (2022), focusing on indigenous resistance to deforestation in the Amazon, and *All That Breathes* (2022), chronicling environmental collapse in New Delhi, illustrate that politically urgent, formally adventurous documentary storytelling continues to find receptive audiences and critical acclaim. Sundance's success lies in its ability to serve as both a marketplace and a cultural crucible—a space where commercial viability and social urgency remain in uneasy but productive tension.

As the global documentary market recalibrates in the wake of the streaming boom and as institutional pressures continue to shape nonfiction aesthetics, Sundance's role as a critical intermediary between independent filmmakers, global audiences, and corporate platforms will likely only intensify. If the trajectory from *Hoop Dreams* to *Summer of Soul* offers any guidance, it is that documentary cinema, despite its immersion in market economies, retains an enduring capacity to provoke, to intervene, and to reimagine the boundaries of public storytelling in the twenty-first century.

## **2.2 Documentary Production and Distribution in Europe: Policy Support, Public Broadcasting Shifts, and Festival-Driven Ecosystems**

European documentary production has long cultivated an approach that prioritises artistic innovation, authorial vision, and socio-political engagement over mass-market imperatives. Unlike the United States, where the rise of global streaming platforms has increasingly oriented documentary production towards broad audience appeal and algorithmic visibility, Europe remains committed to sustaining a rich ecosystem of auteur-driven documentaries, often realised through intricate webs of public funding, festival support, and transnational collaboration. As Ib Bondebjerg (2014) notes, "the European documentary tradition is grounded in a cultural policy ethos that regards nonfiction film as a public good, a space for reflection, and a contributor to democratic life."

Central to the resilience of this model is the deliberate and long-standing development of public funding structures and transnational collaboration frameworks. In contrast to the United States, where documentary production historically relied on market forces, philanthropic support, or broadcast commissions, European nations—particularly in the aftermath of World War II—pursued a cultural policy model that treated audiovisual media as an essential component of democratic life, national identity, and public discourse. Institutions such as France's Centre national du cinéma et de l'image animée (CNC), established in 1946, alongside later equivalents like the British Film Institute (BFI) and Germany's Filmförderungsanstalt (FFA), were conceived not merely as industry support mechanisms but as bulwarks against cultural homogenisation and political disengagement (Bondebjerg 2014). The creation of Eurimages by the Council of Europe in 1988 further institutionalised transnational co-production as

a strategic priority, explicitly recognising that "European cinema must be rooted in collaboration to preserve its plurality and vitality" (Eurimages Charter, 1988). While the strength of public funding frameworks has thus far tempered the full hegemony of platform logics within European documentary production, this equilibrium is increasingly fragile. Institutions such as the CNC in France, the BFI in the United Kingdom, and regional initiatives like Eurimages have historically insulated European nonfiction cinema from the overt market imperatives that dominate in the United States. By sustaining auteur-driven projects, supporting politically sensitive narratives, and maintaining theatrical and public broadcaster exhibition routes, these systems have preserved a degree of formal, thematic, and political diversity within the European documentary landscape. However, neoliberal media reforms-manifest in reduced public subsidies, commercialisation pressures within public broadcasting, and a growing reliance on co-financing from private or digital-sector actors-have begun to erode this protective scaffolding. Simultaneously, the expansion of algorithmically curated distribution platforms, even within Europe, is subtly reshaping commissioning priorities, privileging audience data metrics, genre predictability, and cross-border scalability over artistic risk or cultural specificity. As Bondebjerg (2021) cautions, "the European public service model is under increasing strain from global market pressures that do not share its normative commitment to diversity, citizenship, and public value." Thus, while European documentary infrastructures have thus far mitigated the homogenising tendencies of platform capitalism, their capacity to do so in the coming decade remains profoundly uncertain. This long-term policy foresight has proven remarkably prescient. Today, co-production is not merely a desirable mechanism but a structural necessity for much of European documentary filmmaking. According to the European Audiovisual Observatory's 2023 report, over 68% of all European documentaries released between 2022 and 2024 were international co-productions, with certain regions-particularly Central and Eastern Europe-exceeding 75% co-production rates (EAO 2023). Co-production not only diversifies funding sources but multiplies opportunities for festival selection, marketing visibility, and theatrical exhibition across multiple territories. As Aida Vallejo (2020) emphasises, "co-production agreements function as a passport, allowing films to move more freely across national and cultural borders." Ezra Winton (2021) similarly argues that "co-production is now less a matter of financial necessity and more a strategic choice to maximise circulation, legitimacy, and political protection."

Recognising the growing centrality of this model, European nations have actively negotiated bilateral and multilateral co-production treaties, specifically designed to streamline administrative procedures and facilitate cross-border collaboration. As Dina Iordanova (2015) observes, "the formalisation of co-production frameworks marks a crucial shift where the European film industry ceased to be a collection of isolated national sectors and evolved into an interconnected, policy-supported network." These treaties not only simplify bureaucratic processes but also allow films to qualify as "national" productions in multiple countries simultaneously, thereby unlocking access to local subsidies, broadcasting slots, and cultural quotas-a strategic advantage that single-country productions often lack. The strategic centrality of co-production is further evident in the programming practices of major international fes-

tivals. An analysis of the main competition selections at Cannes, Berlinale, Venice, IDFA, CPH:DOX, Visions du Réel, and Locarno between 2022 and 2024 reveals that a significant majority—ranging from 65% to 85%, depending on the festival—consisted of international co-productions. For instance, the Berlinale's 2023 Panorama and Competition sections featured over 80% co-produced films, while CPH:DOX's 2024 DOX:AWARD competition lineup comprised nearly 90% international co-productions (Festival Reports 2023-2024). This dominance is not incidental but reflects a profound structural realignment in contemporary documentary production: cross-border collaboration has become synonymous with critical prestige, festival visibility, and market viability. Moreover, the same co-produced documentaries frequently continue their trajectory towards major awards recognition, particularly at the Academy Awards. In recent years, films such as *Flee* (2021, Denmark/France/Sweden/Norway), *Collective* (2020, Romania/Luxembourg), *Writing with Fire* (2021, India with European co-production partners), *Honeyland* (2019, North Macedonia co-produced with European grants), *A House Made of Splinters* (2022, Denmark/Sweden/Finland/Ukraine), *20 Days in Mariupol* (2023, Ukraine/USA), and *Four Daughters* (2023, Tunisia/France/Germany/Saudi Arabia) exemplify this trajectory. Each of these films emerged through co-production-heavy festival circuits before securing Academy Award nominations or shortlisting for Best Documentary Feature, with several earning dual nominations in both documentary and international feature categories. As Dina Iordanova (2020) underscores, "co-production today is not simply a financial model but a curatorial logic, structuring how films move through festivals, awards circuits, and ultimately into global public consciousness." Through strategic alliances, diversified funding, and cross-border storytelling, co-productions reinforce the resilience of European documentary cinema, allowing it to preserve democratic values, artistic ambition, and international relevance in an increasingly market-driven global environment.

This convergence of policy foresight, institutional frameworks, and strategic co-production practices has created an environment where even documentaries emerging from smaller or economically marginalised national industries can achieve global impact. It is within this context that *Honeyland* (2019) exemplifies the transformative potential of the European model. Originating from North Macedonia—a country with limited domestic production capacity and minimal access to international markets—*Honeyland* illustrates how the European co-production infrastructure not only facilitates the realisation of high-risk, auteur-driven projects but also enables their circulation on the global stage. As the following case study demonstrates, without the scaffolding of European co-financing, festival support, and cross-border institutional collaboration, a film like *Honeyland*—with its slow observational aesthetic and deeply localised narrative—would have faced insurmountable barriers to completion, visibility, and critical recognition.

*Honeyland* (2019), directed by Tamara Kotevska and Ljubomir Stefanov, offers a compelling case study of how supranational support structures sustain artisanal documentary filmmaking. Produced in North Macedonia—a country with modest national film funding and a relatively underdeveloped audiovisual infrastructure—*Honeyland* received critical development and production support through the Macedonian Film





**Fig. 2.4.** Official poster for 'Honeyland' (dir. Tamara Kotevska and Ljubomir Stefanov, 2019).

Agency, regional arts councils, and strategic participation in European co-production platforms such as CineLink and pitching sessions organised by the European Documentary Network (EDN). Without access to this intricate web of transnational funding opportunities and institutional endorsements, a project characterised by its minimal dialogue, ecological focus, and non-commercial narrative structure would likely have remained unrealised. The global reception of *Honeyland* further underscores the cultural and artistic significance of these support systems. The film was widely lauded by major critics: *Variety* described it as "an elemental visual poem" that "captures a disappearing way of life with profound intimacy and painterly beauty" (Debruge 2019), while *The Hollywood Reporter* praised it as "a luminous, heartbreaking elegy to a vanishing world" distinguished by "astonishing cinematography and narrative richness achieved through patient observation" (Rooney 2019). *Sight & Sound* hailed it as "a masterclass in ecological storytelling," elevating the documentary form beyond reportage into the realm of myth and humanist reflection (Macnab 2019). Its subsequent success—including winning awards at Sundance, earning dual Academy Award nominations for Best Documentary Feature and Best International Feature Film, and being distributed internationally by Neon and other partners—testifies to its ability to resonate across aesthetic, cultural, and linguistic boundaries.

From a production standpoint, *Honeyland* exemplifies the inherent vulnerabilities of artisanal documentary practice: extensive filming over three years, reliance on non-

professional subjects, unpredictable production conditions, and an adherence to non-intrusive, observational ethics. These factors rendered the project financially fragile and commercially risky. Yet, despite these structural challenges, *Honeyland* achieved remarkable success, grossing approximately \$1.3 million worldwide—including \$815,082 in the United States and Canada, and \$436,881 internationally (The Numbers 2024). In the context of North Macedonian cinema—where domestic theatrical releases are rare and international recognition is exceptional—this achievement represents an extraordinary breakthrough. Crucially, such success was made possible not solely by the filmmakers' artistic commitment, but through the structural scaffolding provided by European cultural policy: public funding mechanisms, regional co-production alliances, and festival-supported development platforms. As Vallejo (2021) emphasises, "the European co-production model provides not only financial scaffolding but a symbolic endorsement that enhances a film's ability to circulate within prestige circuits and reach global audiences." *Honeyland* thus demonstrates that without the complex ecology of European institutional support, many of the continent's most significant, aesthetically ambitious, and politically resonant documentaries might never reach completion, let alone achieve global cultural impact.

The stakes of sustaining documentary production through co-production frameworks extend far beyond the survival of individual films; they are intimately connected to the philosophical foundations of democratic society itself. As Chantal Mouffe (2000) argues, "democracy requires the availability of multiple spaces of contestation, where dissent can be expressed and new subjectivities can be formed." Documentary cinema—particularly politically sensitive and artistically daring works—constitutes one such vital space of contestation. Without the protections afforded by transnational co-production infrastructures, the capacity for documentary filmmakers to contribute meaningfully to agonistic democratic discourse would be severely diminished. Jürgen Habermas (1989) emphasises that a functioning democracy depends upon the existence of a robust public sphere, where rational-critical debate can flourish free from domination. Documentary films, especially those enabled through co-production alliances, act as critical interventions in this public sphere, amplifying marginalised voices and contested narratives that might otherwise remain invisible within national or corporate media frameworks. Nancy Fraser (1990) critiques the ideal of a singular public sphere as inherently exclusionary, emphasising the necessity of multiple "subaltern counter-publics"—alternative spaces where subordinated groups can articulate oppositional interpretations of reality. Documentary cinema often fulfils precisely this role, crafting alternative publics through visual storytelling that challenges hegemonic constructions of knowledge and power.

Moreover, as Jacques Rancière (2004) contends, politics is fundamentally about the "distribution of the sensible"—the structuring of what is perceptible and intelligible within society. Co-produced documentaries such as *A House Made of Splinters* (2022) and *No Other Land* (2024) intervene directly in this distribution, rendering visible the lives, losses, and resistances of populations marginalised by dominant geopolitical narratives. Simon Lereng Wilmont's *A House Made of Splinters* offers a tender, quietly devastating portrait of children living in a temporary shelter in Eastern Ukraine, caught amid the slow, grinding violence of protracted war. As Variety notes,



the film is "a tender, quietly devastating portrait of war's invisible victims" (Debruge 2022), achieved through a restrained, observational style that foregrounds the children's emotional resilience amid systemic collapse. IndieWire similarly praises it as "a film of aching humanity and restrained formal beauty" (Ehrlich 2022), highlighting its refusal to sensationalise trauma in favour of a profoundly humanist gaze. Crucially, the film's realisation depended upon a Nordic co-production network (Denmark, Sweden, Finland, and Ukraine), without which the project would have struggled to secure financing or international distribution during a period of extreme geopolitical instability. *A House Made of Splinters* thus exemplifies how co-production infrastructures enable the documentation of fragile, contested realities that might otherwise remain unseen. Similarly, *No Other Land* (2024), directed collaboratively by Palestinian and Israeli activists, chronicles the forced displacement of Palestinian communities in the South Hebron Hills. Winner of the Best Documentary Award at Berlinale 2024, the film has been described by the Berlinale Jury as "a courageous and profoundly personal testimony to resistance against displacement" (Berlinale Jury Statement 2024), and by Screen Daily as "an urgent act of witnessing, balancing personal intimacy and geopolitical indictment" (Hopewell 2024). Shot under conditions of extreme precarity, *No Other Land* depends structurally and ethically on transnational co-production, with Norwegian, German, and Qatari partners providing critical financial, logistical, and political support. Its very existence as a filmic object—its ability to bear witness, to circulate, to provoke debate—is inseparable from the protections afforded by the European co-production system. Amartya Sen (1999) enriches this understanding by framing democracy as the protection not merely of electoral processes, but of the freedoms of information, expression, and critical judgment. Co-produced documentaries embody these democratic freedoms, offering citizens access to diverse realities and enabling informed public deliberation across borders. In contexts where state-controlled narratives dominate—as increasingly observed in post-2022 Ukraine, Belarus, and elsewhere—the ability to maintain independent documentary production through international collaboration becomes an essential defence of informational and expressive freedom.

Finally, Ariella Azoulay (2008) conceptualises visual media practices, including documentary cinema, as components of a "civil imagination," fostering solidarity and political responsibility across distant spaces. Through transnational co-production, documentaries like *A House Made of Splinters* and *No Other Land* enact this civil imagination, resisting the atomisation and isolation characteristic of nationalist discourses, and reaffirming the interconnectedness of human struggle.

Thus, the European co-production system must be understood not simply as a financing mechanism, but as a structural and cultural architecture that sustains diversity, resilience, and creative risk-taking within the contemporary documentary landscape. It embodies a collective commitment to the democratic principles of visibility, plurality, contestation, and deliberative freedom. Without such frameworks, many of Europe's most significant, politically urgent, and aesthetically ambitious documentaries would either remain unrealised or face severe barriers to circulation.

However, while the European co-production framework has enabled the creation of politically urgent and artistically ambitious documentaries, the challenge of audience

reach remains increasingly pressing. Many of these deeply artistic and ethically complex works struggle to attain mass visibility beyond the circuits of festivals and specialised venues. The traditional infrastructures that once supported documentary dissemination—public broadcasters, theatrical networks, and national television—have eroded significantly. As a result, the sustainability of the European documentary tradition now depends not only on the continued vitality of co-production models but also on the reinvention of distribution pathways. The necessity for film festivals to assume expanded roles in documentary distribution has been further accelerated by the disruptions of the Covid-19 pandemic. The global lockdowns of 2020-2021 forced festivals to hybridise rapidly, reimagining themselves not solely as physical gathering spaces but as digital platforms capable of sustaining access to documentary works beyond the temporal and geographic confines of the festival event. As Dina Iordanova (2021) observes, the pandemic "catalysed a permanent shift in the architecture of film circulation, blurring the boundaries between festivals, streaming platforms, and distribution systems." Skadi Loist (2020) similarly argues that "hybrid formats have repositioned festivals as year-round, transnational agents of media circulation rather than temporally bound events."

Leading European festivals such as CPH:DOX, IDFA, Visions du Réel, Doclisboa, and Sheffield DocFest pioneered new models of hybrid exhibition, offering curated online programmes alongside traditional theatrical screenings. CPH:DOX in 2020 became one of the first major festivals to migrate fully online, launching a digital platform that reached unprecedented national and international audiences. IDFA institutionalised robust online programming that now constitutes a permanent distribution arm. Visions du Réel and Doclisboa adopted hybrid access models, while Sheffield DocFest formalised its online screenings as integral to its future strategy. Moreover, collaborative initiatives such as Doc Alliance and its streaming platform DAFilms—a partnership among seven major European documentary festivals—have further institutionalised this transformation, creating sustainable infrastructures for year-round exhibition of auteur-driven nonfiction. Thus, the hybridisation of festivals represents not a temporary adjustment but a structural evolution within the European documentary ecosystem. It reflects a broader realignment whereby festivals increasingly assume responsibility for the full lifecycle of documentary circulation—ensuring that politically urgent, artistically ambitious works can transcend traditional geographic, economic, and temporal barriers, and reach the audiences crucial for sustaining the democratic functions of nonfiction cinema.

Few recent documentaries embody these tensions—and the adaptive potential of the European co-production and festival ecosystem—more fully than *For Sama* (2019), directed by Waad Al-Kateab and Edward Watts. Produced as a British-Syrian co-production by ITN Productions and Channel 4 News, with additional support from PBS Frontline and strategic backing from European festival markets such as IDFA Forum and Sheffield MeetMarket, *For Sama* exemplifies the intersection of personal testimony, political resistance, and formal innovation. The project faced extraordinary production challenges: Al-Kateab filmed over five years during the siege of Aleppo, operating without formal institutional support, often without reliable power, storage, or communication technologies. As Ehrlich (2019) notes, the footage itself is "a raw



**Fig. 2.5.** Official poster for 'For Sama' (dir. Waad al-Kateab and Edward Watts, 2019).

act of survival as much as an act of filmmaking," captured under conditions where the very act of documentation became an existential risk. Following Al-Kateab's evacuation from Syria, the post-production process unfolded under conditions of displacement and precarity, with editing conducted across multiple European countries. The film's subsequent distribution trajectory encountered further barriers: its initial festival success in 2019 was soon followed by the global disruptions of the Covid-19 pandemic. The collapse of traditional theatrical exhibition routes posed a significant threat to *For Sama's* global reach. As Aida Vallejo (2021) notes, "the fragility of independent documentary circulation became starkly visible in the pandemic's rupture of physical distribution networks." Yet *For Sama's* success in overcoming these obstacles illustrates the critical role of emerging technological innovations and transnational broadcasting alliances. Channel 4 (UK) and PBS Frontline (USA) played pivotal roles in securing wide online and television dissemination, pivoting rapidly to digital platforms and orchestrating strategic virtual events that maintained the film's visibility. Through the deployment of virtual cinema models, targeted impact campaigns, and global streaming partnerships, *For Sama* transcended the collapse of traditional circuits and reached broad, transnational audiences.

Critically, *For Sama* was recognised as a landmark achievement by both critics and institutions. The Guardian described it as "one of the most viscerally powerful documentaries ever made about conflict" (Bradshaw 2019), while Variety praised its "unsparing immediacy and wrenching narrative intimacy" (Debruge 2019). The film received the Prix L'Œil d'or for Best Documentary at Cannes, the BAFTA for Best Documentary, and an Academy Award nomination for Best Documentary Feature, marking its extraordinary transnational resonance. Thus, *For Sama* stands as a final testament to the European documentary ecosystem's capacity for resilience and innovation under extreme conditions. It reveals how deeply artistic, politically courageous

works-born from zones of extreme danger, produced across fragmented geographies, and circulated through hybrid technological infrastructures-can still attain global impact when sustained by the strategic confluence of co-production frameworks, festival circuits, public broadcasting networks, and digital innovation.

### **2.3 Documentary Production in Asia and Emerging Markets: Innovation, Access, and the Rise of Regional Voices**

The landscape of documentary production across Asia and emerging markets has undergone profound transformations over the past three decades, shaped by a complex interplay of political constraint, technological innovation, and the emergence of dynamic regional voices. While early models of nonfiction filmmaking in these regions were often tied to state broadcasters, national ideology, or educational mandates, the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have witnessed the gradual diversification of documentary practices. This diversification has been catalysed by increased access to affordable digital technologies, the proliferation of independent film festivals, the rise of online streaming platforms, and shifting audience expectations. Unlike the relatively stable institutional ecosystems of Europe or the commercially driven structures of the United States, Asian documentary production operates within a precarious matrix where governmental control, artistic freedom, entrepreneurial innovation, and transnational pressures coexist-often in tension. In countries such as China and Vietnam, independent documentary movements have emerged as alternative forms of public discourse, navigating precarious spaces outside official channels. In contrast, Japan and South Korea present hybrid models where strong public broadcasting infrastructures coexist with vibrant independent sectors, facilitating both institutional stability and artistic experimentation.

At the same time, Southeast Asia and other emerging regions have witnessed the rise of a new generation of filmmakers who harness digital tools to challenge dominant narratives, foreground marginalised experiences, and expand the thematic and formal boundaries of nonfiction storytelling. As Ying Qian (2011) notes, "the digital turn has enabled the flourishing of grassroots documentary movements that reconfigure public discourse and collective memory beyond state-sanctioned frameworks". Over the past decade, documentary films from Asia-particularly from China, Japan, and South Korea-have gained unprecedented visibility and recognition at major international festivals and on global streaming platforms. Between 2015 and 2025, festivals such as IDFA, CPH:DOX, Hot Docs, Sundance, Sheffield DocFest, and Visions du Réel have consistently featured and awarded Asian documentaries. IDFA, for instance, screened twenty Asian documentaries in 2019 and described its 2023 programme as its "widest ever East and Southeast Asian cinema selection" (Screen Daily 2023). Sundance awarded its Grand Jury Prize to the China-focused *One Child Nation* in 2019 and to India's *All That Breathes* in 2022 (Sundance.org 2022). Similarly, CPH:DOX awarded its 2025 top prize to a Chinese documentary, *Always* by Chen Deming (Screen Daily 2025), underscoring how far Asian documentary storytelling has moved to the centre of global attention.

Parallel to festival recognition, the rise of streaming platforms such as Netflix and HBO dramatically expanded the global reach of Asian documentaries. Netflix, for instance, went from virtually no Asia-originated documentaries in 2015 to producing dozens of titles by the early 2020s, including *Street Food: Asia* (2019), *Blackpink: Light Up the Sky* (2020), and *Found* (2021). As Netflix CEO Reed Hastings emphasised, content "Made in Asia" has the capacity to be "watched by the world" (Netflix 2019)—a strategy validated by the widespread popularity and critical acclaim of Asian documentaries on global streaming charts. HBO followed a similar trajectory, acquiring and premiering landmark Asian documentaries such as *All That Breathes* (India) and *In the Same Breath* (China/U.S.) in the early 2020s, further cementing the international visibility of Asian nonfiction storytelling.

This synergy between festival recognition and global streaming distribution has not only expanded access but also reshaped the world's perception of Asia and Asian content. Whereas Asian documentary cinema once occupied a peripheral status within the global industry, it now commands central stages at premier festivals and leading distribution platforms. Rising festival awards, dedicated focus programmes, streaming exclusives, and sustained audience demand collectively mark a paradigm shift: Asian documentaries are no longer viewed solely as regional or ethnographic curiosities but as dynamic, politically vital, and artistically innovative contributions to global documentary culture. The Covid-19 pandemic further accelerated these transformations, simultaneously democratising access to production technologies and intensifying state surveillance of media and information. In this evolving context, Asian documentary filmmakers have increasingly turned to transnational co-productions, regional festival circuits, and digital distribution platforms to sustain their practices and to reach both local and global audiences.

This section examines the diverse trajectories of documentary production across Asia and emerging markets, highlighting how regional filmmakers navigate the tensions between innovation and restriction, access and surveillance, local specificity and global circulation. It argues that contemporary Asian documentary cinema represents not only an aesthetic flourishing but also a critical site of cultural resistance, political articulation, and reimagined public spheres in the twenty-first century.

Among the diverse trajectories shaping Asian documentary cinema, the evolution of independent nonfiction filmmaking in China stands as one of the most significant and emblematic. China's documentary sector illustrates many of the broader regional dynamics outlined above: the tension between state control and creative autonomy, the embrace of new technologies, the pursuit of transnational circulation, and the negotiation between local specificity and global visibility. Beginning with the New Documentary Movement of the early 1990s and evolving into complex interactions with global markets and digital infrastructures in the 2020s, Chinese documentary practice offers a compelling case study of how political, technological, and aesthetic forces converge in the contemporary Asian nonfiction landscape. The evolution of independent documentary cinema in mainland China provides a striking example of how nonfiction filmmaking can emerge as a mode of resistance against ideological control while simultaneously becoming entangled in new forms of transnational market pressures. Until the late twentieth century, documentary production in China was

closely tied to the state apparatus, functioning primarily as an instrument of "symbolic political discourse," wherein images served to reinforce official narratives through ideological voiceover commentary (Lin 2004). However, the emergence of the New Documentary Movement (NDM) in the early 1990s marked a radical break from this tradition.

Catalysed by private screenings of Western documentaries such as Michelangelo Antonioni's *Chung Kuo – China* (1972) and *Heart of the Dragon* (1984), and enabled by the accessibility of consumer-grade video technology, the pioneers of the NDM—including Wu Wenguang with his seminal *Bumming in Beijing* (1990)—embraced observational realism. Rejecting omniscient voiceover narration, they foregrounded the lived experiences of ordinary citizens, creating "a world apart from the conventional documentaries that viewers had become accustomed to seeing" (Lin 2004). This aesthetic shift signified not merely a stylistic innovation but a political act: it reoriented documentary away from top-down propaganda towards a bottom-up exploration of everyday life marginalised by official narratives. However, the globalisation of Chinese independent documentary practice introduced new dynamics that complicated this early oppositional stance. As Luke Robinson (2024) argues, transnational training initiatives—such as the CNEX-Sundance Institute Documentary Workshop—played a significant role in reshaping the aesthetics and politics of Chinese independent documentaries. These programmes promoted character-driven storytelling, structured according to a universalised narrative logic. As Robinson observes, "storytelling via a character-driven narrative, goal-orientated logic and the dramatic arc of the three-act structure would ensure their films were universally accessible" (Robinson 2024, 3). This narrative conditioning is vividly illustrated in *Plastic China* (Wang Jiuliang, 2016). While the film exposes the environmental and human costs of global plastic waste processing, it centres on the individualised story of Yijie, a young girl living and working in a recycling facility. Rather than pursuing systemic critique, the film emphasises emotional identification and humanitarian empathy. As Robinson notes, "*Plastic China* elevates personal story over structural enquiry, voicing a subject who elicits empathy and emotion over conflict or critical reflection" (Robinson 2024, 6). This strategy reflects a broader shift whereby storytelling "was abstracted from the broader goals of mass movement politics, becoming a highly reproducible vehicle for producing consensus through the endorsement of the personal" (Robinson 2024, 4). The affective responses generated—what Robinson terms "worrying about China"—privilege individual concern and humanitarian sentiment over systemic political mobilisation (Robinson 2024, 1).

A pivotal example of the observational ethos developed within China's New Documentary Movement, and its tensions with political constraints, is Zhou Hao's *The Chinese Mayor* (2015). Following the controversial mayor Geng Yanbo of Datong as he undertakes a sweeping urban reconstruction plan, the film offers a nuanced portrait of governance, modernisation, and the human costs of political ambition. Shot in a verité style without voiceover, *The Chinese Mayor* exemplifies the aesthetics of independent Chinese documentary realism, emphasising access, intimacy, and complexity over ideological narration. Despite its observational subtlety, the film encountered significant barriers to domestic distribution, emblematic of the persistent

constraints on politically sensitive nonfiction storytelling in China. Nevertheless, it achieved significant international acclaim, premiering at the Sundance Film Festival—where it won a Special Jury Award for Unparalleled Access—and later screening at Sheffield DocFest and other major venues. The film’s trajectory illustrates both the power and the precarity of Chinese independent documentary practice: celebrated abroad, restricted at home, yet continuing to shape global understandings of contemporary China. Alongside the flourishing of independent documentary auteurs, China has strategically developed domestic documentary infrastructures aimed at professionalisation, internationalisation, and narrative management. The Guangzhou International Documentary Film Festival (GZDOC) has emerged as China’s largest and most internationally connected nonfiction marketplace. With governmental backing and partnerships with global institutions, GZDOC provides a platform for co-productions, pitching forums, and project incubators, playing a critical role in shaping which narratives circulate internationally under the rubric of Chinese documentary cinema. Similarly, the CNEX Foundation, established in 2006, has become a key driver of independent documentary development. Combining funding, mentorship, and international collaboration, CNEX supports emerging filmmakers while simultaneously orienting them towards aesthetics that meet global expectations. As Robinson’s critique implies, such institutional frameworks can offer essential material support while also conditioning narrative form and political tone. Thus, the evolution of domestic infrastructure in China reflects a dual strategy: facilitating creative production and international visibility while subtly negotiating the boundaries of acceptable political critique.

Bilibili and China Streaming Market Revenue Growth 2018- 2024

Year	Bilibili Revenue (USD Billion)	Bilibili YoY Growth (%)
2018	0.57	67.3
2019	0.93	64.2
2020	1.65	77.0
2021	2.66	61.5
2022	3.0	13.0
2023	3.09	2.9
2024	3.68	19.1

The rapid growth of domestic streaming platforms has further reshaped documentary circulation within China. Platforms such as Tencent Video, iQIYI, Bilibili, and Youku have expanded their nonfiction offerings, commissioning original productions and licensing international documentaries to appeal to increasingly diverse audiences. According to the *iResearch China Online Documentary Report* (2022), the domestic online documentary audience reached over 340 million viewers, with platforms re-

porting year-on-year growth rates of approximately 15% for documentary content consumption. Streaming platforms have introduced new aesthetic and narrative expectations, favouring serialised formats, faster editing rhythms, and hybrid genre approaches designed to attract younger demographics. Notable examples include Tencent Video's *The Great Shokunin* (2016–present), iQIYI's *Born in 2000*, and Bilibili's integration of animation and documentary storytelling for youth audiences. As Lin (2021) observes, "platformization has expanded documentary spectatorship beyond elite cinephile circles, embedding non

fiction content within the everyday digital media consumption habits of Chinese audiences.» While these platforms offer expanded opportunities for visibility and sustainability, they also introduce market pressures that risk depoliticising content and privileging commercially viable narratives over more radical or systemic critique. Nevertheless, the rise of domestic streaming ecosystems represents one of the most significant structural shifts in Chinese documentary practice in the twenty-first century. China's ambitions to expand its leadership in the nonfiction sector have been further underscored by initiatives such as the Maritime Silk Road International Documentary Festival (2024). Positioned within the broader framework of the Belt and Road Initiative, the festival promotes narratives of regional connectivity and cultural exchange, serving both artistic and geopolitical agendas. It exemplifies how documentary infrastructure can be mobilised not only for cultural diplomacy but for the projection of soft power, influencing how China and its neighbouring regions are represented globally. As China's documentary landscape continues to evolve, independent filmmakers find themselves navigating increasingly complex terrains of artistic aspiration, state oversight, international market logics, and geopolitical realignments. The Chinese documentary sphere thus stands as a critical site where questions of realism, resistance, humanitarian discourse, platformisation, and global circulation intersect—and where the future of nonfiction cinema in Asia will, in significant measure, be contested and defined.

The trajectory of documentary cinema in South Korea offers a distinct model within the broader Asian context, shaped by the entanglement of political activism, democratization movements, technological acceleration, and evolving media infrastructures. Unlike China, where independent documentary emerged primarily in opposition to state-controlled media, South Korean nonfiction filmmaking developed in close dialogue with the country's democratization processes, particularly from the 1980s onward. Throughout the authoritarian era of the 1960s to 1980s, media in South Korea was tightly regulated, but the rapid political transformations of the late 1980s catalysed an independent documentary movement intimately linked to grassroots activism. Early independent nonfiction films, such as *Sangge-dong Olympic* (Kim Dong-won, 1988), chronicled the struggles of marginalised communities and played vital roles in social mobilization efforts. As Nam In-young (2004) observes, South Korean documentary cinema emerged from "a desire to change the world," embodying a mode of socially committed filmmaking where the act of documentation itself constituted a form of political intervention. Drawing on Thomas Waugh's (1984) theory of the "committed documentary," South Korean nonfiction during this period prioritised political engagement, collective struggle, and ethical relationships



between filmmakers and subjects, collapsing traditional hierarchies to foster what Nam describes as a "horizontal relationship" between subject and filmmaker. Parallel to these political transformations, South Korea's rapid technological modernisation profoundly shaped the material conditions of documentary production. The widespread availability of affordable digital video cameras in the early 2000s—particularly MiniDV and HDV formats—lowered production barriers and enabled a new generation of observational filmmakers. Works such as *Repatriation* (Kim Dong-won, 2003), shot largely on consumer-grade equipment, demonstrated that technical accessibility could catalyse new modes of political engagement and narrative intimacy. As Jin Dal Yong (2021) notes, "South Korea's compressed digital modernisation produced an early and vibrant convergence of independent cultural production and technological democratisation." By the 2010s, South Korea's leadership in broadband infrastructure and early adoption of online video-on-demand services further reshaped documentary distribution models, with platforms such as Naver TV and Daum TV Pot normalising long-form nonfiction consumption. This digitalisation deepened after 2015 with the near-universal penetration of smartphones, leading to the rise of mobile-first documentary formats, serialized short-form projects, and new aesthetic experiments adapted for smaller screens. As Kim Jin-kyung (2018) observes, "the smartphone became a principal site for documentary spectatorship, shifting viewing habits toward episodic and personalised engagements." By the early 2020s, the rapid spread of smart TVs—adopted by over 60% of Korean households—further encouraged the production of cinematic nonfiction works designed for hybrid viewing experiences, expanding aesthetic expectations toward polished, globalised documentary storytelling.

These infrastructural changes paved the way for a notable expansion in domestic documentary audiences. Historically, nonfiction cinema occupied a marginal position within South Korean theatrical exhibition, rarely exceeding 1% of annual market share. Yet the late 2000s and 2010s witnessed significant breakthroughs: *Old Partner* (2009) amazed with 2.93 million admissions, setting a record for rural, low-budget documentary storytelling. This success was later eclipsed by Jin Mo-young's *My Love, Don't Cross That River* (2014), which attracted over 4.8 million viewers and briefly topped the national box office, surpassing Hollywood blockbusters during its theatrical run. As noted by the Korean Film Council (2014), this success was "exceptional, given the generally less attention a documentary gets in theatres." Subsequent hits such as *Our President* (2017) and *The Birth of Korea* (2024) continued this trajectory, demonstrating that nonfiction narratives rooted in emotional authenticity or historical resonance could achieve wide mainstream appeal. The triumph of *My Love, Don't Cross That River* marked a symbolic turning point for South Korean documentary cinema. Shot over fifteen months in a remote village, Jin Mo-young's tender portrayal of an elderly couple's final days eschewed didacticism in favour of a restrained observational mode, highlighting everyday rituals of care and farewell. As *Variety* commented, *My Love, Don't Cross That River* redefines the box-office potential of nonfiction cinema in South Korea, achieving the kind of emotional resonance that few fiction films attain" (Variety 2014). The film's humanistic approach resonated deeply across generational divides, transforming industry perceptions of nonfiction's

commercial and cultural viability. Jin Mo-young himself reflected, "I wanted to show that documentary can touch audiences as much as fiction" (Jin 2015). Its success inspired a new wave of filmmakers to blend aesthetic sophistication with ethical intimacy, expanding the thematic and formal horizons of Korean nonfiction cinema. Concurrently, the rise of streaming platforms catalysed a second transformation in Korean documentary production and distribution. Netflix's strategic \$2.5 billion investment in Korean content after 2019 included a series of high-profile documentary commissions such as *BLACKPINK: Light Up the Sky* (2020), *The Raincoat Killer* (2021), *Cyber Hell* (2022), and *In the Name of God: A Holy Betrayal* (2023). These works achieved remarkable global reach, with *In the Name of God* logging over 8.1 million hours viewed globally within its first week (TheWrap 2023). As Korean critic Seung-Min Lee (2024) aptly notes, "Netflix's algorithmic distribution models have made Korean documentaries global products, shifting their imagined publics from national to planetary." Topics once considered too local—such as Korea's true-crime history, cyber-activism, and religious cults—have been transformed into internationally resonant narratives, demonstrating how platformisation has reshaped the geography of nonfiction circulation. The parallel development of robust festival infrastructures further underpinned this evolution. DMZ Docs, established in 2009 near the Korean Demilitarised Zone, rapidly became one of Asia's premier documentary festivals, while the EBS International Documentary Festival (EIDF) innovated by combining theatrical exhibitions with nationwide television broadcasts. Jeonju International Film Festival integrated documentaries into its Korea Cinemascope and Korean Competition sections, while the Busan International Film Festival's Wide Angle section elevated nonfiction visibility through the prestigious Mecenat Awards. Landmark international successes—including Park Bong-nam's *Iron Crows* (Best Mid-Length Documentary, IDFA 2009) and Yi Seung-jun's *Planet of Snail* (Best Feature Documentary, IDFA 2011)—secured Korea's emergence on the global documentary stage. The Oscar nomination of *In the Absence* (2020) further cemented Korean nonfiction's place within global cinema discourse, with producer Gary Byung-seok Kam becoming the first Korean documentary producer nominated for an Academy Award.

Yet even as Korean documentaries diversified in theme, style, and distribution channel, they retained a persistent civic function. As Patricia Aufderheide (2024) has observed, contemporary Korean documentary cinema acts as "an active site of remembrance, shaping contested historical narratives where state-sanctioned accounts remain incomplete or silent." Films such as *Two Doors* (2012) and *In the Absence* (2020) embody this memorial imperative, reconstructing public memory around traumatic events such as the Gwangju Uprising and the Sewol Ferry disaster. Festivals such as Jeonju and Busan have explicitly defended documentary's civic role, even in the face of political pressures, as evidenced by the 2014 screening of *The Truth Shall Not Sink with Sewol* at Busan despite governmental attempts at suppression. Thus, even as South Korean documentary cinema embraces globalised aesthetics and new digital infrastructures, it continues to function as a critical medium for political engagement, public memory, and cultural resilience.



**Fig. 2.6.** Still from ‘My Love, Don’t Cross That River’ (dir. Mo-young Jin, 2014).

While South Korean documentary cinema has been shaped by rapid technological acceleration and platform-driven global expansion, the evolution of nonfiction filmmaking in Japan reflects a markedly different rhythm. Japanese documentary has developed through a slower, deeply introspective trajectory, grounded in artisanal production models, auteurist ethics, and enduring engagements with social and philosophical inquiry. The influence of postwar pioneers such as Ogawa Shinsuke and Tsuchimoto Noriaki remains palpable, establishing traditions of collective filmmaking, long-term immersion within communities, and an ethical commitment to co-presence with subjects rather than detached observation. These foundational principles continue to shape contemporary Japanese nonfiction, even as new technological and institutional pressures emerge. Rather than experiencing a compressed modernisation cycle, Japan’s documentary sector has exhibited a measured and gradual adaptation to global media transformations. During the twentieth century, Japan led Asia in broadcast documentary production through public broadcasters like NHK. Yet the transition to digital streaming platforms and transnational co-production models has occurred at a more deliberate pace compared to neighbouring countries. Even into the 2020s, theatrical distribution, curated festival circuits, and public television premieres remain central modes of circulation, sustaining localised forms of spectatorship and civic discourse.

Despite this traditionalism, the period from 2010 to 2025 witnessed significant evolution in Japanese documentary cinema, marked by rising domestic box office success, increased international festival recognition, the growth of professional hubs such as YIDFF and Tokyo Docs, and the cautious expansion into streaming platforms. Domestically, Japanese documentaries increasingly found commercial success, evolving from niche releases into occasional major box-office contenders. Early milestones such as *Death of a Japanese Salesman* (2011), which surpassed ¥100 mil-

lion in gross revenue, were succeeded by the popularity of idol group documentaries like *Documentary of AKB48: The Show Must Go On* (2012) and *Itsunomanika, Koko ni Iru* (2019), each earning several hundred million yen. This trend culminated in the unprecedented success of *ARASHI Anniversary Tour 5×20: Record of Memories* (2021), which grossed over ¥5.06 billion and became the highest-grossing live-action film of the year in Japan, a landmark achievement that underscored the genre's new mainstream appeal (Storm Labels 2021). Internationally, Japanese documentaries also gained significant recognition. Films such as Kyoko Miyake's *Tokyo Idols* (2017) and *We Are X* (2016) secured premieres and awards at Sundance, signalling a growing global appetite for Japanese non-fiction storytelling. Veteran auteur Kazuo Hara's *Sennan Asbestos Disaster* (2017) earned the Mecenat Award at Busan and an Audience Award at Tokyo FILMeX, reinforcing the international prestige of observationally driven Japanese works. Kazuhiro Soda's corpus, including *Peace* (2010) and *Inland Sea* (2018), further strengthened Japan's documentary reputation at IDFA, Berlin, and Locarno. Soda's invitation to serve on the IDFA jury in 2021 reflected the elevated standing of Japanese nonfiction within global festival circuits. Across major forums such as Hot Docs, CPH:DOX, and Visions du Réel, Japanese documentaries increasingly appeared not merely as curiosities, but as substantive competitors.

Institutions such as the Yamagata International Documentary Film Festival (YIDFF) played a pivotal role in this evolution. Founded in 1989 as the first major Asian documentary festival, YIDFF consistently privileged deep social engagement, patient observational practices, and artisanal production values. As Patricia Aufderheide (2012) noted, YIDFF “privileged the documentary as an artistic, ethical, and social project rather than as commercial entertainment,” fostering an environment where politically urgent and formally innovative works could thrive. After the 2011 earthquake and tsunami, YIDFF's programming directly engaged with Tohoku-centered documentaries, curating urgent domestic narratives for a global audience and expanding its internationalist orientation. By 2023, YIDFF had received 1,633 submissions from 109 countries and drew over 23,000 attendees, a modest but steady increase reflecting both local engagement and global reach. Complementing Yamagata's cultural role, Tokyo Docs, launched in 2012, emerged as Japan's primary industry platform for documentary pitching and co-productions. Targeted at facilitating international partnerships, Tokyo Docs successfully connected Japanese documentary makers with global broadcasters and distributors, leading to projects like the omnibus series *Colors of Asia* and fostering co-production relationships with outlets such as ARTE, BBC, and Netflix. This strategic turn toward global collaboration, combined with local funding expansions from the Agency for Cultural Affairs and initiatives like The Asian Pitch consortium, enabled Japanese documentary producers to undertake more ambitious, internationally visible projects during the 2010s and early 2020s.

At the same time, the rise of streaming platforms profoundly reshaped the landscape of documentary distribution in Japan. Netflix Japan's launch in 2015 initiated a gradual but important shift toward global accessibility for Japanese nonfiction storytelling. Series such as *ARASHI's Diary -Voyage-* (2019–2020), *Ride on Time* (2018–), and *Naomi Osaka* (2021) illustrate how Netflix positioned Japanese docu-

mentary content within global popular culture circuits. Domestic platforms, including NHK Plus and Amazon Prime Japan, expanded their documentary catalogues, increasing both production investment and audience accessibility. Amazon's exclusive acquisition of *Record of Memories* for streaming in 2023 further signalled how valuable Japanese documentary content had become in the digital media economy. Nevertheless, the expansion into digital streaming has been asymmetrical. While music and celebrity-focused documentaries achieved considerable success online, more artisanal, politically engaged works—such as *Minamata Mandala* (2020) and *The Inside Circle* (2022)—continued to rely on traditional distribution avenues, including theatrical exhibition and specialised festivals. As Hideaki Fujiki (2022) observes, "the infrastructure of independent documentary distribution in Japan continues to privilege localism, artisanal production, and festival circuits over algorithmic platformisation," a dual structure that both preserves creative freedoms and constrains mass visibility.

The funding environment similarly evolved between 2010 and 2025. Whereas documentary filmmakers in Japan once relied largely on self-financing and limited television commissions, new sources of support emerged from government initiatives (e.g., the Japan Co-Production Program), broadcaster-led grants (e.g., NHK's Asian Pitch), and international festival forums. Tokyo Docs, by opening pathways to pre-sales and co-productions with European and North American partners, further diversified funding channels. Meanwhile, public cultural funds increasingly recognised documentary cinema as a strategic cultural asset, offering grants for projects that advance social discourse or cultural diplomacy. Ultimately, the Japanese documentary field between 2010 and 2025 underwent a dynamic transformation. From modest early commercial success to box-office records, from limited festival presence to global awards and jury appointments, from isolated artisanal communities to internationally networked hubs like YIDFF and Tokyo Docs, Japan's nonfiction cinema expanded its scope, ambition, and reach. While fundamental tensions remain—between slow cinema traditions and platform-driven global visibility—the documentary sector's evolution over this period demonstrates a remarkable resilience and adaptability. Japanese documentary cinema today stands not only as a crucial pillar of national cultural expression but as an increasingly recognised and vital contributor to the global nonfiction landscape.

While the preceding analysis has focused primarily on East Asian contexts, it is crucial to recognise that the regional dynamics shaping contemporary documentary production extend into Central Asia, including Kazakhstan and its neighbouring states. Geographically proximate to China, South Korea, and Japan, and increasingly integrated into Asian media and festival networks, Central Asian documentary filmmaking has been influenced both by historical Soviet legacies and by emerging Asian production models. The growth of co-production forums, festival alliances, and streaming initiatives across Asia offers important new avenues for documentary makers from Kazakhstan and the broader region to secure funding, reach audiences, and engage with global discourses.

Historically, the primary route for Central Asian documentary filmmakers seeking international collaboration and distribution was oriented toward Europe. This

pattern reflected both institutional legacies of the Soviet era and the structural consequence of Asia's comparative seclusion from transnational nonfiction networks during much of the twentieth century. European co-production markets, television broadcasters, and major festivals provided the principal platforms through which Central Asian documentaries could achieve visibility and support. However, in recent years, as Asia's documentary infrastructures have expanded—with the proliferation of major co-production forums, the internationalisation of key festivals, and the gradual opening of cultural markets—a new opportunity space has emerged for Central Asian filmmakers to realign their transnational engagements toward Asia. This shift carries particular resonance given the shared cultural mentalities, historical experiences, and storytelling traditions that link Central Asia with East and South Asian contexts. Values rooted in collectivism, respect for oral histories, and community-centered narratives create natural affinities that can support meaningful artistic collaborations and regional co-productions. Recent developments illustrate this growing integration: Kazakh documentary filmmakers such as Zhannara Kurmasheva and Banu Ramazanova have participated actively in major Asian industry platforms, including the DMZ Docs Co-Production Market and Tokyo Docs, while Alina Mustafina's selection into the Wide Angle competition at the Busan International Film Festival signals increasing recognition of Central Asian nonfiction narratives within major Asian cinematic spaces. These engagements underscore how regional trends—such as the expansion of Asian documentary festivals, the rise of cross-border co-production models, and the cautious platformisation of nonfiction content—present both opportunities and new forms of precarity for Central Asian filmmakers. While structural challenges such as limited domestic funding, fragmented distribution infrastructures, and political sensitivities remain acute, the evolving ecosystems of South Korea, China, and Japan offer critical frameworks for understanding potential trajectories, alliances, and challenges facing Kazakhstan's documentary sector. As Asian documentary platforms continue to globalise, Kazakhstan and Central Asia are positioned not merely to participate, but to contribute to shaping a more interconnected and diversified nonfiction landscape across the region.

#### **2.4. Global Crossroads: Hybridization of Production Practices and the Fragmentation of Distribution Models**

The preceding sections have illustrated the diverse regional trajectories through which documentary production and distribution have evolved between 2010 and 2025. Yet these transformations are not confined within national or continental boundaries. Rather, they are symptomatic of deeper, global structural shifts that have reconfigured the possibilities, practices, and vulnerabilities of contemporary nonfiction cinema. At the intersection of technological innovation, market expansion, and shifting geopolitical dynamics, documentary filmmakers today operate within an increasingly hybridised production landscape, where cross-border co-productions, transnational funding ecosystems, and multi-platform release strategies have become normative rather than exceptional. Simultaneously, the distribution architectures that once structured the global circulation of documentaries—festivals, broadcasters, the-

atrical circuits—have become increasingly fragmented, disrupted by the rise of streaming platforms, algorithmic content curation, and new forms of online exhibition.

The global expansion of documentary filmmaking has been accompanied not merely by an increase in production volumes or financing sources but by a profound hybridisation of production practices and narrative forms. As traditional national production systems became increasingly porous, filmmakers embraced transnational co-production models, blending financing from public institutions, private investors, international broadcasters, and digital platforms. In many cases, a single documentary project might now involve a European cultural fund, an Asian broadcaster, a North American streamer, and a multinational festival-based pitching forum, each imposing distinct expectations regarding content, form, and marketability. As Aida Vallejo and Ezra Winton (2020) argue, “the documentary field has become a site of negotiated hybridity, where aesthetic ambitions, institutional priorities, and global market forces intersect.”

This structural hybridity has been paralleled by, and indeed catalysed, a transformation at the level of narrative form. Documentary filmmakers increasingly experiment with hybrid modes that collapse the traditional binaries between fiction and nonfiction, observation and intervention, intimacy and spectacle. Techniques such as staged reenactments, dramatized sequences, interactive storytelling, and essayistic voiceovers have become not only more prevalent but often institutionally incentivised by co-production markets and festival programmers seeking formally innovative works. As Patricia Aufderheide (2015) observes, “the contemporary documentary operates in a space where the aesthetic boundaries between reporting, memory work, and artistic performance are actively blurred.”

Global hubs such as CPH:DOX in Copenhagen, IDFA’s DocLab in Amsterdam, and Sundance’s New Frontier initiative have championed projects that defy classical documentary conventions, fostering works that blend documentary footage with speculative fiction (*All Light, Everywhere*, 2021), employ poetic essayistic structures (*Faya Dayi*, 2021), or invite participatory digital engagement (*Notes on Blindness: Into Darkness*, 2016). As a result, documentary production today is increasingly characterised by narrative hybridity as much as by financial and institutional hybridity.

Moreover, the demands of transnational co-production have exerted a subtle influence on storytelling strategies. Projects seeking to appeal to diverse funders and audiences often adopt multilayered narratives, weaving local specificities into globally resonant themes, or structuring stories around universal motifs such as resilience, displacement, ecological crisis, or resistance. This thematic globalisation, while expanding access and dialogue, risks flattening cultural complexity in favour of internationally palatable frameworks, a tension that contemporary filmmakers must navigate carefully.

If production practices have hybridised, distribution systems have undergone a parallel but distinct transformation: fragmentation. The traditional linear pathways—cinema release, festival circulation, television broadcast—have been destabilised, replaced by a proliferation of parallel and often competing distribution channels. The rise of global streaming platforms, niche video-on-demand services, hybrid festival



models, and direct-to-consumer strategies has created a decentralised distribution ecology in which visibility, accessibility, and financial sustainability are no longer guaranteed but must be actively negotiated.

Major streaming platforms such as Netflix, Amazon Prime, and HBO Max have played an ambivalent role in this new landscape. On the one hand, they have vastly expanded potential audiences for documentaries, allowing geographically localised or socially marginalised stories to circulate globally. As Brett Story (2020) notes, “streaming platforms have fundamentally reshaped the documentary economy, offering distribution reach at a scale unimaginable within traditional theatrical or broadcast models.” Yet access to these platforms is uneven and heavily curated, privileging projects with high production values, universalised narratives, or festival pedigree, while sidelining formally experimental, politically radical, or regionally specific works. As Thomas Elsaesser (2016) presciently argued, “platformisation does not democratise distribution; it reorganises scarcity through different, less visible mechanisms.”

Parallel to this, niche streaming services such as DAFilms (DocAlliance), OVID.tv, and regional platforms like VoDA in Korea have emerged as crucial spaces for experimental, politically engaged, or culturally specific documentaries that may not fit the aesthetic and commercial logics of global giants. Hybrid festival models, accelerated by the Covid-19 pandemic, have also transformed the festival landscape. Leading events such as CPH:DOX, IDFA, and Hot Docs now operate hybrid editions, combining in-person screenings with online accessibility, thereby democratising access for remote audiences while simultaneously complicating traditional premiere hierarchies and notions of exclusivity.

For filmmakers, this fragmented distribution environment demands increasingly strategic navigation across a mosaic of possibilities: boutique theatrical releases, festival circuits, platform licensing, educational distribution, and direct-to-consumer models. Each pathway offers different trade-offs between visibility, revenue potential, audience engagement, and artistic autonomy. For audiences, the documentary experience has likewise been decentered, mediated by subscription algorithms, niche curation, and social media virality rather than traditional national broadcasters or cinema chains.

Thus, the global documentary landscape in the mid-2020s is characterised by both unprecedented opportunity and profound precarity. The hybridisation of production practices has enabled new aesthetic experiments and expanded transnational collaborations, while the fragmentation of distribution systems has diversified audience pathways but exacerbated inequalities in visibility and sustainability. As the field continues to evolve, documentary filmmakers must increasingly act as both storytellers and navigators of a complex, shifting, and often unstable global media terrain.

### **Conclusion for Chapter II**

The preceding analysis has traced the evolving architectures of documentary production and distribution across North America, Europe, Asia, and emerging markets between 2010 and 2025. What emerges from this comparative mapping is not a simple story of technological progress or market expansion, but a more complex, uneven, and often contradictory reconfiguration of nonfiction cinema’s global ecosys-



tem. Across diverse regions, documentary filmmakers have embraced transnational co-production models, hybridised narrative forms, and adapted to fragmented distribution environments, expanding the aesthetic, political, and cultural horizons of non-fiction storytelling.

At the heart of these transformations lies a paradox. Technological innovations—particularly the proliferation of digital tools, streaming platforms, and hybrid exhibition models—have created unprecedented opportunities for documentary circulation, visibility, and creative experimentation. Simultaneously, these same forces have destabilised traditional infrastructures of support, rendering the field more precarious, competitive, and unevenly accessible. Filmmakers now operate within increasingly hybridised production systems, where financial, institutional, and narrative negotiations cross national and disciplinary boundaries. They also navigate a fragmented distribution landscape in which access to audiences, revenues, and cultural legitimacy must be actively constructed rather than assumed.

Institutional architectures—public funding mechanisms, transnational co-production treaties, regional festival networks—continue to play a vital role in sustaining documentary production, particularly for politically urgent and artistically ambitious works. Yet these structures themselves are being reshaped under the pressures of globalisation, algorithmic distribution, and shifting audience behaviours. The tension between local specificity and global marketability, between artistic integrity and platform logics, between civic engagement and entertainment imperatives, has become the defining condition of contemporary nonfiction cinema.

Thus, the global documentary field in the mid-2020s is characterised by dynamic hybridity: hybridisation of production practices, hybridisation of aesthetic forms, and hybridisation of distribution systems. It is simultaneously a site of expanded possibilities and heightened vulnerabilities. The next chapter builds upon this foundation, moving from structural transformations toward closer examination of how these global forces manifest within specific national contexts, institutional ecosystems, and creative practices. In doing so, it seeks to illuminate not only the opportunities but also the enduring frictions and resistances that continue to shape the evolving landscape of documentary cinema in the digital age.

### **3. The Landscape of Documentary Cinema in Kazakhstan: Historical Trajectories, Structural Developments, Contemporary Narratives, and Emerging Challenges**

#### **3.1. From Soviet Legacy to National Narratives: A Historical Overview of Kazakh Documentary Cinema**

Soviet documentary film has long fascinated international scholars, not merely due to its emergence within a closed ideological system but because it exemplified the paradox of state-sanctioned innovation. While operating under strict political constraints, filmmakers engaged in bold formal and epistemological experimentation—crafting a visual language that sought not only to represent reality but to actively intervene in its perception and organisation. Michel Foucault (1977) would argue that cinema in this context functioned as a disciplinary technology of the gaze, simultaneously serving as a tool for surveillance and ideological instruction. The inception of Soviet documentary cinema can be traced back to the revolutionary fervour of the 1920s, when the Bolsheviks recognised the strategic potential of cinema as an instrument of mass education and ideological consolidation. As Vladimir Lenin famously asserted, "Of all the arts, for us the cinema is the most important" (quoted in Taylor 1996). Early Soviet documentarians such as Dziga Vertov, Esfir Shub, and Aleksandr Medvedkin pioneered an avant-garde approach that sought to mobilise cinema as a tool for shaping proletarian consciousness. Vertov's *Kino-Eye* (1924) and Shub's *The Fall of the Romanov Dynasty* (1927) exemplified the ambition to transcend theatricality and fictional illusion in favour of a cinema of direct engagement with everyday reality. As scholars like Annette Michelson (1984) and Yuri Tsivian (1994) argue, these early works conceptualised documentary not as passive representation but as an active agent in constructing a new socialist reality. The purpose of documentary cinema for the Bolsheviks extended beyond mere depiction; it was a means of forging a new social order. Documentary film was intended to instruct, mobilise, and modernise a largely illiterate and disparate population, aligning it with the goals of the socialist state. In this regard, documentary functioned as a form of ideological infrastructure, paralleling initiatives in literacy campaigns, industrialisation, and collectivisation. As Elizabeth Papazian (2009) observes, Soviet documentary filmmakers embraced the tension between realism and ideological aspiration, producing works that oscillated between empirical observation and utopian projection.

This experimental spirit extended beyond the metropolitan centre of Moscow into the republics of the USSR, including Kazakhstan. Documentary filmmaking in these republics was inherently dualistic: it functioned both as a medium for ideological conformity and as a vibrant space for cultural negotiation. Republics were compelled to communicate socialist values through cinema, yet filmmakers consistently infused their works with distinct local traditions, languages, and iconographies. This tension between centralised standardisation and regional particularism produced hybrid cinematic forms. Employing Homi Bhabha's (1994) concept, one can see these regional documentaries as occupying a 'third space'—an intermediary cultural zone

where imposed narratives are creatively rearticulated, allowing local identities to emerge within sanctioned ideological frames. The expansion of Soviet documentary practices into the republics, including Kazakhstan, was facilitated through the establishment of national studios in the 1930s and 1940s. The Soviet leadership strategically promoted the development of local film industries to reinforce socialist internationalism and showcase the cultural diversity of the Union's "family of nations." Institutions such as Kazakhfilm, founded as a documentary studio in 1934, exemplified this policy. These studios were tasked with producing films that celebrated regional cultures while embedding them within the overarching Soviet ideological framework. As Oksana Sarkisova (2007) notes, the visual representation of national identities served both to acknowledge cultural specificity and to subsume it within the larger narrative of socialist unity. International scholars such as Emma Widdis (2003), David Gillespie (2003), Jeremy Hicks (2007), and Oksana Sarkisova (2007) have thoroughly examined these dynamics. Widdis, in *Visions of a New Land*, illustrates how Soviet filmmakers deployed landscapes symbolically, transforming geographic space into ideological narratives. Hicks challenges traditional interpretations of Soviet documentary in *Dziga Vertov: Defining Documentary Film*, asserting the complexity and innovative potential beyond mere propaganda. Sarkisova, in *Screening Soviet Nationalities*, analyses cinematic representations of national identities across Soviet republics, notably in Central Asia, highlighting cinema's role in nation-building processes within socialist frameworks. The emergence of national film studios across the Soviet republics was not merely a decentralisation of production but a carefully managed cultural project aimed at both celebrating and regulating diversity. This dynamic enabled the proliferation of documentary practices across the republics, fostering new cinematic traditions while maintaining centralised ideological control. In Kazakhstan, early documentary production combined ethnographic imagery with socialist modernisation themes, creating hybrid forms that both documented and reimagined local realities. The institutional support provided by Moscow, combined with the training of regional filmmakers at central Soviet film schools such as VGIK, ensured a level of professionalisation and integration into the broader Soviet cinematic project.

Kazakh documentary cinema, from its inception, was intricately tied to broader Soviet developments. Importantly, the Soviet documentary system extended beyond aesthetic innovations—it was underpinned by a sophisticated and deeply integrated structure of production, distribution, and exhibition. Despite its propagandistic functions and censorship mechanisms, the Soviet model maintained an efficient infrastructure, ensuring that documentary films were regularly produced, televised, theatrically distributed, and archived across all sixteen Soviet republics. A critical pillar of this infrastructure was the establishment of specialised distribution channels that allowed documentary cinema to achieve mass penetration. Sovexportfilm managed the international distribution of Soviet documentaries, promoting them abroad as cultural diplomacy tools, while domestically, the Central Television's Main Editorial Office for Film Programmes ensured that non-fiction films reached a wide television audience. Television, especially after the 1950s, became a primary platform for the dissemination of documentary content, integrating non-fiction cinema into everyday Soviet life. In parallel, Soyuzkinoprokat and its republican branches orchestrated the

theatrical circulation of documentaries, frequently pairing them with feature films in "kinoprogrammes" or presenting them as standalone thematic compilations in local cinemas. Mobile film units (kinopoezda and kinoperedvizhki) played a vital role in rural distribution, bringing documentaries to remote villages and collective farms, often projecting films on improvised screens under open skies. Moreover, major Soviet festivals, such as the All-Union Documentary Film Festival held in Riga and later in other republics, functioned as important nodes for curating and promoting documentary films, ensuring their circulation across diverse audiences. Archival institutions such as Gosfilmofond and the Central Archive of Film and Photo Documents systematically preserved and recirculated key documentaries, reinforcing their role as historical and ideological artefacts accessible to subsequent generations. This robust and multilayered network established a synchronised audiovisual environment throughout the USSR, effectively creating a shared imaginary and reinforcing unity through visual and ideological cohesion. The mass accessibility of documentary cinema contributed to its perception as a tool of mass education, an essential medium through which Soviet citizens encountered official narratives about history, science, industry, ethnicity, and international solidarity. Documentary film thus occupied a unique position at the intersection of art, pedagogy, and governance.

One could even argue that a certain nostalgic admiration persists for this coherence, especially when contrasted with the fragmented contemporary media landscapes. Soviet cinema thus became instrumental in fostering interethnic solidarity and socialist brotherhood, significantly shaping the aesthetic, narrative, and institutional frameworks of subsequent Kazakh national documentary traditions. Aligning with Jacques Rancière's (2004) analysis, the visual norms of Socialist Realism were part of a broader 'distribution of the sensible'—a politically charged aesthetic regime that structured what was visible, sayable, and imaginable. Soviet documentary cinema did not merely reflect ideology but actively shaped it, embedding state narratives within visual forms. Thus, structure, symbolism, and spatial logic operated as potent instruments of political communication, deeply influencing audiences' perceptions and interpretations of reality. Ultimately, the historical trajectory of Kazakh documentary cinema underscores a complex interplay between ideological constraints and creative agency. Through negotiating these tensions, Kazakh filmmakers contributed significantly to Soviet cinematic discourse, laying a critical foundation for understanding documentary as a site of both ideological control and cultural expression.

Kazakh documentary cinema, from its inception, was intricately tied to broader Soviet developments. Importantly, the Soviet documentary system extended beyond aesthetic innovations—it was underpinned by a sophisticated structure of production and distribution. Despite its propagandistic functions and censorship mechanisms, the Soviet model maintained an efficient infrastructure, ensuring documentary films were regularly produced, televised, and theatrically distributed across the entire USSR. Institutions like Sovexportfilm oversaw international distribution, while domestically, the Central Television's Main Editorial Office for Film Programmes ensured regular broadcast coverage. Soyuzkinoprokat managed theatrical circulation, and archival bodies such as Gosfilmofond and the Central Archive of Film and Photo Documents systematically preserved these films as historical and ideological artefacts. want to

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Following Kazakhstan's independence in 1991, the state embarked on a strategic reorganisation of its media industries, initiating a structural separation between film and television and assigning each to distinct governmental bodies. This division produced two parallel ecosystems with differentiated funding mechanisms, regulatory frameworks, and creative agendas, shaping the trajectory of nonfiction cinema in distinct ways. As this dissertation focuses specifically on the film sector, two institutions emerge as central to understanding the evolution of Kazakh documentary production in the post-Soviet era: the "Shaken Aimanov Kazakhfilm" National Film Studio and the State Center for Support of National Cinema.

The "Shaken Aimanov Kazakhfilm" National Film Studio (hereafter Kazakhfilm), originally founded in 1934 and renamed in honour of the celebrated director Shaken Aimanov in 1960, remains the most significant legacy institution in Kazakh cinema. In 2023, it officially attained the designation of a national studio, reaffirming its symbolic and operational centrality within the country's cultural policy landscape. As a vertically integrated entity, Kazakhfilm offers in-house production facilities, archival resources, and technical infrastructure, serving as both an industrial hub and a cultural repository for national audiovisual heritage. Documentary films produced at Kazakhfilm follow a distinct set of institutional procedures and production rules. Projects must be formally included in the studio's annual thematic plan, which is subject to approval by the Ministry of culture and sport of the Republic of Kazakhstan. These projects typically undergo rigorous administrative vetting at multiple stages of development, production, and release. Perhaps most critically, films produced under the state commissioning system receive full public funding but are also subject to

ideological expectations and thematic prescriptions set by governmental authorities. While this model provides crucial economic security for filmmakers—guaranteeing production budgets and distribution support—it simultaneously imposes narrative constraints, often leading to more prescriptive, celebratory, or cautious artistic visions compared to the freer experimentation observed within independently financed works. Understanding the mechanisms and dynamics of state-supported documentary production thus requires an examination not only of artistic outcomes but also of institutional inputs: funding models, planning frameworks, and commissioning logics. To this end, the following section offers a longitudinal production analysis of documentary filmmaking at Kazakhfilm across three key decades, examining trends in volume, thematic orientation, and economic structuring. Particular attention is paid to how changes in cultural policy, state priorities, and institutional reform have influenced the evolution of nonfiction storytelling.

The data sets informing this analysis are organized across three chronological appendices:

- **Appendix A:** Produced documentary films by Kazakhfilm, 1990–2019;

This longitudinal approach seeks to illuminate the broader structural patterns underlying the Kazakh documentary sector's development from the late Soviet collapse to the early twenty-first century. The analysis draws primarily upon internal production records, statistical tables, and year-end reports housed in the Kazakhfilm archives. Primary data include official listings of produced films, annual budgetary allocations for documentary production, and institutional summaries of sectoral output.

Employing comparative and statistical methods, the study traces both contraction phases—marked by budgetary austerity and production declines—and periods of recovery, expansion, and recalibration. Where relevant, basic data visualisation techniques are used to map fluctuations in production volume and funding intensity. Particular emphasis is placed on the 1990s as a period of acute systemic crisis and adaptation, a moment when documentary filmmakers were compelled to negotiate the collapse of Soviet institutional infrastructures while seeking to rearticulate their role within a newly sovereign, yet economically unstable, Kazakh national cinema.

Through this empirical foundation, the study situates Kazakhfilm's documentary production not as a static cultural enterprise but as a historically contingent field—one shaped by the intersections of political transformation, economic volatility, and evolving models of cultural governance. As Chapter 2 has explored in the broader global context, the fate of nonfiction filmmaking is rarely determined by creative forces alone; rather, it is inextricably entwined with institutional architectures, funding ecologies, and ideological currents. The case of Kazakhfilm provides a particularly vivid instance of how these forces interact under conditions of post-socialist transition, offering insights into the fragility and resilience of state-supported documentary cinema at the periphery of global production circuits.

## **Kazakhfilm**

A comprehensive understanding of documentary film production and distribution is inconceivable without a corresponding grasp of its thematic content and narrative specificity. As is often the case with works of fiction—particularly within the paradigm of the studio-based model, where space is occasionally afforded to auteurial intonation—the subject frequently dictates the form, and the form, in turn, determines the mode of production. The final cinematic product subsequently offers a range of strategies for distributional engagement. Admittedly, this is a formula approximating an ideal, and within the cinematic realities of Kazakhstan it has only occasionally approached concrete realisation. Beginning from the rigid parameters of the Soviet command-economy production system, the developmental trajectory of Kazakhstan's contemporary studio-based documentary cinema has encountered immense difficulties in achieving competitiveness—both at the level of production and distribution—not only with more developed global film industries, but even with emergent independent movements within Kazakhstan itself. The most illustrative example of this is the evolution, across both Soviet and post-Soviet periods, of the Kazakhfilm JSC named after Shaken Aimanov, which continues to function as the country's principal production infrastructure for documentary filmmaking. A close examination of the studio's functioning in the sphere of nonfiction cinema reveals that, under the Soviet model of cinematic administration, there occurred, on the one hand, a gradual evolution of cinematic language, the acquisition of a distinctive national aesthetic, and the expansion of genre diversity; yet, on the other hand, stagnation became entrenched in matters of distribution. This was largely due to the structural limitations of the system, which allowed for no alternative modes of dissemination beyond those formats already institutionally entrenched. These deep-seated tendencies proved to be major stumbling blocks in the development of documentary production in the post-independence era. Structural transformation proceeded only with extreme inertia, and the studio system was required to pursue a dual agenda: it had to continue fostering an environment for original and regionally rooted authorship, while also adapting incrementally to capitalist modes of film production—modes increasingly dominated by independent filmmakers and studios. As demonstrated by the analysis undertaken in the present study, Kazakhfilm has, to this day, only partially overcome these limitations. To trace the root causes of current tendencies in this area of inquiry, it is necessary to construct a chronologically calibrated model that reflects both the dynamic and stagnant phases in the evolution of Kazakhstan's national documentary sector within the studio framework. In our view, such a model can today be constructed by identifying and connecting eight key inflection points, each typically spanning approximately one-and-a-half to two decades.

The 1920s and 1930s may be defined as the “Instrumental Period” in the evolution of Kazakh documentary cinema—a phase during which the propagandistic function of the film decisively outweighed its artistic ambition. Thematic direction was determined through top-down state regulation, which steered filmmakers toward representing selected spheres of social life and labour. Narrative form, in turn, was rigidly constrained by the demands of ideological commissioning. Such conditions appear entirely logical within the context of a nascent national cinema emerging under the strictures of a totalitarian regime. As film critic Bekzat Nogurbek aptly re-

marked, “the recognition of the necessity of the documentary genre is something that, sooner or later, all state systems have arrived at” (Nogerbek 397). Analysing the scarce corpus of documentary films produced during this period by “Vostokkino,” the precursor to Kazakhfilm, scholar A. Lumpova concludes that these early works were more journalistic than cinematic in character. “A long road still lay ahead toward discovering cinema’s expressive capacities,” she writes, “and this journey had to begin with the fundamental mastery of film’s very nature as a medium” (Lumpova 27). Indeed, in films such as *The Five-Year Plan in Kazakhstan* (1925), *Life and Customs in Kazakhstan* (dir. V. Karin, 1927), *Golden Shores* (dir. A. Lemberg, 1930), and *Khan-Tengri* (dir. V. Stradin, 1936), a dominant journalistic style is plainly evident. The principal mode here was the essayistic reportage. These works were largely constructed through direct visual recording and frequently recycled archival footage; in some cases, entire sequences migrated from one film to another. Editing was rigidly chronological, stylistic exploration was entirely absent, and camerawork served an exclusively utilitarian function. This approach was rooted in the logic of mass enlightenment via what Lenin had famously deemed “the most important of the arts.” To depict a single collective farm, a mining operation, or the anniversary of the October Revolution required neither aesthetic innovation in cinematic language nor complex strategies of distribution. Television had yet to emerge as a viable medium and remained unavailable in the peripheries of the USSR; thus, all cinematic output reached its audience via a sparse and underdeveloped network of film exhibition halls. For Soviet viewers of the era, the sheer experience of cinema itself was novel and pleasurable enough that the usual market-driven principle of “demand creates supply” remained irrelevant.

An instructive exception to the stream of journalistic documentary sketches typical of the 1920s is *Turksib* (1929), directed by Viktor Turin. While formally resembling a propagandistic industrial portrait in line with state directives, *Turksib* distinguished itself through its ambitious scope, cinematic sophistication, and implicit authorial imprint. Its compositional dynamism—rich with expansive landscapes, montage sequences, and temporal variation—hinted at an awareness of Soviet avant-garde tendencies, subtly diverging from the rigid stylistic conventions of early Kazakh documentary form. De jure, *Turksib* functioned as yet another didactic instrument of Soviet propaganda. De facto, however, the film elevated ideological discourse to an unprecedented level of cinematic artistry, momentarily suspending the viewer’s awareness of reality’s ideological mediation. As Peter Rollberg has argued, the film is structured through “a logical chain of arguments, marked by a rational yet conceptual cinematic strategy” (Rollberg 7). Such an approach, while operating within the permissible boundaries of state narrative, nonetheless advanced the narrative architecture of nonfiction film in the Kazakh-Soviet context. Analysts concur that *Turksib* introduced notable formal advances, including parallel montage, associative juxtaposition, and a calibrated use of tempo-rhythm, which collectively marked a significant narrative evolution. Had a work of similar aesthetic and structural ambition emerged in France or the United States, it might have found a successful theatrical trajectory—one capable of catalysing an alternative path for the development of distribution in documentary cinema. Yet the historical trajectory of Soviet and Kazakh film indus-



tries foreclosed such possibilities. The promise glimpsed in *Turksib* would remain largely unrealised in the ensuing decades.

The 1940s and 1950s can be productively conceptualised as the “Agitprop Period,” in which the dominance of ideological messaging eclipsed any concern with visual or narrative nuance. The documentary idiom of this era increasingly absorbed the expressive devices of narrative fiction—then regarded as a more emotionally efficacious vehicle for mass mobilisation. The documentary narrative assumed the role of affective manipulator, its aim less to represent reality than to shape national sentiment through performative allegory. A paradigmatic instance of this period is Dziga Vertov’s *To You, Front!* (*Tebe, front!*, 1942), a film whose staging, composition, and dramatic tone often verge on fiction. As Gulnara Abikeyeva notes, “It is difficult to call this film a documentary. It is more properly described as a staged production with documentary elements, in the spirit of Vertov’s earlier work. If *Three Songs About Lenin* sang Lenin’s praises through archival footage and montage, and *The Sixth Part of the World* did so for the Soviet Union, then *To You, Front!* is a hymn to Kazakhstan. Through the figure of Saule, who smelts lead, the entire republic is portrayed as doing everything possible to supply the front” (Abikeyeva 235). Here, the personal becomes emblematic, and the visualisation of labour transforms into an operatic performance of national solidarity. This cinematic strategy, while technically embedded in the documentary mode, elides factual complexity in favour of emotionally charged symbolism, foregrounding the role of narrative cinema’s affective economy in the construction of wartime documentary. As such, the agitational documentary of this period cannot be disentangled from the ideological apparatus that shaped its production, distribution, and reception. One can assert that the decisive turn of Kazakh documentary cinema toward a news-based narrative structure was catalysed by the onset of the Great Patriotic War. The wartime evacuation of major Soviet studios such as Mosfilm and Lenfilm to Alma-Ata, the establishment of the Central United Film Studio (TsOKS), and the subsequent mobilisation of the entire Soviet film apparatus for the needs of the front and rear redefined the structural logic of nonfiction filmmaking in the Kazakh SSR. During this period, the dominant genre became the newsreel: fast, frequent, and ideologically responsive. Television began to emerge as a key artery of distribution, shaping not only the aesthetic but also the technical parameters of documentary production.

Newsreels such as *Soviet Kazakhstan* conformed readily to this paradigm. On one hand, they catalysed the professional development of cinematographers, editors, and field directors, refining the industrial skill base for local documentary crews. On the other hand, this shift narrowed the representational gaze: reality was increasingly filtered through the prism of official significance, and many dimensions of lived experience were rendered invisible—deemed either politically trivial or narratively inconvenient. As film historian Kairat Siranov observes, quoting the recollections of documentarian G. N. Novozhilov, “Looking back now, one realises how much we failed to capture. We filmed everything new and emerging, but ignored that which was vanishing. There was much of interest that no longer can be recreated by any means” (Siranov 49). Yet this period of narrowed vision also laid the groundwork for the emergence of a national perspective within documentary cinema. The technical

foundation laid by newsreel production—particularly its emphasis on mobility, speed, and immediacy—combined with earlier formal innovations by directors such as Turin and Vertov, who had engaged national subjects through unorthodox narrative structures, created fertile conditions for the emergence of indigenous authorship. Central among these early voices was Oraz Abishev, widely regarded as a foundational figure in Kazakh nonfiction cinema. A graduate of VGIK and an early practitioner at both Lenfilm and TsOKS, Abishev honed his directorial and editorial sensibility within the format of the newsreel. Even in early issues of *Soviet Kazakhstan*, one can detect his attempt to move beyond the depiction of humans as mere functions of state labour. He strove instead to articulate individuality—to capture personality rather than utility. With the release of his early standalone films *Our Kolkhoz Kyzyl-Tu* (1946), *Our Report* (1947), and *Dina* (1947), it became evident that Kazakhstan had produced its first fully-fledged national documentarian—one whose gaze emerged not from without, but from within the culture he filmed. In her foundational monograph, *Oraz Abishev: A Life in Frames*, Nazira Rakhmankyzy articulates with clarity the director’s distinctive authorial paradigm: “A realistic portrayal of atmosphere is characteristic of all his films... National traditions and customs harmonise with the visuals, expanding their aesthetic horizon. Regardless of the topic, the human being remains central—his unique fate, his individuality. The director does not separate the destiny of the protagonist from the destiny of the nation. For Abishev, it is the people—their creativity and intellect—that are the true agents of history” (Rakhmankyzy 37).

Thus, within a framework still shaped by Soviet ideological imperatives, Abishev introduced an alternative documentary ethic—one grounded in personhood, cultural specificity, and historical rootedness. His films marked the beginning of a gradual decolonisation of documentary narrative in Kazakhstan, shifting the lens of non-fiction filmmaking toward internal perspective and national voice. Thus, on the eve of the next developmental stage of national studio-based documentary filmmaking, the cinematic landscape of Kazakhstan acquired a pivotal figure—an author who fundamentally altered the approach to narrative construction, defining new vectors of thematic focus and drawing attention to numerous subjects and personalities that undoubtedly warranted deeper contemplation and cinematic interpretation.

The ensuing 1960s and 1970s may justifiably be designated as the “Period of Poetics,” a phase reflecting broader shifts in Soviet cinema during the cultural “Thaw.” This era witnessed the global emergence of “New Waves,” the reverberations of which catalysed an unprecedented flourishing of auteur cinema across the USSR. Documentary cinema was no exception: modes of representation and interpretation diversified, deeper national themes were explored, and narratives grew increasingly enriched by authorial perspective and subjectivity. As film scholar Kulsara Aynagulova rightly noted, “the turn from the 1950s into the 1960s in Soviet documentary art was marked by a pivot towards the depiction of the individual and their interior world” (Aynagulova 208). By this time, Kazakhfilm had already formed a solid core of key filmmakers, including Oraz Abishev, E. Fayk, M. Sagimbaev, I. Tynyshpaev, and A. Kolesnikov. They would later be joined by a new generation of directors—Y. Piskunov, M. Smagulov, M. Ibraev, B. Kadybekov—already nurtured within a distinctly national narrative ethos. These authors increasingly ventured into bold

thematic interpretations, incorporating into the filmic language authorial decisions that, while perhaps not new by global standards, were artistically justified and resonant within the local cinematic context. For instance, in the film *Ilyas Zhansugurov*, director E. Fayk sought to dismantle the familiar biographical schema of “born–lived–died.” The film breaks its linear structure with piercing recollections from those close to the poet, visual illustrations of his verse, and rare chronicle footage in which he appears. Another example, T. Duisenbaev’s *Three Colours of the Desert*, foregrounds the thematic leitmotif of the indivisible unity between human life and the natural world. Traces of narrative transformation can also be discerned in many other works from this period: A. Mashanov’s *Touching Eternity* (*Prikosnovenie k vechnosti*) constitutes a pure formal experiment in tempo-rhythm; Y. Piskunov’s *Bulat and Gulya* attempts to construct a dialectic between the live subject and the detached voice-over; A. Suleyeva’s *Kamsat* explores the poetics of the everyday through lyrical observation.

Building on the research of renowned Kazakh film scholar B. Nogerbek, it is important to note that the earliest national documentary films were created by Oraz Abishev, who is widely recognised as the founding figure of Kazakh non-fiction cinema. Abishev laid the foundational traditions of national documentary practice, and his films marked the first attempts to develop a distinct cinematic language within the broader Soviet framework. It is also worth emphasising that Abishev created vivid portrait films of key figures in Kazakh culture, including Dina Nurpeisova, Kazhymukan Munaitpasov, and Mukan Tulebaev. A defining feature of these films lies in the on-screen presence of the subjects themselves, adding both historical and emotional weight. His artistic pinnacle, however, is arguably *The Secret of the Open Palm* (1968), where Abishev moves beyond biographical tribute to a philosophical reflection on time and eternity. By anchoring the narrative in petroglyphs—ancient rock carvings—the filmmaker creates a contemplative dialogue between the past and the present, embedding historical memory within the very landscape of Kazakhstan. The flourishing of genre diversity in Kazakh documentary cinema peaked between the mid-1970s and early 1980s. As B. R. Nogherbek (2002, 198) aptly notes, “The greatest achievement of the 1980s was the discovery by documentary cinema of its tremendous potential, its refusal to continue co-creating mirror-like myths, and its desire—already confirmed by many films—to speak the truth and only the truth through the film camera.” With the birth of a new era, Kazakh documentary acquired long-awaited openness and urgency, and thus, in terms of artistic principles and thematic exploration, continued to evolve alongside the expansion of its subject matter. A representative work of this era is Yuri Piskunov’s *A Photograph Is Required* (1975), which merges traditional documentary techniques with staged elements. The film operates on two interlinked planes—temporal (two generations) and spatial (divided by the photograph itself). It begins with provocation, not as climax but as catalyst, creating an emotional arc that flows through the frozen moments of war veterans and their descendants. The voice-over, rather than dominating the narrative, organically arises from the protagonists’ memories and culminates in a poetic meditation on photography as a silent witness to life. A particularly significant contribution by Sergey Azimov is the documentary *Zhóktau. Chronicle of the Dead Sea* (*Жоктау. Хроника*

*мёртвого моря*, 1989), which addresses the ecological catastrophe of the Aral Sea through a deeply personal lens. Having grown up in the Karakalpak ASSR, near the banks of the Amu Darya and the Aral Sea, Azimov constructs the film as a cinematic lament — both environmental and existential. The very title *Zhóktau* refers to a traditional Kazakh mourning ritual, underscoring the elegiac tone of the film as it grieves a dying sea. Rather than simply illustrating the disappearance of water, the film foregrounds the human dimension of ecological collapse — the dislocation, loss, and resilience of local communities. Azimov weaves together observational footage with poetic commentary, resulting in a documentary that blends testimonial depth with metaphorical expression. *Zhóktau* was praised by critics for its emotional intensity and aesthetic integrity, and it remains a landmark work in Kazakhstani non-fiction cinema.

These experiments proved so influential that the national documentary narrative they shaped gradually extended into the realm of popular science cinema. Yet the most significant tectonic shift of this period was the emergence of a multi-genre approach to nonfiction filmmaking. In other words, directors brought with them themes and methods that no longer fit within the narrow confines of didactic reportage. The poetic path laid out by Oraz Abishev found numerous continuations and became a central driver of Kazakh documentary development in subsequent decades. This is why the period from the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s may justifiably be characterised as the “Genre Period”—a time marked by the flourishing of generic diversity. While methodological work on cinema as text and image continued throughout these years, it now occurred across distinct generic terrains. Narrative construction began to draw upon tools from adjacent visual disciplines: provocation (journalism), observation (popular science), reconstruction (fiction film), and so forth. At the centre of these narratives emerged the documentary protagonist—not as a passive figure, but as the organising principle of form and theme. The primary creative agents during this time were the same authors mentioned earlier, who continued to test the elasticity of documentary materials and their capacity to absorb ever-expanding narrative elements. More importantly, this generation engaged in an active revisionist effort to interrogate the viability of classical narrative structures in light of shifting aesthetic and ideological perspectives. Among the most revealing and innovative of these efforts were experiments with voice-over narration, which remains, even today, a principal device for many nonfiction filmmakers. In the film *Neobkhodimaia fotografiia* (*The Necessary Photograph*, 1975), director Yuri Piskunov reimagines the conventional voice-over not as an external commentator but as the voice of an invisible interlocutor—emerging organically from the conversations of the protagonists, sketching the arc of its own inner thought, and returning to the characters to initiate the next thematic turn. As Alexandra Lumpova writes, “Through this technique, the director does not interfere with life but observes it, reflects upon it alongside the characters” (Lumpova 29). This approach served as a precursor to the rich internal monologue that would become a central element in the narrative strategies of the final phase of Soviet-era documentary cinema.

The mid-1980s to early 1990s ushered in what may be termed the “Heroic Period,” which most sharply reflects the epochal rupture experienced by both the nation

and the industry. Methodology during this time kept pace with the spirit of the age—eclectic, unrestrained, and willing to expand its arsenal in any direction that might capture viewer attention. Documentary narrative became increasingly complex, incorporating ever bolder formal choices, many of which drew inspiration from the media systems of democratic regimes. However, despite the apparent flourishing of stylistic diversity, this proliferation of methods also masked a significant thematic and ideological rupture. Many of the films produced during this period increasingly lost their connection to national roots, shifting focus toward individuals who were themselves losing their sense of place, struggling to comprehend the rapidly changing social landscape, and entering conflict not only with external reality but with their own inner selves. One of the most telling examples of this ambivalent tendency is the film *I Will Defend Myself* (*Budu zashchishchatsya sam*, 1987), directed by Vladimir Tyulkin. Its protagonist, a man named Chichvanin who has committed a legal offense, embodies the figure of the late-Soviet subject—confused, alienated, and emblematic of the Perestroika era. He is unsure of what is allowed and what is forbidden; he doubts whether legality and justice coincide; and he refuses to passively surrender to an opaque system, insisting instead on taking matters into his own hands. Yet even amid this climate of relative freedom, ideological pressures continued to shape the narrative frameworks of documentary filmmaking. Having replaced newsreels and cinema screenings with television broadcasts, the era of Perestroika demanded glasnost, investigation, truth in all its forms, and a surge of socially critical films addressing systemic flaws and public grievances. As a result, a new tone was set in Kazakh documentary cinema by landmark titles such as *The Kumshagal Story* (1987) by Igor Vovnyanko, *Requiem for the Aral Sea* (1988) by Sagatbek Makhmutov, *Saty: Chronicle of a Quiet Village* (1988) by Oraz Rymzhanov and Bagdad Mustafin, *The Passions of ALZHIR* (1989) by Ayagan Shazhimbaev, *Zhoktau: Chronicle of the Dead Sea* (1989–1990) by Sergei Azimov, and *The Polygon* (1990) by Vladimir Rerikh and Oraz Rymzhanov, among others. Many scholars agree that this period marked an unprecedented high point in the development of Kazakh documentary. Indeed, between 1988 and 1992, more major and socially significant nonfiction films were produced in Kazakhstan than in any other period before or since (Abikeyeva 2024, 78).

The documentary filmmakers, energised by the weakening of censorship, found fertile ground in the socio-political transformations of the era. First, Kazakhfilm underwent a structural reorganisation, dividing its production into two creative associations: “Alem,” representing the younger generation, and “Miras,” representing the older. This restructuring allowed for a greater diversification of voices and approaches, including the emergence of many independent professionals. Second, the 1988 enactment of the Soviet Law on Cooperatives effectively liberalised private enterprise, offering tax exemptions during its initial implementation and paving the way for a new wave of creative entrepreneurship (“Zakonu ‘O kooperatsii v SSSR— ’ 25 let”). The first notable example of this cooperative movement was the Catharsis Cooperative Film Studio (*Kooperativnaya kinostudiya “Katarsis”*). As its founder, director Maksat Smagulov, recalled, its core membership included Kazakhstani filmmakers such as Bolat Omar, Rashid Nugmanov, Bakhyt Kilibayev, and Murat

Akhmetov, alongside figures from other Soviet republics such as Mikhail Belikov, Algimantas Puipa, and Alexander Rekhviashvili (Smagulov in *Iskusstvo kino* 1995, 71). The successes of *Katharsis* and other independent studios sharply exposed the chronic issues within Kazakhfilm: a shortage of skilled personnel, a lack of autonomous managerial practices, and an incapacity to operate without thematic directives issued from above. These institutional weaknesses only deepened with the arrival of independence.

Among the most distinctive voices in post-Soviet Kazakh documentary is Asiya Baigozhina, whose films exemplify the shift from institutional chronicle to testimonial reflection. Her *Chronicle of an Unannounced Demonstration* (1991) captured the immediate aftermath of the Jeltoqsan uprising in unprecedented form. As Banu Ramazanova (2025) notes, “all the characters in the film talk on screen, which makes them live and real,” establishing a polyphonic structure that prioritises witness over narrative mastery. Her later film *A Glimmer of the Truth* (2021) revisits the Jeltoqsan trauma through the voices of survivors thirty years later. Abandoning archival illustration in favour of long-form testimony, Baigozhina constructs a continuous monologue that functions as collective mourning. Ramazanova (2025) draws an explicit comparison to Claude Lanzmann’s *Shoah*, arguing that Baigozhina similarly discards all auxiliary tools “except the most fundamental: interviews.” Through this minimalism, Baigozhina affirms the ethical weight of voice, absence, and memory. These filmmakers — Baigozhina, Dvortsevov, Azimov, Mamai — represent not only a generational shift, but a redefinition of documentary purpose in Kazakhstan. Their works reflect broader shifts in the politics of memory and cultural voice. Engaging with concepts from memory studies, such as Marianne Hirsch’s (2012) notion of *post-memory*, one can argue that these films function not merely as historical documents, but as active sites of mnemonic reconstruction. They confront the erasures and silences inherited from previous regimes, offering spectators an ethical encounter with the unspoken. Rather than offering closure, they hold open the wound of historical trauma. Similarly, Svetlana Boym’s (2001) distinction between *restorative* and *reflective nostalgia* provides a lens through which to view the aesthetic choices of contemporary Kazakh filmmakers. Rather than attempting to restore a lost national origin or Soviet past, many of these documentaries dwell in the fragmentary, the melancholic, and the unresolved — suggesting a *reflective* mode of nostalgia that questions rather than reconstructs, contemplates rather than mythologises. This evolution also reflects a transformation in the role of the viewer. Whereas Soviet documentary once positioned the spectator as a pupil — to be educated, mobilised, and ideologically aligned — contemporary Kazakh documentaries increasingly situate the viewer as a witness, a mourner, and a co-participant in memory work. The camera is no longer an arm of the state, but an extension of conscience. In this light, Kazakh documentary cinema’s trajectory from the Soviet to the pre-independence era can be seen as a movement:

- From collectivist myth to individual voice
- From centralised authority to dispersed memory
- From ideological communication to testimonial intervention

As Banu Ramazanova (2025) concludes “*Only with the advent of such documentary films in the Kazakh industry and society can the processes of rejuvenating trauma-*

*tised identities be set in motion once more.*” In a country still negotiating the legacies of empire, rupture, and silence, documentary cinema has emerged as both a site of reckoning and a gesture of healing.

The period spanning the mid-1990s through the 2000s can be confidently described as the “Era of Television”—a time in which broadcast structures revived and extended the Soviet model of a single, centralised commissioning authority. This narrowed the range of Kazakhfilm’s potential partnerships and entrenched its dependency on state funding and top-down distribution mechanisms. During this period, documentary narrative experienced a serious erosion of both methodological depth and thematic diversity. The studio’s financial instability and the absence of strategic management led to Kazakhfilm being relegated to a secondary role. Instead, the leading institution for nonfiction production became the Presidential Television and Radio Complex, under the direction of Sergey Azimov, where a competent cohort of documentary filmmakers was consolidated (Nogerbek 399). Naturally, national television channels emerged as the primary avenue for distribution. By the mid-1990s, documentary cinema had already begun to lose cultural relevance, and by the end of the decade it had nearly vanished from public discourse. State-commissioned films dominated television programming, including titles such as *Kazakhstan: Five Years of Independence* (1997), *Etudes on the Tenge* (1997), *Astana: The New Capital* (1998), and *Singer of the Steppes* (1998). Critical documentary filmmaking was displaced by television journalism, while the genre itself degenerated into formulaic officialdom (Abikeyeva, *Kino nezavisimogo Kazakhstan* 8). This institutional stagnation was acknowledged even at the highest levels of government. In 2011, Minister of Information and Culture Mukhtar Kul-Mukhammed publicly stated: “There is no institution in Kazakhstan devoted to the development of documentary film. These functions have been handed over to Kazakhfilm and the national television networks” (qtd. in Bnews.kz, 2011). For this reason, the 2010s may aptly be termed the “Era of the Tracks”—a metaphor for a decade of stagnation, marked by an absence of strategic innovation, and by the gradual erosion of Kazakhfilm’s authority as a national studio capable of producing distinctive documentary content. The rare attempts at personal, auteur-driven filmmaking during this time were rarely met with meaningful support in terms of distribution. The documentary narratives of this era were wholly shaped by television commissioning, and even in their most accomplished forms, these works largely rested on the aesthetic and narrative achievements of previous decades.

In terms of distribution, *Kazakhfilm JSC named after Shaken Aimanov* began to develop its own idiosyncratic path—one in which even films with clear artistic merit failed to reach audiences, including via television. The studio adopted a strategy of local, semi-private screenings, selectively amplified by sympathetic media outlets as full-fledged events, though rarely echoing beyond the southern capital. For example, in 2017, within the framework of the Days of Kazakh Documentary Cinema in Almaty, a premiere screening of the documentary *Kazakh Renaissance. Zhumat Shanin* took place. Directed by Aleksey Kamensky and scripted by Bakhyt Kairbekov and Aynur Mazhibayeva, the film was produced on commission from the Ministry of Culture and Sports of the Republic of Kazakhstan (Kazinform, 2017). At the same time, the studio actively pursued distribution via international festivals of various calibres.

More precisely, it pursued distribution *to* festivals, since there are virtually no precedents in which a film's festival success led to meaningful engagement with its target audience at home. One illustrative case is Berik Zhakhanov's *Heritage of the Ancestors*, which reached even the London Film Festival, yet was seen domestically only by a small circle of film scholars and critics (Inform.kz, 2019). A similar fate befell the film *Over the Barriers*, directed by the author of this dissertation. Over the course of three decades of independence, *Kazakhfilm JSC named after Shaken Aimanov* has succeeded in overcoming its financial crisis and has partially addressed its personnel deficit by involving young debut filmmakers. However, it has failed to build a competitive, active, and forward-looking system for the distribution of documentary films. One key issue lies in the fact that the narrative direction of its output remains under the control of its principal commissioner—the state. This results in lingering censorship, production and financial constraints, and, most significantly, a continued orientation toward television channels as the primary (and often sole) platform for dissemination. These residual elements of an outdated industrial model—particularly in shaping the business and creative processes at *Kazakhfilm*—lead us to the following prognosis:

The 2020s—and likely the following decade—may provisionally be characterised as the “Period of Competition,” in which *Kazakhfilm JSC named after Shaken Aimanov* has been visibly outpaced by independent studios in the domain of documentary filmmaking. This growing disparity, both narratively and in terms of distribution, has become evident even to the studio itself. Recent announcements that no less than 30% of the total national film production funding will be allocated directly to *Kazakhfilm* beginning in 2025 only reinforce such concerns (“Kazakhfilm to Receive No Less than 30% of State Film Funding”). Despite this preferential support, the studio remains incapable of autonomous operation. A significant portion of its documentary output fails to attract end-users—be they television viewers or audiences of online cinemas and streaming platforms. By contrast, independent production companies and individual auteurs, empowered by bolder artistic, production, and marketing strategies, have long surpassed *Kazakhfilm*, effectively redefining the contemporary landscape of Kazakh documentary cinema.

If one were to identify the studio's three most critical missteps, the following areas would merit close attention:

**Narrative Limitations.** The studio no longer functions as a true incubator of talent or a creative laboratory. This is primarily due to thematic constraints and the lack of openness to authorial experimentation. Its output remains formulaic, ill-suited to innovative reinterpretations or formal risk-taking. As a result, the structure of production has become rigid—an environment increasingly inhospitable to contemporary filmmakers.

**Production Deficiencies.** Even with access to state subsidies, *Kazakhfilm* continues to neglect foundational stages of the documentary production cycle—phases that require both adequate financing and sufficient time allocation. These include research, script development, and international co-production scouting. Numerous international funds and labs now offer such resources, rendering them far more attractive to Kazakhstani filmmakers. The studio's compressed timelines and minimal budgets reveal a



deep institutional misunderstanding of the demands of modern documentary filmmaking.

**Distribution Failures.** Over the years, *Kazakhfilm* has produced a vast number of documentary films, many of which possess clear artistic merit—yet they have been shelved, bypassing even television distribution. In numerous cases, the directors were denied permission to pursue independent promotional efforts. This policy raises fundamental questions about the studio's continued relevance and its role in the documentary sector.

The historical survey conducted in this research—tracing the development of Kazakh documentary cinema from its inception—has prioritised the evolution and transformation of narrative as a key determinant of distribution potential. However, the analysis reveals that narrative innovation has often collided with the intractable rigidity of the institutional system. This structural inflexibility, in our assessment, has been the decisive factor behind the studio's declining leadership within the industry and its gradual erosion of trust—both from filmmakers and from the viewing public.

Between 1990 and 1999, the studio produced no fewer than 153 documentary films. The total verified budget for the years with available data amounted to 39,318,430 tenge. Budget data for 1998 and 1999 is absent, suggesting either a decline in transparency or a reduction in production activity. In 1990, 42 films were released with a total budget of 1,305,500 tenge; in 1991, 29 films were made with a budget of 1,659,700 tenge. In 1992, the budget rose sharply to 10,395,200 tenge, while the number of films remained at 20. The year 1993 witnessed a steep funding drop to 356,510 tenge, although the output remained constant. In 1994, only 8 films were released with a budget of 2,378,170 tenge. In 1995, 9 films were produced with a budget of 8,347,000 tenge. Despite a reduction in output to 7 films in 1996, the budget reached its decade-high at 12,830,110 tenge. In 1997, only 2 films were produced with a budget of 2,082,240 tenge. Film counts for 1998 and 1999 are recorded at 12 and 2, respectively, but no budgetary data are available for these years. The early 1990s were characterised by the inertia of Soviet-era production levels. Despite modest budgets, the studio maintained a high output volume, reflecting the persistence of trained personnel, functioning infrastructure, and creative momentum. The year 1992 marked a significant increase in funding, despite relatively few films produced. This could indicate early efforts by the state to restore the national film industry, reallocate resources, and establish new frameworks for cultural commissioning. The years 1993 and 1994 demonstrated a dramatic decline in both budgets and the number of projects. Hyperinflation, a shift to a market economy, and the absence of clear budgetary mechanisms contributed to this sharp downturn in production volumes. A partial recovery occurred in 1995 and 1996: while the number of films decreased, budgets increased considerably. This may suggest the expansion of project scale, a rise in production costs, and a move towards more complex or time-intensive formats. Following 1996, activity visibly declined. The number of films fell to a minimum, and the absence of budget data for 1998 and 1999 likely reflects institutional and financial crisis within the studio itself. To evaluate the real economic scale of production

during this period, budgets were converted into US dollars based on the average historical exchange rate, with subsequent inflation adjustment.

***From 1993 to 1997, the cumulative funding for documentary production equated to approximately 501,357 USD at the time. Adjusted for inflation, this figure would amount to roughly 1,403,800 USD in 2025 values.***

This indicates that overall documentary film funding during the period remained extremely modest by international industry standards but was calibrated to the realities of the local market, where production costs are substantially lower. Production volumes and budget levels throughout the examined period reveal a strong correlation with macroeconomic trends in the country. Crisis years mirrored drastic reductions in both output and financial support. Conversely, budget peaks coincided with periods of relative economic stabilisation and active cultural policy, underlining the state's role as the primary commissioner and financier of non-fiction cinema. Nonetheless, the lack of continuity in cultural strategy, the shortage of new funding models, and the underdevelopment of film distribution infrastructure posed significant obstacles to the sustainable growth of the documentary sector. Gaps in available data—particularly for 1998 and 1999—complicate comprehensive economic analysis, but also point to shortcomings in transparency and archival record-keeping.

Documentary production at Kazakhfilm during the 1990s was subject to the full spectrum of risks associated with transitional periods—from economic instability to administrative fragmentation. Nevertheless, the preserved statistical record allows for important conclusions to be drawn regarding the studio's adaptive potential and the genre's cultural relevance. The financial fluctuations observed serve not only as indicators of broader economic processes but also as a reference point for envisioning future models of sustainable national film production.

### **Kazakh Cinema**

Established in 2019 by decree of the Ministry of Culture and Sports of the Republic of Kazakhstan, the State Centre for Support of National Cinema was created as a centralised institutional mechanism to administer state funding for film production and promotion, and while the Centre may indeed have made a measurable contribution to the development of animation and fiction filmmaking—through both increased production volume and enhanced international positioning—Unlike the legacy production model of the Kazakhfilm studio, which primarily supported in-house or closely affiliated projects, the Centre introduced a more decentralised model of financing. It opened access to public resources for a broader range of applicants, including independent filmmakers, first-time directors, and artists from outside the traditional studio system. This shift marked a significant departure from Soviet-inherited vertical integration and aimed to pluralise the field of cultural production. As evidenced by comparative data from Kazakhfilm's production history (1991–2024), the Centre enabled the inclusion of previously unrepresented voices, thereby challenging the hierarchical structure of cinematic authorship long associated with state cinema in

Kazakhstan. was created as a centralised institutional mechanism to administer state funding for film production and promotion. The Centre was conceived not only as a financial distributor but also as a policy-shaping body—responsible for curating a national cinematic identity, supporting debut and socially significant films, and fostering Kazakhstan’s visibility in the international audiovisual space. Its founding marked a new stage in the state’s approach to cinema after the dismantling of previous mechanisms inherited from the Soviet period, and its annual pitching sessions have become the primary gateway for public film financing in the country.

While Kazakhstan’s state-supported documentary sector often invokes the language of national identity, heritage preservation, and cultural continuity, a closer examination of production outputs suggests a troubling mismatch between ideological intent and practical execution. A significant number of films funded through the State Centre for Support of National Cinema fall under the category of “calendar-driven documentaries”—projects commissioned or selected in alignment with commemorative dates, anniversaries, or state-sanctioned events. These “*date-oriented*” films are positioned as vehicles of historical affirmation and national cohesion, and are often presented as emblematic of a symbolic decolonial gesture. Yet, the practical impact of these films remains limited. This study, however, directs its analytical attention to the documentary sector, where the implications of institutional design, funding policy, and representational strategy are arguably most visible and contested. The documentary field offers a unique vantage point for interrogating the alignment—or disjunction—between state objectives and cinematic practices in contemporary Kazakhstan.

Very few reach actual audiences, either at home or internationally, and their presence on the festival circuit is minimal. The central paradox is that while these documentaries claim to speak for national identity or historical reckoning, they do not speak to the public—their circulation is constrained, their reception negligible, and their after-life largely non-existent. Out of all the documentaries produced across recent state pitching sessions, only two have achieved measurable international success: *Gingerbread for Her Father, Grandfather and Great-Grandfather* by Alina Mustafina, and *We Live Here* by Zhanana Kurmasheva. These two projects emerged from different pitching rounds, yet share a common refusal to conform to formulaic production logic. They prioritise authorship, originality, and depth of research—elements systematically neglected in many state-commissioned films.

When these films reached international audiences—*We Live Here* premiering at CPH:DOX and Hot Docs, and *Gingerbread* screening at Busan, Torino, and Cinema Verité—they became far more than cinematic works: they became symbolic representatives of Kazakhstan’s voice and cultural identity on the world stage. Their presence in global festivals attracted international media attention not typically afforded to Kazakh films. Crucially, it was not narrative features but documentaries that received coverage in *Variety*, *The Hollywood Reporter*, *Modern Times Review*, and *Business Doc Europe*. This shift signals a reorientation in how Kazakh cinema is being recognised abroad—no longer limited to fiction, but through non-fiction works grounded in memory, testimony, and local authorship. Their success illustrates that when Kazakh documentaries transcend bureaucratic templates and speak with narrative and aesthetic specificity, they are capable of reshaping how the country is per-

ceived globally. These films demonstrate that Kazakhstan does not need to adopt foreign forms to be seen; rather, it must invest in its own stories, told through uncompromised, author-driven production processes.

This reveals a fundamental issue: Kazakhstan cannot speak to the world through documentary cinema unless it first transforms how it listens to its own filmmakers. Calendar-driven documentary production privileges symbolic presence over substantive inquiry. It fosters institutional compliance rather than creative authorship, and produces films that rarely survive beyond the year or event for which they were commissioned. In contrast, globally successful documentary films rely on long-term research, iterative storytelling, and deep editing cycles—all of which are structurally undervalued in Kazakhstan's current funding model. One of the most acute systemic failures is the absence of dedicated research stages in project development. Films are often pushed into production prematurely, guided more by deadlines than by dramaturgical readiness. Furthermore, editing—arguably the most time-intensive and creative phase of documentary work—is subject to fixed budgets and compressed timelines, leaving little room for narrative refinement or aesthetic experimentation. More fundamentally, this raises a deeper question of ideological coherence. If state-supported documentary cinema is meant to embody national values, promote identity, and serve cultural diplomacy, then the failure to build functioning distribution and outreach mechanisms directly undermines those very ideological aims. In the Soviet era, the ideological function of cinema was backed by a robust, vertically integrated system—from production to exhibition—that ensured that films did not simply exist, but were *seen* and *discussed*. That model, for all its constraints, acknowledged that ideological power relies not just on content, but on circulation. As film scholar Brian Winston notes, "ideology in documentary is not just embedded in content, but in systems of visibility and control" (Winston 2008, 49). In Kazakhstan today, the disconnection between production and audience engagement makes ideological intent ring hollow. Support for documentary cinema is commendable, but ideology without infrastructure is performative.

This brings to the forefront an essential contradiction: how can cinema claim to represent national identity if it is structurally prevented from reaching the nation? As David Throsby has emphasised in his cultural economics framework, the symbolic value of art cannot be separated from the institutional context that sustains its transmission (Throsby 2001, 57). Without systems of dissemination, cultural production remains abstract, failing to fulfil its social or ideological functions. Even Lenin, writing in the early Soviet period, recognised the strategic value of cinema for ideological dissemination, famously asserting: "Of all the arts, for us the most important is the cinema" (Lenin, cited in Taylor 1998, 27). This statement was not merely rhetorical; it signalled a coordinated policy effort to harness film as a tool for shaping public consciousness. The ideological strength of Soviet cinema lay not only in its narrative content, but in its systemic integration—from script approval to rural distribution networks—that ensured the reach of its message. Without comparable infrastructure or vision, contemporary state-backed documentaries in Kazakhstan risk becoming symbolic gestures without symbolic power.

To summarise this analysis, Kazakhstan’s current documentary support system is ideologically rich in rhetoric but materially poor in execution. For documentary cinema to truly serve as a meaningful vehicle of national expression, international visibility, and decolonial articulation, its institutional architecture must evolve. This evolution requires not merely more funding, but smarter, more strategically aligned funding—support that values narrative integrity, research depth, public accessibility, and long-term impact. Without this recalibration, the genre risks remaining a symbolic exercise with minimal transformative potential—films made to mark time, rather than to mark history.

<b>№</b>	<b>Description of Work and Services</b>	<b>Quantity</b>	<b>Cost</b>	<b>Percentage ratio</b>
<b>1</b>	<b>First Pitching of State Center for Support of National Cinema</b>			
	<b>Fiction Films</b>	10	5,095,384,431	71.93%
	<b>Co-productions</b>	1	310,000,000	4.38%
	<b>Feature films intended for a wide audience</b>	3	1,588,539,981	22.42%
	<b>Debut Films</b>	1	37,330,789	0.53%
	<b>Documentary Films</b>	2	52,822,545	0.75%
	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>7,084,077,746</b>	<b>100.00%</b>
<b>2</b>	<b>Second Pitching of State Center for Support of National Cinema</b>			
	<b>Fiction Films</b>	5	2,076,942,165	38.76%
	<b>Co-productions</b>	2	282,000,000	5.26%
	<b>Feature films intended for a wide audience</b>	4	646,022,357	12.06%
	<b>Debut Films</b>	13	558,557,550	10.42%
	<b>Animated Films</b>	5	1,101,829,893	20.56%
	<b>Documentary Films</b>	10	692,963,064	12.93%
	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>39</b>	<b>5,358,315,029</b>	<b>100.00%</b>
<b>3</b>	<b>Third Pitching of State Center for Support of National Cinema</b>			
	<b>Fiction Films</b>	2	1,750,000,000	
	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>1,750,000,000</b>	<b>100.00%</b>
<b>4</b>	<b>Forth Pitching of State Center for Support of National Cinema</b>			
	<b>Fiction Films</b>	16	12,316,829,790	83.41%
	<b>Co-productions</b>	1	25,000,000	0.17%

<b>№</b>	<b>Description of Work and Services</b>	<b>Quantity</b>	<b>Cost</b>	<b>Percentage ratio</b>
	<b>Feature films intended for a wide audience</b>	1	129,547,208	0.88%
	<b>Debut Films</b>	20	544,715,406	3.69%
	<b>Animated Films</b>	7	1,121,900,000	7.60%
	<b>Documentary Films</b>	17	629,445,868	4.26%
	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>14,767,438,272</b>	<b>100%</b>
<b>5</b>	<b>Fifth Pitching of State Center for Support of National Cinema</b>			
	<b>Fiction Films</b>	9	1,802,000,000	67.08%
	<b>Co-productions</b>	1	100,000,000	3.72%
	<b>Feature films intended for a wide audience</b>			0.00%
	<b>Debut Films</b>	2	345,000,000	12.84%
	<b>Animated Films</b>	2	230,000,000	8.56%
	<b>Documentary Films</b>	5	209,225,000	7.79%
	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>2,686,225,000</b>	<b>100%</b>
<b>6</b>	<b>Six Pitching of State Center for Support of National Cinema</b>			
	<b>Fiction Films</b>	8	2,053,317,117	50.13%
	<b>Co-productions</b>	1	400,000,000	9.77%
	<b>Feature films intended for a wide audience</b>	1	262,895,855	6.42%
	<b>Debut Films</b>	2	382,775,537	9.34%
	<b>Animated Films</b>	3	909,115,862	22.19%
	<b>Documentary Films</b>	2	88,007,782	2.15%
	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>4,096,112,153</b>	<b>100%</b>

Between 2019 and 2024, the production and funding decisions of the State Center for Support of National Cinema reveal a persistent structural asymmetry in the allocation of public resources across film genres. Despite the normative positioning of documentary film as a vehicle for civic engagement and cultural memory, its place within Kazakhstan's national cinema funding architecture has remained peripheral. On a superficial level, the number of documentary films supported appears to indicate a positive trajectory, particularly in years such as 2022, when seventeen projects were funded. However, such quantitative expansion has not been accompanied by proportional financial growth, thereby generating a misleading narrative of institutional commitment. In 2022, the aggregate budget allocated to documentary film con-

stituted only 4.26% of the total annual film production budget. Comparatively, in 2020, only ten documentary projects received funding, yet their share of the total budget was significantly higher at 12.9%. This inverse relationship between project quantity and fiscal proportion indicates an erosion in the unit value of documentary funding and points toward a broader phenomenon: the illusion of growth in a context of fiscal marginalization.

This pattern is further compounded by the consistent upward trajectory of animation as a strategic funding priority. In both 2020 and 2022, animated films received more than 1.1 billion tenge annually, accounting for a significant share of total production expenditure. Average per-project allocations in the animation sector exceeded 160 million tenge in 2022, compared to less than 40 million per documentary project. These figures not only highlight a fourfold disparity in per-project support but also suggest an implicit genre hierarchy underpinning national film policy. Whereas animation is increasingly positioned as a cultural export commodity-aligned with soft power ambitions, youth engagement strategies, and content localization-documentary film is treated as an auxiliary category, rarely integrated into long-term planning or positioned as an instrument of international representation.

The fragility of this institutional framework was most visibly exposed during the 2021 funding cycle, in which no documentary or animated films were financed. While the exceptional conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted cultural production globally, the complete absence of contingency mechanisms for sustaining documentary output during this period points to a deeper systemic issue: the absence of embedded resilience within public funding instruments for non-fiction cinema. The documentary sector's reliance on location-based, real-time engagement with social realities renders it particularly vulnerable to exogenous shocks. The lack of targeted support in 2021 underscores not only a logistical challenge but also a failure to articulate documentary cinema as an essential domain of public cultural investment.

Taken together, the quantitative and fiscal data demonstrate that documentary film occupies a structurally disadvantaged position within Kazakhstan's national cinema policy. Its increasing numerical output has not translated into economic sustainability, political visibility, or cultural centrality. By contrast, animation benefits from relatively stable and expansive institutional support, despite operating in a genre space traditionally associated with higher production costs and longer development cycles. This divergence signals a strategic blind spot in the cultural policy framework of the State Center for Support of National Cinema. Globally, documentary film is recognized as a dynamic field of social inquiry, public pedagogy, and formal innovation-yet within the national context, its treatment as a low-cost, low-impact genre undermines its capacity to contribute to national identity, public discourse, and international cultural presence.

In economic terms, this genre-based disparity can be understood as a misallocation of public cultural capital. Without dedicated budget lines, incentive schemes, or platform-specific distribution mechanisms, documentary cinema remains caught in a cycle of project-to-project survival, incapable of leveraging economies of scale or engaging meaningfully with international co-production markets. From a policy standpoint, the current funding regime fails to internalize the long-term socio-cultural val-

ue generated by documentary production, focusing instead on short-term deliverables and output quotas. Rectifying this imbalance requires a reconfiguration of state support mechanisms to recognize the documentary form not merely as a marginal or supplementary mode of production, but as a cornerstone of democratic media ecosystems and cultural sovereignty.

At the heart of Kazakhstan's documentary crisis lies not only a material underfunding of the genre but a deeper epistemological gap between how documentary is perceived globally and how it is positioned domestically. Internationally, documentary film has become central to civic discourse and global cultural exchange. As Patricia Aufderheide argues, "Documentary is a crucial form of public communication in democratic societies," functioning simultaneously as art, journalism, and social intervention (Aufderheide 2007, 3). This view has led many nations to treat documentary cinema not as a marginal or educational tool, but as a powerful narrative form requiring long-term strategic investment. By contrast, within Kazakhstan, documentary filmmaking is still frequently treated as functional or archival-often excluded from creative funding, aesthetic discourse, or cultural diplomacy. This perception has measurable effects. It restricts the diversity of narratives that are funded, diminishes the genre's visibility at international festivals, and deters foreign co-producers who see documentary as an entry point into a country's social realities. In short, the genre's symbolic marginalization translates into economic and diplomatic exclusion. As Sandra Gaudenzi observes, documentary today operates within a "logic of impact," where its success is no longer measured solely by box office or broadcast metrics, but by its ability to catalyze social awareness and behavioral change (Gaudenzi 2019, 165). This requires not just production funding but ecosystem-wide support, including outreach infrastructure and audience engagement mechanisms-components still largely absent from Kazakhstan's institutional framework.

One essential pathway toward reconfiguration lies in regional collaboration. A Central Asian Documentary Co-Production Treaty could serve as both an economic tool and a geopolitical gesture. As Ib Bondebjerg notes in his analysis of transnational European networks, co-productions "do not merely pool financial resources-they enable the symbolic negotiation of shared histories, identities, and futures" (Bondebjerg 2016, 91). In the Central Asian context-where histories of Soviet rupture, ecological trauma, and social transition are both distinct and interwoven-such a treaty could provide the infrastructure for collaborative storytelling and regional cultural sovereignty. Moreover, international co-production mechanisms are essential not just for resource pooling, but for resisting dominant narrative frames. As Alisa Lebow has written, "Who gets to document whom-and how-is a political question at its core" (Lebow 2012, 15). Without a robust local and regional network, Kazakhstan risks having its stories mediated exclusively through external lenses, often shaped by extractive geopolitical interest or orientalist tropes. In this light, rethinking the role of documentary cinema is not a technical fix-it is a cultural and political imperative. Kazakhstan's visibility in the global media landscape will not be determined solely by how many films it produces, but by how it conceptualizes authorship, access, and accountability in the stories it chooses to tell. Elevating documentary cinema from institutional periphery to cultural priority requires both inward reform and outward coali-



tion-building. It demands a recalibrated national vision in which non-fiction film is understood as a cornerstone of democratic expression and regional solidarity.

The funding trajectory of Kazakhstan's documentary cinema from 2019 to 2024, as administered by the State Centre for Support of National Cinema, reveals a critical disjunction between public rhetoric and institutional practice. While official discourse has increasingly acknowledged the importance of socially engaged cinema, the allocation patterns and structural mechanisms of support remain uneven and insufficient. The case of 2022 is emblematic: although 17 documentary projects were funded—a nominal peak—their collective share constituted only 4.26% of the total production budget. In contrast, the 10 documentaries funded in 2020 received 12.9% of available funding, exposing an inverse relationship between project quantity and financial commitment. This signals not growth but contraction, whereby numerical expansion masks declining investment per project and, more troublingly, a lack of long-term institutional strategy. Moreover, in comparative terms, the documentary genre consistently receives lower per-film investment than other categories such as animation. In 2022, the average documentary was allocated less than 40 million KZT, while animated features exceeded 160 million KZT per project—a fourfold disparity. The funding gap demonstrates a latent hierarchy in cultural policy, wherein animation is framed as a strategic soft-power export, while documentary filmmaking remains conceptually tethered to marginality, perceived as reactive or commemorative rather than forward-looking and epistemologically central. The complete absence of documentary support in 2021, precipitated by the COVID-19 pandemic, further underscores the genre's fragility and the lack of a crisis-resilient infrastructure within Kazakhstan's film funding landscape. To address these asymmetries and recalibrate the institutional treatment of non-fiction filmmaking, the following interlinked policy recommendations are proposed. Each is grounded in international precedent and tailored to Kazakhstan's evolving media ecology:

Establish a dedicated documentary funding stream within the State Centre for Support of National Cinema. To counteract the genre's vulnerability to budget fluctuations and genre-based asymmetry, Kazakhstan should introduce a ring-fenced budget line exclusively for documentary cinema. This approach has proven effective in countries such as France, where the Centre national du cinéma et de l'image animée (CNC) allocates separate and transparent support mechanisms for creative documentaries through the Fonds de soutien à l'audiovisuel. This ensures that documentary projects are evaluated and financed within their own aesthetic and market logic, rather than being assessed against fiction or animation benchmarks.

Implement multi-year funding schemes for high-impact or research-driven documentary projects. Documentary production often unfolds over extended timelines due to its reliance on real-world observation, longitudinal access, and trust-building with subjects and communities. The Danish Film Institute (DFI) has addressed this by introducing multi-stage funding schemes that allow projects to mature over several years. A similar model in Kazakhstan would facilitate deeper narrative development, elevate technical standards, and increase eligibility for international co-productions—particularly with partners who require fully developed treatments, research dossiers, or rough cuts prior to investment. Develop an integrated impact and outreach support

framework. At present, Kazakhstan lacks institutional mechanisms to support the downstream phases of documentary production—specifically, impact campaigning, distribution, and audience engagement. The UK's BFI Doc Society Fund offers a compelling precedent, with grants specifically aimed at ensuring civic-oriented documentaries reach broad and diverse publics through tailored distribution strategies, educational partnerships, and community screenings. A comparable system in Kazakhstan would elevate non-fiction cinema beyond mere content generation, enabling it to function as a catalyst for public dialogue and sociopolitical reflection.

Institutionalise crisis-contingent support tools for non-fiction filmmakers. The suspension of documentary funding in 2021 exposed a fundamental weakness in Kazakhstan's cultural policy: the absence of risk mitigation mechanisms for the documentary sector during periods of disruption. In response to similar crises, countries such as Denmark and Canada deployed emergency relief funds, created rolling submission deadlines, and allowed funding extensions for affected productions. Embedding such instruments within Kazakhstan's public funding architecture would safeguard documentary cinema from exogenous shocks, ensuring continuity and institutional commitment in the face of uncertainty.

Foster international co-productions and strategic partnerships with global documentary markets. To expand both the financial and creative bandwidth of local filmmakers, the State Centre should actively promote co-productions through structured access to funds such as Eurimages, IDFA Bertha Fund, or the Hot Docs-Blue Ice Fund. This can be facilitated via dedicated co-production labs, regional industry forums, and bilateral agreements with European and Asian partners. Such initiatives would strengthen Kazakhstan's position as a documentary hub in Central Asia—grounding narratives in local realities while making them legible and exportable to global audiences. Collectively, these measures constitute not merely technical adjustments but a philosophical reorientation—one that restores documentary filmmaking to its rightful place within national cultural policy. In doing so, Kazakhstan would align itself with international best practices wherein publicly funded non-fiction cinema is treated as a high-value, high-impact medium for truth-seeking, memory work, and soft power projection. Kazakhstan's documentary sector stands at a critical inflection point. To ensure its future viability and international relevance, a multi-pronged transformation is imperative—one that realigns funding structures, reconfigures production practices, integrates international standards, and reaffirms the public and global value of documentary storytelling. Only through such a strategic overhaul can Kazakhstan cultivate a resilient, research-driven, and internationally competitive documentary cinema ecosystem.

These recommendations are informed by comparative insights from internationally recognized institutions that have successfully embedded documentary film within broader national cultural strategies.

### **3.2 The Integration of Technology and Creativity in Kazakh Documentaries: Challenging Traditional Production Systems and Navigating New Frameworks in Contemporary society**

While the initial wave of independent Kazakh documentary filmmaking in the early 2010s was characterised by infrastructural innovation and political urgency, the mid-2010s witnessed a further evolution in narrative strategies. Facing the challenges of digital saturation, fragmented attention economies, and intensified competition for visibility, independent filmmakers increasingly adopted popular storytelling techniques traditionally associated with entertainment media. This shift, often termed the emergence of "pop-doc" or popular documentary forms, involved the integration of character-driven narratives, heightened emotional arcs, stylised editing, and strategic audience targeting, particularly via social media amplification.

Rather than representing a capitulation to market logics, the turn toward pop-doc strategies must be understood as a pragmatic recalibration—an effort to sustain public engagement, expand reach, and secure financial or institutional viability within a rapidly transforming media environment. As Aida Vallejo (2020) argues, “the popularisation of documentary does not inherently dilute its political or cultural functions; rather, it reflects an adaptive negotiation between visibility and criticality within the constraints of contemporary media ecosystems.” In the Kazakh context, the integration of popular formats allowed nonfiction filmmakers to reach audiences far beyond the limited circuits of cinephile communities and festival screens, bringing socially resonant narratives into broader national and regional consciousness.

This section examines how Kazakh independent documentaries have engaged with pop-doc aesthetics and distribution strategies, tracing both the creative opportunities and the critical tensions that this realignment entails. In doing so, it situates Kazakhstan’s documentary sector within the global reconfiguration of nonfiction storytelling, where questions of authenticity, spectacle, civic engagement, and entertainment increasingly intertwine.

The emergence of the popular documentary—commonly referred to as *pop-doc*—has significantly reshaped the global landscape of nonfiction filmmaking in the platform era. First formalised by Kate Nash, Craig Hight, and Catherine Summerhayes (2014), the concept of pop-doc describes documentary works that are specifically designed for circulation within digital ecosystems, where emotional immediacy, algorithmic visibility, and audience participation are paramount. As Nash, Hight, and Summerhayes argue, “pop-docs capitalize on emerging platforms and participatory cultures, making the audience not just a spectator but a node in the documentary network” (2014, 2). These works deliberately blur the traditional boundaries between journalism, activism, and entertainment, privileging emotional resonance, character-driven storytelling, and viral dissemination over slower, observational, or institutionally anchored models of nonfiction cinema. In the global context, pop-doc has largely emerged from media-industrial transformations, as streaming services and digital platforms sought to recalibrate nonfiction storytelling for increasingly fragmented, mobile-first audiences. However, in Kazakhstan, the adoption of pop-doc strategies has followed a markedly different trajectory. Here, the emergence of platform-native documentary filmmaking was less a market-driven innovation and more a structural necessity. In a media environment where theatrical exhibition opportunities for nonfiction were virtually non-existent, public broadcasting support was minimal, and traditional funding channels were heavily politicized, independent filmmakers turned to

online platforms such as YouTube as a primary means of production, distribution, and audience engagement. As such, Kazakhstani pop-doc reflects not merely a stylistic shift but an infrastructural adaptation, enabling filmmakers to create alternative public spheres outside the constraints of state-controlled or commercially saturated systems.

Kazakhstani filmmaker Kana Beisekeyev provides a compelling case study of this phenomenon. Across a body of work that spans early observational shorts to high-profile social issue documentaries, Beisekeyev has consistently embodied the core traits of pop-doc: emotionally resonant narratives, mobile-friendly formats, and socially conscious themes designed for circulation within participatory digital cultures. With over 88 million cumulative views on his YouTube channel as of 2025 (US Youtubers 2025), Beisekeyev has pioneered a model of grassroots documentary distribution that challenges traditional gatekeeping structures and redefines the parameters of nonfiction visibility in Kazakhstan. His work exemplifies how platform-driven documentary can function simultaneously as cinematic text, public intervention, and infrastructural innovation. Two of his most recent films—*The Waiting List* (2022) and *Winter in Rehab* (2024)—demonstrate how pop-doc strategies have been mobilized in Kazakhstan to address urgent social issues while navigating the complex interplay between aesthetic ambition, technological affordance, and civic engagement. The following section examines these works as indicative of a broader reconfiguration of documentary production and reception in Kazakhstan’s evolving media landscape.

*The Waiting List* provides a compelling illustration of documentary cinema functioning not merely as a cultural mirror but as a deliberate intervention into public discourse and civic structures. Centred on the lives of patients awaiting life-saving organ transplants, the film foregrounds the systemic challenges surrounding posthumous organ donation in Kazakhstan. Although legislative reforms introduced the principle of presumed consent—enshrined in Article 212 of the Code of the Republic of Kazakhstan “On the Health of the People and the Healthcare System”—public trust and awareness remained markedly low. Prior sociological surveys indicated that only 19 percent of citizens expressed willingness to donate their organs posthumously, revealing a profound gap between legal norms and societal acceptance. This disjunction provided fertile ground for the film’s impact-driven approach. *The Waiting List* exemplifies what Sandra Gaudenzi has termed the “logic of impact”: a documentary mode “designed not only to inform but to produce measurable change in behaviour, policy, or attitude” (Gaudenzi 2019, 163). Released online and widely circulated via YouTube and social media platforms, the film catalysed civic mobilisation to an unprecedented degree. According to BlueScreen.kz, it triggered a cascade of fundraising campaigns initiated by Kazakhstani bloggers to support transplant patients featured in the film—an intervention rarely observed in response to local non-fiction works (BlueScreen 2023). Empirical data gathered during and after the film’s release confirmed its persuasive efficacy: willingness to consent to organ donation increased from 19 to 30 percent, while general support for the practice rose from 19 to 26 percent. These shifts correspond to Patricia Aufderheide’s conception of documentary as “a space for deliberation, empathy, and ethical reflection” (Aufderheide 2007, 74), and affirm Michael Chanan’s assertion that the genre’s potency lies in its

ability “to intervene in public discourse, not just reflect it” (Chanan 2007, 11). The case of *The Waiting List* thus demonstrates not only the civic functions long attributed to nonfiction cinema but also the ways in which these functions have been amplified and redistributed through digital infrastructures. As Aufderheide further argues, the contemporary documentary has evolved into “a creative mechanism to advance social change and justice in the networked participatory media age” (2007). Beisekeyev’s ability to convert viewers into active participants situates *The Waiting List* firmly within this trajectory, showcasing how platform-native documentary forms can extend their impact far beyond the screen. In this context, *The Waiting List* must be understood not merely as a cultural artefact but as a form of distributed advocacy—amplifying neglected voices, reshaping public attitudes, and operating as an emergent tool of civic pedagogy within Kazakhstan’s evolving media ecology.

If *The Waiting List* exemplifies the participatory impact logic of contemporary documentary, *Winter in Rehab* (2024) offers a paradigmatic case of distributional innovation. Shot in an observational style reminiscent of Frederick Wiseman, the film documents life inside a rehabilitation centre for individuals recovering from substance addiction. Deliberately eschewing voiceover narration and formal interviews in favour of immersive, non-intrusive observation, *Winter in Rehab* aligns itself with traditions of direct cinema, even as it exploits the connective affordances of digital media infrastructures. Its distribution strategy, however, diverges sharply from conventional documentary circulation models. Rather than pursuing the established festival–distributor–theatrical pipeline, *Winter in Rehab* premiered directly on YouTube, where it rapidly garnered substantial viewership before securing a national theatrical release on 30 May 2024. As *Vlast.kz* reported, the number of theatrical screenings increased incrementally in the weeks following release—an outcome described as “highly uncharacteristic for domestic documentaries” (Vlast 2024). This inversion of traditional rollout patterns exemplifies what Sandra Gaudenzi describes as an “intervention in complex systems, not just one-way communication” (Gaudenzi 2019, 165): the film activated social circulation and audience demand from the ground up, rather than relying on pre-existing institutional distribution channels.



**Fig. 3.1.** Kanat Beisekeyev at the premiere of ‘The Waiting List’ (dir. Kanat Beisekeyev, 2022).

This strategy responds directly to the transformed media ecology outlined by Nash, Hight, and Summerhayes, who argue that “the screen ecology of documentary is no longer defined by hierarchy—cinema over digital—but by interrelation and circulation” (2014, 5). Rather than treating digital exhibition as subordinate to theatrical prestige, *Winter in Rehab* demonstrates how platform-first releases can serve as engines for later theatrical expansion, reframing digital spaces as primary sites of audience-building and civic engagement. Moreover, this model aligns with emerging theories of transmedia nonfiction that conceptualise social change not as a linear dissemination of content but as a co-produced outcome between narrative text, digital architectures, and participatory audiences. As Gaudenzi (2013) notes, “digital interactive and networked media offer so many new possibilities to document reality,” creating new relational ecologies between filmmakers, audiences, and subjects.

In the case of *Winter in Rehab*, these dynamics are vividly manifest. The film’s combination of observational realism, accessible digital circulation, and community-driven momentum enabled it to achieve an unprecedented transition from online release to growing national theatrical presence—a trajectory rarely achieved by domestic nonfiction productions in Kazakhstan. As such, *Winter in Rehab* stands as a critical intervention in both the aesthetic and distributional evolution of Kazakh documentary cinema, illustrating how independent filmmakers can harness hybrid screen ecologies to reconfigure visibility, reception, and civic impact under contemporary media conditions.

Taken together, *The Waiting List* and *Winter in Rehab* demonstrate how contemporary Kazakhstani documentaries are assuming newly strategic roles within the cultural and political landscape. One catalyses ethical debate and supports public communication in the field of bioethics; the other transforms grassroots digital momentum into formal theatrical success. Both works contest the outdated notion of documentary as a reactive, marginalised form, instead positioning it as an active infrastructural agent—capable of shaping public opinion, mobilising civic engagement, and redefining the pathways through which media circulates within the public sphere.

Beisekeyev’s films exemplify a broader shift toward understanding documentary not simply as a reflective mirror of social realities, but as an operational force in civic pedagogy, policy advocacy, and participatory media practice. His approach resonates with what Stella Bruzzi (2006) describes as “the performative turn” in contemporary documentary: “a space where the filmmaker’s subjectivity, the viewer’s emotions, and the story’s urgency co-produce meaning” (185). Although Beisekeyev rarely appears on screen, his presence is acutely felt through voiceovers, emotional structuring, and the careful orchestration of affective resonance—techniques that function not merely as aesthetic strategies, but as mechanisms for building trust and relational credibility in a media environment where institutional trust remains volatile. Moreover, by circumventing traditional institutions—state broadcasters, international streamers, and even the established festival circuit—Beisekeyev has effectively constructed a Kazakhstani pop-doc ecosystem, one that privileges reach, im-

mediacy, and social relevance over conventional prestige hierarchies. His work affirms that pop-doc, rather than representing a diminished form of documentary, constitutes an evolved mode of nonfiction storytelling: one attuned to the communicative architectures of platforms, capable of leveraging emotional affect as civic engagement, and oriented toward the active reconstitution of public discourse.

As John Corner has argued, “documentary’s power lies not in objectivity, but in its ability to generate affective proximity to distant realities” (2008, 93). In this regard, Beisekeyev’s pop-docs have operated simultaneously as mirror and engine of contemporary Kazakhstani society: reflecting its emergent anxieties and aspirations while actively shaping the contours of its civic imagination. While Beisekeyev pioneered a direct-to-audience documentary model—rooted in emotional resonance, digital circulation, and civic engagement—the long-term cultural significance of his work lies equally in the infrastructure it created for others to follow. His YouTube channel, amassing over 88 million cumulative views by 2025, demonstrated not only that Kazakhstani nonfiction cinema could bypass traditional institutional frameworks and reach substantial audiences, but also that it could cultivate a durable participatory public. This emergent audience, initially gathered around Beisekeyev’s cinematic voice, rapidly expanded into a broader network of viewers prepared to seek out, respond to, and circulate socially engaged documentary narratives. In this sense, Beisekeyev’s achievement was not merely personal but infrastructural: he catalysed the formation of a viewing public capable of sustaining a more diversified nonfiction culture. This newly constituted public sphere did not remain exclusive to Beisekeyev’s aesthetic or thematic register. It soon expanded to embrace other creators who, while operating through similar digital platforms, brought distinct tones, formats, and journalistic sensibilities. Among the most impactful of these is Rinat Balgabayev, whose work exemplifies a second-wave documentary practice in Kazakhstan: rooted in publicist realism, civic critique, and topic-driven intervention.

Balgabayev operates within the same digital-first environment as Beisekeyev but shifts from emotional, performative storytelling toward a more reportorial and investigative register. His films frequently resemble extended journalistic inquiries, confronting structural silences around issues such as drug addiction, sexual violence, and mental health. Crucially, his trajectory demonstrates not only the growth but the diversification of online documentary audiences in Kazakhstan, revealing an evolving responsiveness to different modes of address and authorship. This diversification is vividly illustrated through viewership metrics:

- *Toy vo vremya chumy* (2021) – approximately 58,000 views
- *Sol* (2022) – approximately 5.1 million views
- *Zakladka* (2024) – approximately 4.3 million views
- *Gorgona* (2024) – approximately 1 million views
- *Zatmenie* (2025) – approximately 1 million views

From a modest initial audience to consistent seven-figure viewerships, this progression signals not merely individual success but the formation of a durable media habit: a Kazakhstani public willing to engage regularly with homegrown, socially engaged nonfiction cinema. This growing engagement supports what Nash, Hight, and Summerhayes (2014) term “new documentary ecologies,” wherein attention

flows through dynamic networks of search, algorithmic recommendation, and social relevance rather than institutional prestige (3). Significantly, both Beisekeyev and Balgabayev leverage the logics of platformization—treating YouTube as archive, distribution channel, and social forum—yet their methods diverge in affect and orientation. If Beisekeyev seeks to move his viewers emotionally, Balgabayev seeks to activate them politically, using documentary as a catalyst for public discourse and, at times, media and policy intervention. His film *Sol* (2022) was widely cited in national debates on synthetic drug epidemics, while *Gorgona* (2024) partnered with UN Women to address the endemic nature of gender-based violence. Rather than existing in competition, Beisekeyev and Balgabayev represent complementary forces within Kazakhstan’s evolving documentary sphere. Beisekeyev helped birth a pop-doc audience receptive to narrative nonfiction as civic encounter; Balgabayev subsequently harnessed and sharpened that audience toward publicist engagement and critical dialogue.

As Sandra Gaudenzi (2019) asserts, “impact is not the result of a message delivered, but of a system activated” (165). In this light, the success of Balgabayev’s films suggests that Beisekeyev’s achievement was not merely in cultivating an audience, but in constructing an open system: a cultural and technological infrastructure capable of sustaining diverse documentary voices, styles, and interventions. Together, their work marks a profound shift in the Kazakhstani nonfiction landscape: from isolated authorship to multivocal documentary culture; from gatekept circulation to audience-driven discovery; and from passive spectatorship to active civic participation. The significance of these developments becomes even more pronounced when situated within Kazakhstan’s demographic context. With a national population of just 19 million (Agency of Strategic Planning and Reforms, Republic of Kazakhstan, 2024), the fact that documentary viewership for independent, socially engaged films consistently reaches into the millions is extraordinary. It underscores the transformative capacity of digital platforms to circumvent traditional infrastructural limitations and demonstrates that documentary cinema, far from remaining peripheral, now constitutes a vibrant and increasingly central mode of civic and cultural engagement in contemporary Kazakhstan.

### **3.3. Between Global Trends and Local Voices: Kazakhstan’s Engagement with International Documentary Paradigms**

For much of its post-independence history, Kazakhstan’s documentary cinema existed in a state of arrested development—technically present but culturally marginal, a vestige of Soviet institutional frameworks rather than a dynamic site of artistic or civic innovation. While the broader society navigated rapid economic modernization and complex political realignments, nonfiction filmmaking remained tethered to outdated paradigms: didactic narration, state-commissioned themes, and limited public circulation. Internationally, Kazakhstan occupied little more than a footnote in global documentary discourse—a “terra incognita” on the nonfiction map, as one festival programmer remarked. Silence, in this context, was not accidental; it was the cumulative result of systemic neglect, infrastructural inertia, and narrow cultural vision. By the



mid-2010s, however, the conditions for transformation had quietly but decisively coalesced. Twenty-four years after independence, Kazakhstan's cultural landscape had matured: a new generation of post-Soviet citizens—digitally fluent, globally aware, and socially engaged—demanded more diverse and resonant forms of cultural expression. Documentary filmmaking, long peripheral, was poised for reinvention. It was not state institutions that led this shift, but young independent filmmakers, who embraced the creative documentary voice as both aesthetic tool and civic instrument.

2015 marked the arrival of Kana Beisekeyev, whose emotionally charged, digitally distributed films redefined the relationship between nonfiction cinema and everyday audiences. In 2016, Katerina Suvorova (Anartaeva) expanded this emergent space through formally ambitious, internationally recognized works that bridged local specificity with transnational sensibilities. Together, they inaugurated a new documentary horizon for Kazakhstan—not merely imitating global trends, but internalizing and adapting them to articulate local identities, struggles, and aspirations. This transformation was not sudden but historically organic. It emerged precisely because of prior stagnation: a deferred evolution that, once unblocked, unfolded with remarkable speed. As Jeffrey Ruoff (1992) has argued, in societies emerging from authoritarian media regimes, the "documentary impulse" often manifests as a collective act of cultural reclamation—an urgent need to fill representational voids, challenge official narratives, and create new spaces of memory, visibility, and dialogue. The filmmakers who emerged in this moment did not simply seek visibility; they sought agency. They deployed documentary not as passive reflection, but as an infrastructural force—reshaping distribution models, reimagining public engagement, and redefining the very parameters of nonfiction storytelling. In doing so, they positioned Kazakhstan's evolving documentary culture at the intersection of local histories and global currents, reclaiming the genre's role as a tool of civic imagination and cultural authorship.

Among this new wave, Katerina Suvorova stands out as a pivotal figure: her work exemplifies how Kazakhstani filmmakers have absorbed global documentary innovations while simultaneously articulating distinctively local—and often subversive—visions of society.

The international trajectory of Katerina Suvorova's *Sea Tomorrow* (2016) represents a watershed moment in the evolution of Kazakhstani documentary cinema. Produced under conditions of institutional neglect and absent systemic support for art-house nonfiction filmmaking, the film nevertheless achieved global visibility, redefining expectations for what a documentary from Kazakhstan could accomplish both aesthetically and in terms of transnational circulation. *Sea Tomorrow*, a lyrical exploration of the human and environmental aftermath of the Aral Sea's desiccation, eschews expository narration and political didacticism in favour of an observational, essayistic approach characterised by patient temporality, visual minimalism, and atmospheric resonance. In so doing, it aligns itself not with domestic documentary traditions—which historically prioritised educational or propagandistic narratives—but with a broader global art documentary lineage exemplified by the works of Sergei Dvortsevov, Gianfranco Rosi, and Chantal Akerman.

Suvorova's methodology reflects a conscious departure from dominant representational modes. Rather than constructing an explanatory framework for international audiences unfamiliar with the region's ecological catastrophe, she creates an affective space in which gestures, landscapes, and the slow labour of survival constitute the primary narrative drivers. This approach resonates with Alisa Lebow's theorisation of the "feminist documentary impulse," which posits that "alternative ways of seeing, narrating, and knowing the world" emerge when filmmakers privilege relationality, opacity, and co-presence over mastery and spectacle (Lebow 2012, 1). Suvorova's camera neither sentimentalises nor objectifies her subjects; instead, it establishes a cinematic ethics grounded in endurance, dignity, and embedded observation. Crucially, the film's success was not confined to critical reception but extended into structural breakthrough. *Sea Tomorrow* premiered at the Locarno Film Festival's Critics' Week, earned accolades at Jihlava and Jean Rouch International Documentary Festival, and, in a historic first for Kazakhstani non-fiction, was acquired by Netflix for distribution across European territories. This acquisition marked a pivotal shift: it positioned Kazakhstani documentary cinema within the global digital distribution ecology for the first time, breaking through both geographic and institutional peripherality. The film's availability on streaming platforms such as Netflix, Amazon Prime Video, and later Apple TV not only amplified its audience reach but also redefined its industrial identity, transforming it from a regional art-house work into a globally accessible cultural artefact.



**Fig. 3.2.** Still from 'Sea Tomorrow' (dir. Katerina Suvorova, 2016).

This moment is best understood not simply as an individual achievement but as a systemic intervention. In a media landscape where, according to UNDP Gender Equality Reports (2020), women directors in Kazakhstan remain severely underrepresented in publicly funded cinematic production, Suvorova's global success challenged

prevailing gender hierarchies within the national film industry. As Deb Verhoeven (2017) argues, "women's breakthroughs in cinema are rarely organic; they typically occur despite, not because of, existing institutional structures." Suvorova's reliance on international co-production models, her successful navigation of European festival circuits, and her strategic engagement with global streaming infrastructures illustrate how female filmmakers, operating from marginal positions within national systems, can leverage global circuits to reconstitute local cinematic traditions. Moreover, *Sea Tomorrow*'s success occurred in a context where state support for documentary cinema remained minimal and ideologically constrained. As Suvorova herself has noted, KazakhCinema allocates approximately 80% of its funding to projects that reflect "positive national images," relegating only a fraction to auteur or critical works, often under conditions that strip them of substantive artistic autonomy (Suvorova 2023). In this regard, *Sea Tomorrow* parallels Hamid Naficy's concept of "accented cinema"-a mode of filmmaking that emerges from the disjunctions and hybridities of marginalised or deterritorialised cultural spaces (Naficy 2001). While Suvorova is not diasporic, the position she occupies-operating within an internally marginalised cinematic field, relying on international infrastructures for survival and circulation-positions her authorship within the accented tradition, marked by negotiation, displacement, and transnational dialogue.

What distinguishes *Sea Tomorrow* from earlier Kazakhstani documentary efforts is its refusal to translate or mediate its subjects for external audiences. It speaks, in Trinh T. Minh-ha's terms, "nearby" rather than "about" its subjects, maintaining a formal and ethical proximity without collapsing into didacticism or exoticisation (Minh-ha 1990). This refusal to offer easy narrative closure or explanatory frameworks grants the film its political power: it insists on the endurance of marginalised communities not as spectacle, but as an ontological fact that resists instrumentalisation. At an industrial level, the Netflix acquisition of *Sea Tomorrow* functioned as both symbolic and material validation, demonstrating that Kazakhstani documentary cinema could meet the formal, technical, and thematic standards of the global streaming economy without compromising artistic integrity. In this sense, Suvorova's achievement can be seen as analogous to the international trajectory of *Honeyland* (2019) from North Macedonia, another case where a small national cinema leveraged co-production frameworks, festival circuits, and platform distribution to achieve disproportionate global visibility. Like *Honeyland*, *Sea Tomorrow* exemplifies how marginal cinemas, through strategic engagement with global infrastructures, can reframe national narratives and cultural imaginaries on the world stage. Thus, *Sea Tomorrow*'s significance lies not only in its creative achievement but in its structural implications. It represents a turning point where Kazakhstani documentary cinema, long confined by institutional inertia and international invisibility, entered the global conversation on its own terms-through a feminist, relational, and deeply local articulation of documentary ethics. It offered a new template for young filmmakers in Kazakhstan, demonstrating that it was possible to bypass domestic gatekeeping structures, to align with global artistic standards, and to construct pathways toward visibility through aesthetic rigor, ethical fidelity, and strategic transnational engagement.

Building on the international precedent set by Katerina Suvorova, Kazakhstan has entered a new phase in the development of its documentary cinema—a phase defined by the emergence of young, predominantly female directors who are reshaping not only the aesthetics of non-fiction filmmaking but also its infrastructures of visibility, production, and distribution. These directors are no longer seeking permission to participate in the cinematic field; they are actively redrawing its boundaries. Their work marks a transition from isolated brilliance to networked emergence, from exceptional individual success to the beginnings of a sustainable, self-articulating documentary culture. A pivotal figure in this transformation is Zhanana Kurmasheva, whose 2025 film *We Live Here* marked a historic breakthrough for Kazakhstani cinema by becoming the first national documentary officially selected for the main competition at CPH:DOX—one of the world's leading platforms for contemporary nonfiction. Until this moment, Kazakhstan had remained largely invisible within premier European documentary circuits, often bypassed in favour of regions with stronger institutional support. As CPH:DOX Artistic Director Kristoffer Nielsen noted, "*We Live Here* is a film that speaks in a whisper yet echoes globally—a rare, necessary voice from a region still underrepresented in world documentary storytelling" (Nielsen 2025). Following its premiere, *We Live Here* traveled to Hot Docs, affirming its relevance within the North American market. Kurmasheva herself framed the achievement not merely as a personal milestone but as a systemic intervention: "We have always had stories. What we lacked was a way to be heard. *We Live Here* is not just my voice—it's the voice of a generation trying to claim a place in the global memory map" (Kurmasheva 2025). Formally, *We Live Here* embodies the aesthetic and ethical sensibilities theorized by Trinh T. Minh-ha's notion of "speaking nearby" (Minh-ha 1990), a documentary practice rooted in relationality, presence, and resistance to objectification. Its fluid, fragmentary structure resists reductive portrayals of Kazakhstan as an exoticized periphery, instead offering a nuanced meditation on survival, memory, and care. *Modern Times Review* praised the film as "a luminous exercise in small-scale cosmopolitanism: a documentary that remains rooted in its soil but attentive to the global winds of change" (Lind 2025). Similarly, the Hot Docs catalogue highlighted how it "breaks the stereotype of Central Asian documentary as trauma spectacle, offering instead a politics of subtle persistence" (Hot Docs 2025). Kurmasheva's success is significant not simply as an artistic achievement but as a structural opening. Her words capture this larger stakes: "This is not just about one film travelling. It's about building roads where there were none before" (Kurmasheva 2025). Following in her wake, a new generation of Kazakhstani female documentarians is further expanding the field's thematic, aesthetic, and institutional horizons.

Kristina Mikhailova's upcoming film *River Dreams*—selected for Docs by the Sea, Circle Women Doc Accelerator, and DOK.Incubator 2025—continues this lineage by blending intimate personal storytelling with structural social critique. Through her initiative *Woman Makes Docs*, founded in 2023, Mikhailova is actively reshaping the gender dynamics of the field, creating spaces where women filmmakers can train, collaborate, and gain visibility. As Ella Shohat and Robert Stam argue, representation is not merely a question of inclusion but "of restructuring the field of visibility and

audibility" (Shohat and Stam 1994, 15)-precisely the work that Mikhailova's generation is undertaking. Similarly, Sasha Shegai's *Acting Classes*-winner of the Edinburgh Pitch and selected for Ex-Oriente Film and IDFA Academy-brings a minimalist, ascetic style to Kazakh documentary practice. Her observational approach, rooted in long takes, bodily vulnerability, and temporal suspension, resonates strongly with Laura Mulvey's notion of delayed cinema, in which cinematic time becomes a site of political reflection rather than mere narrative propulsion (Mulvey 2006, 63). Shegai's work invites viewers into processes of identity formation that unfold slowly, resisting the spectacle-driven imperatives of global media.

Meanwhile, Alina Mustafina's *Gingerbread for Her Dad* (2024)-which premiered at the Busan International Film Festival and later screened at Torino and Cinema Verite in Tehran, winning a jury prize-explores the intergenerational transmission of trauma through a deeply personal journey across borders to locate a family burial site from World War II. The film powerfully evokes Marianne Hirsch's theory of postmemory, illustrating how memories of historical violence are inherited and reactivated through acts of mourning and testimony (Hirsch 2008, 107). In doing so, Mustafina's work dissolves ethnographic distances, embodying Fatimah Tobing Rony's insight that documentary is increasingly being used by women from historically marginalized regions "to wrest control of representation from external gazes" (Rony 1996, 101).

Together, these filmmakers are building what could be called a post-Soviet feminist documentary ecology-an emerging network of practices that centre relational ethics, embodied knowledge, and aesthetic care. Their work refuses the instrumentalization of trauma or the exoticization of marginality. Instead, they prioritize situatedness, complexity, and slow attention to everyday realities. In doing so, they reframe Kazakhstan not as a cinematic blank space, but as a vibrant site of documentary innovation. Moreover, they are not simply adapting to dominant international models-they are subtly reshaping them. Through their strategic engagement with international residencies, co-production forums, and new digital distribution platforms, these directors assert regional authorship within global circuits on their own terms. As Patricia White argues, "feminist cinema is not a genre but a set of interventions into the apparatus of cinema itself" (White 2015, 7). This new generation exemplifies that intervention: destabilizing inherited hierarchies of visibility, reframing whose stories matter, and how they should be told. Their emergence is historically urgent. Kazakhstan's population, just over 19 million as of 2025, means that the YouTube viewership numbers achieved by Beisekeyev, Balgabayev, and now this wave of women filmmakers-often reaching into the millions-represent not just artistic success but profound cultural shifts. They signal the existence of a national and diasporic audience willing to engage with homegrown documentary narratives on an unprecedented scale. Ultimately, this wave of Kazakhstani female documentary authorship transforms silence into polyphony-insisting that the future of Central Asian cinema will be shaped not by absence, but by an expanding chorus of complex, situated, and unapologetically self-authored voices

The current transformation within Kazakhstani documentary cinema signals not only a generational renewal but a profound cultural and industrial realignment. For decades following independence in 1991, Kazakhstan's nonfiction filmmaking re-

mained largely peripheral-underdeveloped institutionally, marginalized culturally, and disconnected from the global circuits increasingly defining contemporary documentary production. Today, however, a quiet but resolute shift is underway, marked by the emergence of new voices, new structures, and new international alliances. At the centre of this evolution lies a deepening engagement with global co-production and distribution frameworks. After years of isolation, Kazakhstani filmmakers are now embedding their projects into transnational documentary ecosystems, not as peripheral guests but as active participants. Projects such as *River Dreams*-a co-production between Kazakhstan, France, and Switzerland currently progressing through leading European development labs-represent a historic breakthrough: the first documentary from Kazakhstan to structurally integrate into European financing, mentorship, and distribution pipelines. If successful, *River Dreams* will set a critical precedent, establishing a replicable model for future collaborations and affirming that Kazakhstani documentary cinema is capable of operating within-and reshaping-global nonfiction currents. Parallel developments reinforce this momentum. *Qyzbolsyn* and *Seal Whisperer*, both entering early stages of international co-production in 2024-2025, signal a growing willingness among Kazakhstani filmmakers to pursue cross-border partnerships not merely for financial necessity but as an artistic and strategic imperative. The international release of Zhanana Kurmasheva's *Atomic Secrets* under the Guardian Documentaries banner in April 2025 further exemplifies the new possibilities: a Kazakhstani filmmaker securing distribution within one of the world's most respected journalistic platforms, thereby bypassing traditional festival bottlenecks and reaching global audiences directly.

These developments mark a shift that is as cultural as it is industrial. For a country that gained sovereignty only three decades ago-and where documentary film was long relegated to archival, educational, or state-commissioned functions-the emergence of a globally connected, creatively ambitious nonfiction sector is nothing short of transformative. It signifies not merely participation in existing global media flows but the aspiration to contribute distinctively to the evolving grammar of contemporary documentary storytelling. Importantly, these new trajectories must not be viewed solely through the lens of market integration. They embody an epistemological intervention: a redefinition of how Kazakhstani realities, subjectivities, and temporalities are constructed and circulated within global visual cultures. As Trinh T. Minh-ha has argued, the political significance lies not only in speaking but in speaking differently-resisting dominant structures of seeing and knowing through alternative cinematic grammars (Minh-ha 1990). The new generation of Kazakhstani filmmakers-particularly the cohort of women directors who have gained increasing international prominence-exemplify this shift. Their works do not merely insert Kazakhstan into global documentary canons; they rearticulate the very terms of engagement, privileging relational aesthetics, affective knowledge, and ethical co-presence over spectacle or exoticism. The emerging co-production frameworks, if successfully consolidated through projects like *River Dreams* and others, will not only increase visibility but structurally alter the foundations of Kazakhstan's documentary sector. They will create new funding pathways, festival alliances, and audience circuits, while nurturing a documentary culture grounded in artistic sovereignty rather than



ideological compliance. In doing so, they offer Kazakhstan an unprecedented opportunity: to author its own place within the global documentary imagination-not as a latecomer or anomaly, but as a fully participating, self-defining voice. Thus, the current moment must be understood not as a culmination but as an inflection point: a still-fragile but deeply significant opening toward a more pluralistic, interconnected, and ethically reflexive documentary future. It is a future authored through the voices, images, and interventions of those who for decades were marginalized within both national and international structures-and who now, through persistence, artistry, and strategic vision, are reshaping them.

While recent advances in production and international co-production mark a crucial turning point for Kazakhstani documentary cinema, the question of distribution remains a persistent and systemic challenge. Despite the global realignment of media toward digital platforms, Kazakhstan remains a country where television continues to play a dominant role in information dissemination, particularly among regional audiences. In this context, the recent restructuring that merged the Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Information into a single governmental body offers an important, if still largely untapped, opportunity: the reintegration of documentaries into national broadcast ecosystems. Historically, television served as the principal distribution channel for nonfiction cinema, providing both visibility and social legitimacy. In the post-independence period, however, the documentary genre became increasingly marginalized on domestic television, displaced by imported entertainment formats and locally produced serial fiction. Today, despite the nascent rise of streaming initiatives such as UNICO, Freedom, and Salem Entertainment-platforms that operate exclusively online and primarily target urban, digitally literate audiences-the national documentary audience remains fragmented and largely underserved. Platformization is a growing but still embryonic phenomenon; television, particularly regional networks, continues to offer the widest access point for documentary storytelling.

At the same time, the traditional theatrical and festival ecosystems for documentary films remain weakly institutionalized. Major national film festivals such as Eurasia International Film Festival (IFF) do not offer dedicated documentary sections, and Bastau IFF's inclusion of nonfiction works remains irregular, contingent upon financial resources and regional availability rather than systematic commitment. Against this backdrop, the emergence of the Qara Film Festival in Almaty represents a profound and necessary intervention. As the first festival in Kazakhstan solely devoted to documentary cinema, Qara provides a stable platform for screening, critical discussion, and audience cultivation. It facilitates an ecosystem where documentary films are not treated as marginal educational supplements but as vital artistic and civic contributions to national cultural life. The importance of Qara cannot be overstated: documentary cinema thrives not merely through production, but through visibility, discourse, and public encounter. Festivals such as Qara create the conditions under which documentary can evolve-from isolated acts of individual authorship into a collective cultural practice. As Trinh T. Minh-ha reminds us, cinema is not only a tool of representation but a "site of encounter" (Minh-ha 1990), where meaning is co-produced through viewing, dialogue, and reflection. In the absence of consistent broadcast support or widespread commercial theatrical exhibition, festival infrastructures

like Qara play an essential role in sustaining creative documentary practice in Kazakhstan.

Moreover, the emergence of platforms for theatrical exhibition challenges the outdated assumption that documentaries are secondary to fiction films in their right to occupy cinema screens. Creative documentary-particularly in its observational, hybrid, and essayistic forms-is made for the big screen, where its aesthetic ambitions, immersive temporalities, and sensory complexities can be fully experienced. Reducing documentary cinema to television broadcasting alone not only diminishes its artistic possibilities but reinforces hierarchical distinctions between fiction and non-fiction that are increasingly irrelevant within contemporary media ecologies. As Patricia Aufderheide (2007) argues, the documentary is not merely a report on reality; it is a crafted, affective, and intellectual engagement with the world that demands the same cultural space and institutional respect as narrative fiction. The critical success of recent documentaries such as *We Live Here* and *Gingerbread for Her Dad* further underscores the urgency and potential of resolving this distributional impasse. Both films have secured representation through international sales agents-a rare development for Kazakhstani documentary works-suggesting that there is growing interest in Kazakhstani stories not only at home but within the global nonfiction market. These international placements indicate a shifting perception: Kazakh documentaries are no longer seen solely as local artefacts but are beginning to be valued as globally resonant cultural products. Nevertheless, without strategic reintegration into national television programming, sustained festival infrastructures, and the normalization of theatrical exhibition for documentaries, these successes will remain isolated rather than systemic. If Kazakhstan's emerging generation of filmmakers is to consolidate the gains achieved through recent festival accolades and international partnerships, distribution infrastructure must evolve accordingly. Public broadcasters, particularly in light of the new unified Ministry structure, have a renewed mandate to support the visibility of national documentary works-not as marginal programming, but as integral components of cultural policy, public dialogue, and national memory formation. The window of opportunity is narrow but significant. As streaming culture slowly expands, and as the global appetite for regionally grounded documentary narratives continues to grow, Kazakhstan stands at a critical crossroads: it can either relegate its nonfiction cinema to a niche existence or leverage this moment to build a robust, multi-channel documentary distribution ecosystem-one that reflects the complexity, diversity, and aspirations of its contemporary society.

The evolving landscape of documentary filmmaking in Central Asia today unfolds at a critical intersection, negotiating between the drive for formal innovation and the imperative to safeguard national identity and cultural memory. With growing exposure to global cinematic practices-including interactive storytelling, augmented reality applications, and hybrid docufiction techniques-Central Asian filmmakers have increasingly integrated international trends into their creative repertoires. While these innovations have expanded the expressive possibilities of documentary practice and enhanced its global appeal, they simultaneously pose complex cultural and ethical challenges (Dönmez-Colin, 2019). At the heart of these concerns lies the question of respectful representation. Documentary cinema in Central Asia has historically func-



tioned as a custodian of collective memory, a medium through which the region's distinct cultural traditions, historical narratives, and social practices are preserved and transmitted (Isaacs & Polese, 2015). Innovations that pursue experimental forms without careful cultural calibration risk distorting these foundations, unintentionally erasing or simplifying nuanced identities. As Gulnara Abikeyeva (2013) argues, the accelerated adoption of global formats can lead to "a loss of local specificity," flattening rich historical textures into commodified, exportable images. Thus, Central Asian filmmakers must navigate a delicate ethical terrain: embracing creative renewal while ensuring that the aesthetic and narrative registers they employ remain faithful to the lived realities and values of their societies.

Focusing specifically on Kazakhstan, these tensions acquire heightened significance. Documentary cinema in Kazakhstan occupies a crucial position in mediating the country's evolving post-Soviet identity. Following independence in 1991, Kazakhstan's cultural institutions sought to articulate a national narrative that both reclaimed indigenous traditions and projected a modern, globally engaged image. Documentary filmmakers, therefore, find themselves at a crossroads: one path involves deeper integration with global documentary methodologies-adopting universal themes, character-driven arcs, and algorithmically friendly formats-potentially increasing international relevance but risking cultural dilution. The other path prioritises the reinforcement of national themes, traditional aesthetics, and local epistemologies, safeguarding cultural authenticity but potentially constraining global resonance and creative flexibility. However, as recent developments in Kazakhstani documentary suggest, a transformative third path is emerging-one that fuses innovation and cultural authenticity rather than treating them as oppositional forces. This path recognises that innovation, when grounded in a deep understanding of national histories and sensibilities, can expand rather than diminish cultural specificity. It allows Kazakh filmmakers to craft works that are both locally rooted and globally resonant, translating indigenous experiences into cinematic languages that engage broader audiences without sacrificing integrity. Films like *We Live Here* (Kurmasheva, 2025) and *Gingerbread for Her Dad* (Mustafina, 2024) exemplify this synthesis, combining personal, historically situated narratives with aesthetic forms that are recognisable within global documentary discourse. At stake is more than aesthetic strategy; it is the future cultural authorship of Kazakhstan within international non-fiction cinema. As Dönmez-Colin (2019) stresses, achieving a meaningful balance requires not only individual ethical vigilance but institutional support. National cinema centres, cultural ministries, and independent documentary festivals must play active roles by providing platforms for dialogue, ethical reflection, and capacity-building. Initiatives such as training workshops in responsible storytelling, ethical production guidelines, and public conversations on documentary representation are crucial in equipping filmmakers to innovate without eroding cultural memory.

Moreover, international collaborations-while valuable-must be approached critically. Participation in global documentary markets and festivals should enhance, rather than homogenise, the Kazakh documentary voice. Partnerships must be built on mutual respect, cultural sensitivity, and a recognition of asymmetrical power dynamics that often shape transnational co-productions (Isaacs & Polese, 2015). In this regard, the

recent developments in Kazakhstan's documentary sector—including the successes of international co-productions like *River Dreams* (Mikhailova, Kazakhstan-France-Switzerland) and *Atomic Secrets* (Kurmasheva, 2025)—offer cautious optimism. These projects suggest that Kazakhstani filmmakers are increasingly adept at navigating global platforms without forfeiting their narrative sovereignty. Ultimately, the sustainable future of Kazakhstani documentary lies in this active negotiation: embracing the liberatory potential of new technologies and global circulation while remaining anchored in the ethical, historical, and cultural particularities that constitute the nation's collective identity. The challenge is formidable, but the opportunity—to redefine national cinema as both locally meaningful and globally resonant—is equally profound.

### Conclusion for Chapter III

The evolution of documentary cinema in Kazakhstan—from its Soviet-era propagandist origins to its current complex entanglement with state directives, independent experimentation, and global market forces—reveals a multifaceted and uneven development. This chapter has charted the formation of Kazakh nonfiction cinema as both an artistic practice and an institutional structure, foregrounding the dynamic interplay between narrative transformation, production paradigms, and mechanisms of distribution. The historical periodisation presented here underscores the cyclical character of documentary production in Kazakhstan: from the ideologically rigid “Period of Instrument” and the slogan-driven aesthetics of wartime agitki, through the stylistic liberation of the “Period of Poetics” and the genre diversification of the late Soviet years, to the precarious restructuring of the post-independence era. Central to this evolution has been *Kazakhfilm named after Shaken Aimanov*, a studio that simultaneously served as a crucible for innovation and a site of persistent structural inertia. Its trajectory reveals not only moments of artistic and institutional resilience but also sustained patterns of narrative ossification, managerial fragility, and systemic dependency on state patronage.

The chapter has demonstrated that documentary narrative in Kazakhstan has continually negotiated the boundaries between propaganda and poetics, instruction and introspection. Figures such as Oraz Abishev and Yuri Piskunov laid foundational aesthetic and thematic blueprints, while later generations tested the limits of genre, authorship, and cinematic language. Yet, despite individual breakthroughs, the overall system remained—and to a significant extent remains—resistant to sustained innovation, particularly in its reluctance to decentralise funding decisions, expand distribution channels, and embrace non-hegemonic narratives. The 2010s and 2020s have intensified these contradictions. While independent studios and auteur filmmakers have redefined the possibilities of Kazakh documentary cinema through transnational co-productions, festival strategies, and hybrid aesthetics, *Kazakhfilm* has largely failed to transition into a competitive player in the digital and globalised media landscape. Its structural rigidity—manifested in narrative conservatism, limited investment in research and development, and inadequate distribution infrastructure—has relegated much of its output to cultural invisibility. Even films with notable artistic merit rarely

reach their intended audiences, undermining the genre's potential as a vehicle for civic dialogue, cultural reflection, and international engagement. At the same time, the post-Soviet documentary landscape in Kazakhstan is not merely one of institutional lag but of emerging alternatives. A growing cohort of independent filmmakers has embraced participatory modes, creative nonfiction, and international networks to bypass outdated systems. Their work signals a reconfiguration of authorship and agency in the Kazakh documentary tradition, offering new models for both production and reception.

As the nation moves deeper into the digital age, the challenges facing Kazakh documentary cinema—ideological gatekeeping, distributional fragmentation, and narrative standardisation—demand structural reform and imaginative recalibration. Whether the genre will realise its full potential as a space of truth-telling, historical memory, and social critique will depend on its capacity to reconcile the demands of artistic autonomy with the pressures of institutional change. This chapter thus positions documentary cinema in Kazakhstan not as a static heritage, but as a contested and evolving field—one whose future remains inseparable from broader cultural, technological, and political transformations.

## CONCLUSION

Chapter 1 provided a critical investigation into the historical and philosophical evolution of documentary cinema, tracing its development from the earliest actuality films of the Lumière brothers to the hybridized forms that define the digital age. Across this trajectory, documentary film has continually negotiated the tension between recording reality and constructing narrative, between bearing witness and mediating experience. Technological transformations—from cinematographic innovation to broadcast television, digital platforms, VR, and AI—have not merely expanded technical possibilities but have deeply reshaped the epistemological, ethical, and aesthetic foundations of nonfiction storytelling.

The analysis demonstrated that the digital era has not simply offered new tools for documentary production but has profoundly challenged the assumptions underpinning its cultural authority. The emergence of the post-truth condition, as theorized by thinkers such as Hannah Arendt, Jean Baudrillard, and Michel Foucault, has destabilized documentary's traditional claims to verifiability, objectivity, and public trust. In this fractured media environment, documentary cinema must continuously renegotiate its role, balancing the demand for emotional engagement against the need for evidentiary rigor and ethical transparency.

Through the close analysis of landmark contemporary documentaries—*The Edge of Democracy*, *13th*, *Summer of Soul*, and *All the Beauty and the Bloodshed*—the chapter illustrated how modern filmmakers navigate the contested terrain of truth, bias, and manipulation. Rather than presenting themselves as neutral observers, these works embrace reflexivity, foreground subjective positioning, and construct complex, layered engagements with historical, political, and personal realities. They demonstrate that bias, when critically acknowledged and ethically deployed, can function as a tool for strengthening documentary authority rather than diminishing it.

Furthermore, the transformation of audience behavior—from passive consumption to critical engagement and participatory interpretation—was shown to compound the ethical challenges facing documentary filmmakers. In a saturated information economy where skepticism and distrust prevail, filmmakers are called upon not only to present compelling narratives but to foster critical literacy and epistemological awareness among their audiences. Documentary is thus increasingly positioned as a pedagogical and philosophical practice as much as a cinematic one.

The philosophical reflection concluding this chapter emphasized that nonfiction filmmaking in the digital era is not defined by the abandonment of truth but by the critical reinvention of how truth is produced, represented, and defended. Drawing on the insights of Nichols, Williams, and Aufderheide, the chapter argued that documentary cinema's resilience lies in its ability to embrace complexity, to navigate the constructedness of representation without forfeiting its ethical commitment to the real.

Thus, the evolution of documentary cinema, examined through technological, aesthetic, ethical, and philosophical lenses, reveals a field in dynamic negotiation with the conditions of the digital and post-truth age. Documentary filmmaking today stands not as a guarantor of objective reality, but as a critical practice that mediates

between complex realities, emotional truths, and ethical imperatives. As filmmakers confront the fragmentation of audiences, the politicization of truth, and the demands of new technologies, they redefine the possibilities of nonfiction storytelling for a rapidly transforming global culture.

Building on this critical foundation, the next chapter turns to a comparative exploration of documentary practices across key cinematic regions-tracing how the United States, Europe, Asia, and Kazakhstan navigate the global challenges of technological disruption, ethical responsibility, and evolving distribution models.

Chapter 2 of this dissertation examined the profound structural, technological, and aesthetic transformations that have reconfigured the global documentary landscape between 2010 and 2025. Through the analysis of shifting production practices, emerging regional patterns, technological innovations, and new market configurations, this chapter sought to illuminate how the contemporary documentary field has evolved - simultaneously expanding its reach and fragmenting its modes of production and distribution.

The first section focused on the United States, where the evolution of documentary cinema has been inextricably linked to the rise of digital streaming platforms. Historically, American documentaries had demonstrated box office potential - with figures like Michael Moore establishing the viability of documentary films as commercial hits. However, it was the advent of Netflix's streaming model that catalyzed a seismic shift. Beginning with acquisitions like *The Square* (2013) and *Making a Murderer* (2015), Netflix positioned documentaries not only as informative works but as commercially lucrative and culturally influential properties. The success of docuseries such as *Don't F\*\*k with Cats* and *Making a Murderer* illustrated how streaming platforms mainstreamed true crime narratives and constructed new global viewing habits through binge-watching cultures. Netflix further innovated by developing high-profile docudramas like *Rise of Empires: Ottoman* (2020-2022) and *Alexander: The Making of a God* (2024), blurring lines between entertainment and nonfiction, a phenomenon that can be linked to early cinema's "cinema of attractions," as foreseen by Eisenstein. Nevertheless, the rise of streaming also introduced new tensions between commercial pressures and creative freedom, raising critical questions about how algorithms, marketability, and audience metrics now shape documentary production. In contrast, analyzed how European documentary production has largely maintained public funding structures and emphasized transnational cooperation as a means of safeguarding creative diversity. Through co-production treaties and cross-border collaboration, Europe has established an alternative model where art-house and politically sensitive documentaries - such as *Honeyland* (2019), *House Made of Splinters* (2022), and *No Other Land* (2024) - thrive despite market volatility. European film festivals like Cannes, Berlinale, Venice, IDFA, and CPH:DOX increasingly feature predominantly co-produced works in their main competitions, illustrating how the co-production system enables artistic ambition while enhancing distribution access across multiple territories. This section also addressed the growing role of documentary festivals as secondary distributors, especially following COVID-19, with platforms such as CPH:DOX and IDFA offering hybrid screenings that extended audience reach beyond traditional cinephile circles. Europe's model, however, faces its

own pressures: rising commercialization, audience fragmentation, and the need for continuous innovation to maintain documentary's cultural centrality. Section 2.3 shifted focus to Asia, where documentary production and distribution have evolved through highly dynamic - yet regionally specific - patterns. In China, despite systemic constraints on free expression, independent filmmakers found avenues for circulation through international co-productions, festivals like GZDOC, and streaming channels, with films such as *The Chinese Mayor* and *Minding the Gap* illustrating emerging hybrid practices. Notably, China's domestic streaming platforms, such as Tencent Video and iQIYI, have become important vehicles for documentary visibility, reflecting both market expansion and political sensitivities. In South Korea, the documentary sector has experienced remarkable growth, propelled by domestic box office successes (*My Love, Don't Cross That River*), international awards (IDFA, Sundance), and strategic institutional support via DMZ Docs, EIDF, and strong engagement with Netflix. Korean documentaries navigated a hybrid space where both state funding and commercial innovation supported a vibrant nonfiction ecosystem. Japan, meanwhile, continued to nurture a culturally specific approach through festivals like YIDFF and industry initiatives like Tokyo Docs. Although Japan's documentary sector remained more insular compared to South Korea's outward-facing growth, the expansion of domestic streaming (NHK+, Amazon Prime Japan) helped democratize access. Japan's fusion of heritage institutions and cautious digital adoption suggests a different - but equally significant - model for documentary evolution in Asia. The final section analyzed the overarching global shifts in documentary production and distribution systems, marked by hybridization and fragmentation. Hybridization manifests through genre-blurring formats: docudramas, serialized true-crime sagas, and participatory nonfiction. Distribution has simultaneously fragmented, with streaming services dominating viewership but failing to ensure long-term sustainability for most independent documentaries. Festivals, once definitive launching pads, now coexist uneasily with direct-to-streaming models. New platforms like Disney+, Apple TV+, and HBO Max have institutionalized documentary content into branded ecosystems, while Netflix's shift toward serialized "docutainment" highlights the commercial pressures facing nonfiction cinema. In parallel, independent documentaries increasingly rely on multifaceted strategies - impact campaigns, niche VOD services, NGO partnerships - to find visibility and viability.

Chapter III The evolution of Kazakhstani documentary cinema in the post-independence era reflects a complex and at times contradictory trajectory, shaped by the interplay of globalisation, cultural resilience, and institutional inertia. From the early decades of systemic stagnation-where documentary production was largely subsumed under state-mandated thematic plans-to the emergence of a new generation of globally oriented filmmakers, Kazakhstan's nonfiction sector has gradually redefined its position within both national and international cultural spheres. For much of the post-1991 period, the documentary sector remained constrained by rigid production frameworks, with films commissioned almost exclusively through state funding mechanisms tied to prescriptive thematic agendas. These plans, intended to reinforce cultural heritage and promote national identity, often limited the thematic diversification and aesthetic experimentation necessary for a vibrant and globally competitive

documentary culture. As a result, documentary cinema was institutionally marginalised-functioning primarily as an archival or didactic tool, rather than a site of artistic innovation or public engagement. However, beginning in the mid-2010s, a discernible shift emerged. The pioneering international successes of films such as *Sea Tomorrow* (2016), *We Live Here* (2025), and *Gingerbread for Her Dad* (2024) signalled a growing capacity among Kazakhstani documentarians to navigate global circuits on their own terms. The rise of direct-to-audience digital strategies, the establishment of independent production infrastructures, and the integration of international co-production models-exemplified by projects such as *River Dreams* and *Atomic Secrets*-have collectively begun to erode the monopolistic influence of state commissioning on the documentary field. Yet even as new avenues for creative and structural autonomy have opened, the legacy of stagnation continues to exert influence. State funding remains the primary financing source for most domestic productions, and its logic-centered on thematic conformity and positive national imagery-continues to delimit the full diversification of documentary voices. Without substantive reform to the funding frameworks and the establishment of independent documentary support mechanisms, the current momentum risks remaining fragile, dependent on individual initiatives rather than systemic sustainability. At the same time, the rise of new documentary platforms-such as the Qara Film Festival-and the growing presence of Kazakhstani documentaries in international markets and sales agencies mark an important shift toward infrastructural evolution. Crucially, the renewed integration of the Ministry of Culture and Information offers a potential opportunity for rethinking documentary distribution strategies, particularly by restoring non-fiction cinema's rightful place on national television-a medium still central to reaching Kazakhstan's broad regional audiences. Importantly, this transformation must not be interpreted merely as an increase in production volume or international recognition. Rather, it signals a deeper paradigmatic reorientation: documentary is moving from the margins of Kazakh cultural life toward becoming a critical space for civic dialogue, historical reflection, and creative experimentation. The work of filmmakers such as Katerina Suvorova, Zhannara Kurmasheva, Kristina Mikhailova, Sasha Shegai, and Alina Mustafina exemplifies this shift-articulating new cinematic grammars rooted in feminist critique, intergenerational memory, aesthetic hybridity, and ethical engagement. Nevertheless, the balance between innovation and cultural authenticity remains delicate. As Kazakhstani filmmakers increasingly engage with global aesthetic trends and technological innovations, the ethical imperative to preserve narrative specificity, cultural nuance, and community accountability grows more pressing. It is only through a sustained commitment to thoughtful hybridity-where global methods are adapted rather than adopted wholesale-that Kazakhstan's documentary cinema can fully realise its dual potential: as a custodian of national memory and a dynamic participant in global documentary discourse. In this sense, the future of Kazakhstani documentary cinema stands at a critical juncture. With careful strategic support, infrastructural expansion, and ethical vigilance, Kazakhstan can move beyond isolated successes toward the creation of a robust, pluralistic, and internationally resonant documentary culture-one that not only reflects the nation's evolving identity but actively shapes its cultural authorship on the global stage.

## **Recommendations:**

While Kazakhstan's documentary sector has undergone visible transformation over the past decade, genuine structural prosperity will depend on the integration of key international best practices. Globally, successful documentary ecosystems-such as those in Denmark, France, Canada, and South Korea-have achieved sustainability through a combination of targeted funding mechanisms, creative ecosystem development, and strategic audience-building infrastructures. For Kazakhstan to fully realize the potential of its emerging documentary voices, similar models must be thoughtfully adapted to the local context.

A first crucial step involves reforming the funding landscape. Internationally, countries such as Denmark and Canada maintain dedicated documentary funds, recognizing nonfiction cinema as a distinct form requiring specialised support. Kazakhstan would benefit from establishing a similar "KazDoc Fund," offering grants designed specifically for research, development, and production phases of documentary projects. Equally important is the introduction of flexible development support-a model successfully employed by the Netherlands Film Fund-where small grants are issued for early-stage research without the burdensome administrative requirements typical of full production financing. This would allow Kazakhstani filmmakers to develop innovative ideas without prematurely forcing projects into rigid structures.

Another critical area of reform is the expansion of international co-production frameworks. France and South Korea, for instance, have built extensive bilateral and multilateral audiovisual treaties to secure cross-border financing, talent exchange, and distribution. Kazakhstan must prioritise the negotiation of Central Asian regional co-production agreements, beginning with immediate neighbours such as Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, and gradually extending to wider partnerships with European and Asian co-producers. Recent projects like *River Dreams* (Kazakhstan/France/Switzerland) and *Atomic Secrets* (Kazakhstan/UK) demonstrate that Kazakhstani documentaries can find international partners; institutionalising these pathways would systematise rather than exceptionalise such successes.

At the national level, the television sector represents an underutilised avenue for documentary circulation. Countries such as France mandate public broadcasters like ARTE to commission and air domestic documentaries, ensuring year-round visibility for nonfiction works. Kazakhstan could adopt a similar model, requiring national and regional broadcasters to allocate a percentage of their programming budgets and slots specifically to Kazakhstani documentaries. This would be especially impactful given the dominance of television in rural regions, where streaming platforms are only beginning to penetrate. Moreover, emerging online distribution platforms such as UNICO, Freedom, and Salem Entertainment offer promising new channels, but these need to be complemented by broader state support for marketing, impact campaigns, and audience education to fully integrate documentary films into public consciousness.

Educational reform is equally urgent. Leading documentary nations such as France and Denmark support dedicated documentary directing programs, combining rigorous creative training with ethical and technical instruction. Kazakhstan should establish a specialised academic track in documentary filmmaking-ideally embedded with-



in national film schools-to cultivate a new generation of documentarians versed not only in traditional methods, but in contemporary practices such as interactive nonfiction, VR/AR documentary, and impact-driven storytelling. In parallel, the creation of national Documentary Labs tied to platforms like the Qara Film Festival would nurture early-stage projects, mentor emerging directors, and create pipelines to international festivals and markets.

Distribution structures must also be reimaged. Globally, niche documentary streaming services such as DAFilms and OVID.tv have complemented dominant platforms like Netflix by offering spaces for politically engaged, formally innovative, and culturally specific nonfiction films. Kazakhstan could build a national documentary platform that streams domestic nonfiction works to both local and international audiences, promoting access and discoverability. Such an initiative would mirror successful models in Eastern Europe and Canada, reinforcing documentary's civic and cultural role while diversifying revenue streams for filmmakers.

Importantly, the need for ethical frameworks must not be overlooked. In Canada and parts of Europe, funding bodies now require ethical declarations when filmmakers work with vulnerable communities or sensitive topics. Kazakhstan's documentary system should integrate similar standards, ensuring that innovation does not come at the expense of ethical representation, especially given the documentary form's deep entanglement with social realities.

Across all these areas, a consistent principle emerges: innovation must be tied to cultural specificity, and global integration must be pursued without erasing national identity. Kazakhstan is at a pivotal moment. With the convergence of new production voices, growing international recognition, and a tentative but real expansion of platforms and funding avenues, the foundations for a vibrant documentary sector are now visible. However, achieving lasting prosperity will require deliberate, strategic integration of global best practices-adapting them intelligently to local needs, histories, and ambitions.

By establishing a documentary-specific funding ecosystem, developing regional and international co-production networks, reforming television and digital distribution infrastructures, creating formal training programs, and institutionalising ethical guidelines, Kazakhstan can not only sustain its current momentum but reposition itself as a leading documentary hub in Central Asia. If these steps are taken seriously, the 2020s will be remembered not simply as a decade of emerging voices, but as the beginning of a systemic redefinition of Kazakhstani documentary cinema within the global non-fiction landscape.

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We Live Here (2025), Directed by: Zhanana Kurmasheva, Country: Kazakhstan  
Won't You Be My Neighbor? (2018), Directed by: Morgan Neville, Country: USA  
Winter in Rehab (2024), Directed by: Kanat Beisekeyev, Country: Kazakhstan  
Zhaktau: Chronicle of the Dead Sea (1989–1990), Directed by: Sergey Azimov,  
Country: Kazakhstan  
Zakladka (2024), Directed by: Rinat Balgabayev, Country: Kazakhstan  
Zatmenie (2025), Directed by: Rinat Balgabayev, Country: Kazakhstan  
Zero Days (2016), Directed by: Alex Gibney, Country: USA  
Zootopia (2016), Directed by: Byron Howard & Rich Moore, Country: USA

**Appendix A.** Data for Produced films by National Film Studio 'Kazakhfilm' named after Shaken Aimanov from 1990-2019

**Documentary films 1990**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Title</b>	<b>Budget in RUB</b>
1990	Nazvanie filma	17,900
1990	10 minut po Sovetskomu Kazakhstanu	22,000
1990	Aityys	24,300
1990	Atameken	24,300
1990	Biokonservanty	24,300
1990	Bolshoi khleb Kazakhstana	24,500
1990	Bugorok	14,300
1990	V den Pobedy	15,600
1990	Vstrechi v Turtsii	15,600
1990	Gepard vozvrashchaetsya («Kletka»)	24,300
1990	Glubokie korni	14,300
1990	Dni Kazakhstana v FRG	19,200
1990	Doroga zhizni	24,500
1990	Zhizn i smert D.Kozhubergenova	22,000
1990	Zhudus Kuzhamyarov	66,700
1990	Zdravnitsy Kazakhstana	24,500
1990	Istrebitel mukh (Zhizn sredi sobak)	22,000
1990	Kairat Baibosynov	24,300
1990	Kazakhstan segodnya	17,900
1990	Kazakhstan na puti stanovleniya (Sovetskii Kazakhstan)	14,300
1990	Kolya	46,800
1990	Kudryavyi pelikan	14,300
1990	Lichnoe delo D.Dzhambusynova	36,300
1990	Lunnyi Perro	24,300
1990	Magistral	42,200
1990	Miss garantiruet	44,800
1990	My zdes zhivem	22,000

1990	Nedopisannyi portret (Semya V-9)	19,200
1990	Proshu isklyuchit iz chlenov KPSS	28,700
1990	Progressivnaya tekhnologiya vyrashchivaniya urozhaya vinograda	22,000
1990	Samul iz Nizhnei Plozhki	42,200
1990	Sarbulak	14,300
1990	Smert poeta	152,400
1990	Stepnaya syuita	24,500
1990	Tam, v dalekoi pustyne	14,300
1990	Tamada	24,300
1990	Tekhnologiya i obsluzhivanie Mashinno-traktornogo parka	24,500
1990	Trebuetsya kharakter	25,300
1990	Turmagambet-Zhyrau	24,300
1990	Shelkovyi put	24,300
1990	Shchedrost pustyni»	152,400
1990	Stepnaya syuita	25,300
1990	Turmagambet-Zhyrau	<b>177,700</b>
<b>2010</b>	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>1,305,500</b>

## Documentary films 1991

Year	Title	Director	Budget in RUB
1991	A zatem	D.Piskunov	155,400
1991	Alan Medoev» (Gravyury iz zhizni)	A.Suleeva	144,800
1991	Aral – sudba moya	G.Emelyanov	144,800
1991	Baklany	L.Mukhamedgalieva	35,500
1991	Bismillya, rakhman, Rakhim	zakaz	14,300
1991	Volchatnik	A.Milyukov	23,100
1991	Den Grazhdanskoi oborony v shkole	O.Zhunosov (zakaznoi)	28,200
1991	Deti solntsa	O.Garifulina	35,500
1991	Zharyk	zakaz	23,100

1991	Zhertvoprinoshenie	E.Dilmukhamedova	25,300
1991	Zagadki tyurkskoi runiki	zakaz	25,300
1991	Zemletryasenie i chelovek	V.Vasilchenko	15,400
1991	Zemlya-Vostok (Zemlya, s kotoroi startoval Vostok)	A.Nugmanov	22,000
1991	Idris Nogaibaev	M.Vasilev	35,500
1991	Kiyanat (Zaisan)	S.Azimov	35,500
1991	Krestyanskoe khozyaistvo Leontevykh	A.Kadyrbekov	35,500
1991	Lombard	K.Ismagulova	23,100
1991	Mukagali Makataev	M.Vasilev, O.Kozhanov	35,500
1991	Neftyanye volki	zakaz	35,500
1991	Potomki Bian-khu	A.Kadyrbekov	39,500
1991	Ushu v ritme valsa (Provintsialnoe u-shu)	A.Altynbekov	39,500
1991	Strepet	L.Mukhamedgalieva (zakaznoi)	76,900
1991	Tolgau	A.Shazhimbaev	35,500
1991	Flagman menyaet kurs (Flagman vsegda vpered)	V.Ramenskii (zakaznoi)	153,500
1991	Khronika dvukh dnei (Khronika neobyavlennoi demonstratsii)	A.Baigozhina	141,300
1991	Ledi Chimbulak (Chimbulak)	G.Sultanbekova	23,100
1991	Ekho kosmicheskikh trass (Kosmos sluzhit zemle)	Yu.Litvyakov	115,400
1991	Tamyry	zakaz	39,500
<b>1991</b>	<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>1,634,400</b>
1991	Zagadki tyurkskoi runiki	non-fiction	25,300

<b>1991</b>	<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>25,300</b>
<b>1991</b>	<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>1,659,700</b>

## Documentary films 1992

Year	Title	Director	Budget in KZT
1992	Akter Anuar Moldabekov	A.Shazhimbaev	782,230
1992	Glinyanaya kniga Rysbeka Akhme-tova	N.Trotsenko	782,230
1992	Gorod, zaveshchannyi predkami (Turkestan)	A.Kadyrbekov	782,230
1992	10 minut po Almate	A.Nugmanov	76,900
1992	I uvidel novuyu zemlyu (Zemlya i lyudi — II)	L.Gurevich, A.Laptev (zakaznoi)	16,300
1992	Raion plavaniya ne ogranichen	V.Degtyarev	142,200
1992	Skalolazy	S.Kornilin	446,770
1992	Tam za oblakami	L.Mukhamedgalieva	
1992	AS (Vsemi zabytyi)		782,230
1992	Druzhba i koshelek		782,300
1992	Biken apai		782,300
1992	Evangelie ot Brenta		782,230
1992	Vtoroe rozhdenie		446,770
1992	Ilyas Omarov		782,230
1992	Istoriya	zakaznoi	28,500
1992	Flagman menyaet kurs	zakaznoi	56,800
1992	Krestyanskii vopros	zakaznoi	769,280
1992	Ya ponyal zhizni tsel svoyu	D.Piskunov	782,230
<b>1992</b>	<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>9,023,730</b>
1992	Ya — Eraziets	non-fiction	384,620

1992	Sinyaya ptitsa	non-fiction	986,850
<b>1992</b>	<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>1,371,470</b>
<b>1992</b>	<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>10,395,200</b>

### Documentary films 1993

Year	Title	Director	Budget in RUB
1993	Akhan Sere	O.Zhunusov	31490
1993	Gvardiya	A.Kadyrbekov	14380
1993	Zhumat Shanin	A.Shazhimbaev	10260
1993	Zoloto Kazakhstan (Zoloto Respubliki)	D.Piskunov	33080
1993	Vtoroe zamuzhestvo Marii	G.Emelyanov	3280
1993	Polet NLO	L.Losunova	2910
1993	Professiya-kontroler	D.Omirbaev	
1993	Rem (Sobachii krematorii)	V.Tyulkin	54380
1993	Yarmarka v Koyande	V.Tatenko	
1993	Skalolazy	S.Kornilin	
1993	Kochevnik-nevidimka	G.Roitman	
1993	Promyshlennyy alpinizm	G.Smirnov	490
1993	KazGU — 60 let	V.Khiltov	2660
1993	Dobroe imya zemledeltsa	N.Trotsenko	9390
1993	Vospominaniya o trenere		15480
1993	Zhizn ne tolko muravya		31740
<b>1993</b>	<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>209540</b>
1993	Vozvrashchenie v lono neba»(Domusulmanskie obryady)	K.Kaiyrbekov	35720
1993	Sheberler	M.Baikanov	35730
1993	Raiskie ptitsy	L.Mukhamedgalieva	42020
1993	Orel stervyatnik (Orlinaya step)	L.Mukhamedgalieva	33500
<b>1993</b>	<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>146970</b>
<b>1993</b>	<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>356510</b>

### Documentary films 1994

Year	Title	Director	Budget in KZT
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1994	Sudba khronikera ili khronika sud-by	G.Emelyanov	588,500
1994	Portret vne ramy (Parallel)		57,060
1994	Zoloto Respubliki (novaya redakt-siya)		79,400
1994	Chelovek v forme GAI (Voditel i GAI)		422,600
1994	Tochka (Minus Re)	Zh.Zhetyruov	156,500
1994	Preodolenie		435,900
1994	Tekemet	A.Raibaev	287,300
1994	Kargasynshy		350,910
<b>1994</b>	<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>2,378,170</b>

### Documentary films 1995

Year	Title	Director	Budget in KZT
1995	Tugainyi olen	L.Mukhamedgalieva	814,700
1995	Telkara	Zh.Zhetyruov	1,140,300
1995	Bismillya ir rakhman	R.Sachkov	773,400
1995	Tainstvo dombry	M.Vasilev	874,900
1995	Abai — poet i kompozitor (Yazyk lyubvi)		1,900,000
1995	Solnechnyi gorod		485,900
1995	RK № 1 № 8-9 (Konservatorii 50 let)		782,200
1995	RK № 1 № (Kosmonavt Musabaev)		525,200
1995	RK № 2-3 (Den Pobedy)		1,050,400
<b>1995</b>	<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>8,347,000</b>

### Documentary films 1996

Year	Title	Director	Budget in KZT
1996	Zhambyl toiy – zhyr toiy	O.Zhunosov	
1996	Malenkii kloun	G. Sadykova	1,455,160
1996	Lyublyu otchiznu ia, no...		674,330
1996	Dni prazdnovaniya 150-letiya Abaya		1,320,580
1996	Ush ayz		709,170

	Sledsvtvie vedet GSK		3,162,000
	Kara-kun		780,900
1996	RK No. 1 No. 2-3 (150 let Zhambylu)		2,741,170
1996	RK No. 1 No. 4-5 (Assambleya narodov)		1,986,800
<b>1996</b>	<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>12,830,110</b>

### Documentary films 1997

Year	Title	Director	Budget in KZT
1997	II Tsentralno Aziatskie igry	S.Tekeev	1,635,800
1997	Solnechnyi gorod (novaya redaktsiya)		446,440
<b>1997</b>	<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>2,082,240</b>

### Documentary films 1998

Год	Название фильма	Режиссёр	Бюджет (тг)
1998	Imanyna ilanu	B.Kadyrbekov	
1998	Sport	S.Tekeev	
1998	Kino-novaya real'nost'	O.Karavaev	
1998	Nurmukhan	K.Abuseitov	
1998	Astana aru Astana	O.Zhunosov	
1998	Adam zattin Mukhtary	O.Zhunosov	
1998	Pamiat' serdtsa	B.Gabitov – Zhansugurov, Kh.Bulibekov	
1998	Asatana – Baitak – stolitsa Kazakhstana	I.Gonopolskiy	
1998	Listki iz bloknota	G. Omarova	
1998	Deti bol' moia	S. Tauyekel, I. Vovnyanko	
1998	Duet -1, Duet 2	E. Shinarbayev	
<b>1998</b>	<b>TOTAL</b>		

### Documentary films 1999

Year	Title	Director	Budget in KZT
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1999	Neizvestnyi Eizenshtein	I.Gonopolskii	
1999	Respublika Kazakhstana	A.Berkovich	
<b>1999</b>	<b>TOTAL</b>		

### Documentary films 2000

Year	Title	Director	Budget in KZT
2000	Iz glubiny vozzvakh	E.Dilmukhamedova	
2000	Galym	O.Zhunusov	
<b>2000</b>	<b>TOTAL</b>		

### Documentary films 2001

Year	Title	Director	Budget in KZT
2001	K. Satpaev	S. Tauykel, I. Vovnyanko	
2001	Kinofestival Evraziya — 98	O.Karavaev	
2001	Semirechenskiy meridian	B.Kadyrbekov	
2001	Zvezdnye brat'ya Kazakhstana	A. Nugmanov	
<b>2001</b>	<b>TOTAL</b>		

### Documentary films 2002

Year	Title	Director	Budget in KZT
2002	Zhol taptim bar Qazaqtyn zhuregine	O.Zhunusov	
2002	Mahambet	Zh. Zhetyruov	
2002	Qyran dalasy	O.Zhunusov	
2002	Qos alyp - qos gaben	O.Zhunusov	
2002	Ardager	B.Kadyrbekov	
<b>2002</b>	<b>TOTAL</b>		

### Documentary films 2003

Year	Title	Director	Budget in KZT
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2003	V plenu sud'by	B. Gafu	
2003	Zvezdy Kazakhstanskogo boksa	O.Karavaev	
2003	ҚұрылтайQuryltai	A.Suleeva	
2003	Rytsar' serebryanogo veka	H. Narliev	
2003	Nevada Semipalatinsk, 15 let spustya	S. Shafir	
2003	Ozarenie	T. Mukanova	
2003	Ratsional'noe zerno	I.Gonopolskii	
2003	Kenesary	Zh. Zhetyruov	
<b>2003</b>	<b>TOTAL</b>		

### Documentary films 2004

Year	Title	Director	Budget in KZT
2004	God Kazakhstana v Rossii	O.Zhunusov	
2004	Aul Kulyash	M.Musin	
2004	V nachale slavykh del	A.Suleeva	
2004	Bylo ili ne bylo iga	I.Gonopolskii	
2004	Portret aksakala	Zh. Zhetyruov	
<b>2004</b>	<b>TOTAL</b>		

### Documentary films 2005

Year	Title	Director	Budget in KZT
2005	Russkii iazyk: vchera, segodnia, zavtra	H. Narliev	
2005	Muzika dushi	A. Al'piev	
<b>2005</b>	<b>TOTAL</b>		

### Documentary films 2006

Year	Title	Director	Budget in KZT
2006	Moi brat Shaken	V.Tatenko	
2006	Mamania	Zh. Zhetyruov	
2006	Kontinent Earaziya chast' 1 – Evraziiskii lev	E.Dilmukhamedova	

2006	Khamit Ergaliev	O.Zhunusov	
2006	Zh. Moldagaliev	A. Al'piev	
2006	Akhmet Zhubanov	K.Umarov	
2006	K. Smailov	O.Zhunusov	
2006	Zheltoksan alauy	Zh. Zhetyruov	
2006	Zhyrdyn altyn dingeki	E. Bolysbaev	
2006	Pozdnya liubov klassika	S.Azimov	
<b>2006</b>	<b>TOTAL</b>		

### Documentary films 2007

Year	Title	Director	Budget in KZT
2007	Zh. Dosmukhamedov	A.Kystaubae	
2007	Zhemchuzhina Kazakhstana — Zaisan	A. Laptev	
2007	Zhemchuzhina Kazakhstana — Turkestan	N. Sadygulov	
2007	Vysota Alzhapara	A.Abishev	
2007	Aseke	I. Vovnyanko	
2007	Trudnoe vozvrashchenie	A.Baigozhina	
2007	Voina vokrug nas	Zh. Zhetyruov	
<b>2007</b>	<b>TOTAL</b>		

### Documentary films 2008

Year	Title	Director	Budget in KZT
2008	Mukhammad Khaidar Dulati	A.Kystaubae	
2008	Uroki pol'skogo	A. Laptev	
2008	Fenomen Tungyshpaya	N. Sadygulov	
2008	Mutylghan	A.Abishev	
2008	Zharilystan koz ashpaghan dalam-ai	I. Vovnyanko	
2008	Neukrotimyi Nurmukhan	A.Baigozhina	
2008	Zhetisu	Zh. Zhetyruov	
<b>2008</b>	<b>TOTAL</b>		

## Documentary films 2009

Year	Title	Director	Budget in KZT
2010	10 let Astane		1,410,106
2010	70-letie A.Kikelbaeva		346,116
2010	90-letie VGIK v Kazakhstane		381,785
2010	Alash orda		331,682
2010	Bekzat		285,288
2010	Kemeŋgerdiŋ kesh kelgen makhab-baty"		255,182
2010	Keskekti erdiŋ soyy		286,281
2010	Predanny zabveniyu		274,774
2010	N.Nazarbaev glazami vy-dayushchikhsya mirovykh liderov"-5 imidzh.f-ov		42,905,544
2010	Pevets Syrdar		299,915
2010	Tabiġat korġau koġamy		617,846
2010	Tragediya triumfatora		8,176,081
2010	Shora Saryba		95,044
<b>2010</b>	<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>55,665,644</b>

## Documentary films 2010

Year	Title	Director	Budget in KZT
2010	Muzykal'noe nasledie nomadov	N.Koreale	45,000,000
2010	Polpred	B.Sharip	7,000,000
2010	Bibigul Tulegenova	I.Gonopolsky	12,850,000
2010	Bauyrzhan Momyshuly		10,600,000
2010	Korkyt		10,145,000
2010	Kemengger		7,000,000
2010	Bagybek Kundakbae		3,000,000
2010	Astana TEAM	I.Kuzyrov	15,000,000
2010	Mukhtar Magauin	D.Kozhakhhan	6,500,000
2010	Abish Kekilbaev	Zh.Zhetyruov	11,000,000
2010	Murat Akhmadiev	R.Alpiev	7,000,000
2010	Tuiyksu	G.Nasyrov	4,500,000
2010	Rymgali Nurgaliev	O.Zhunusov	5,800,000

2010	Toregeldy Sharmanov	B.Kaiyrbekov	15,000,000
<b>2010</b>	<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>160,395,000</b>

## Documentary films 2011

Year	Title	Director	Budget in KZT
2011	Omira dastan	K.Amerzhanov	5,000,000
2011	Kulturnoe nasledie	A.Mamraimov	44,100,000
2011	Toregeldy Sharmanov		15,000,000
2011	Sogystyng songgy soldattary	S.Tekeev	3,000,000
2011	Aziada-2011	S.Tekeev	9,000,000
2011	Pyat vecherov s prezidentom	R.Suleimenov	55,000,000
2011	N.Nazarbaev glazami mirovykh liderov	R.Suleimenov	150,000,000
2011	Mirzhan Dulatov	B.Barysbekov	15,000,000
2011	Batyr Bigeldinov	A.Abdik	4,000,000
2011	Esmukhan Obaev	Zh.Zhetyruov	7,000,000
2011	Lyudyam ya ne lgal... O.Suleimenov	I.Gonopolskii	7,000,000
2011	Kasym Amanzholov	T.Akhmetov	6,000,000
2011	Sultangali Sadyrbaev	E.Kontai	4,000,000
2011	Uly toiy	A.Abdik	3,560,000
2011	Kazanat	Zhanibek	5,000,000
2011	Bahadur	K.Abenov	14,200,000
2011	Amin Tuyakov	D.Beisenov	7,000,000
2011	Nezrimyi front	B.Sharip	10,000,000
2011	K 20 letiyu zakrytiya Semipalatinskogo poligona», «K 20 letiyu nezavisimosti Respubliki Kazakhstan	R.Suleimenov, I.Dzhalilov	18,805,000
2011	Mukagali Makataev	S.Zhanbolat	7,000,000
2011	Turar Ryskulov	E.Rakishev	5,000,000
2011	Shamshi	T.Akhmetov	10,000,000
2011	Men zhiyrma zhastamyn	A.Ashimov, Zh.Almat, Zh.Kaparova, M.-Makhanov	11,400,000
2011	Seken zhurek	U.Kuldauova	7,000,000
2011	Sultan Orazalin	A.Akhmetzhanov	4,000,000
2011	Velikoe bezumie pchel		20,000,000
2011	T. Kakishev		4,000,000

2011	I.Nogaibaev		7,000,000
2011	Ravnenie na pravdu... (N.Ikhtimbaev)		4,850,000
2011	Kogda dusha ne mozhet molchat" ("Mazhit Begalin")		9,000,000
2011	Na izlome epokh ("O.A. Zholdasbekov")oe uchilische		10,000,000
2011	"Shankhaiskaya organizatsiya sotrud-nichestva" (ShOS)		9,402,500
2011	Ana umitin aktagan Ul (S.Kaskabasov)		4,000,000
2011	Uzelki pamyati (D.Kunaev)		10,000,000
2011	Sluzhba Okhrany Prezidenta		9,402,500
<b>2011</b>	<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>514,720,000</b>

## Documentary films 2012

Year	Title	Director	Budget in KZT
2012	Suyunbai	D.Dosybiev, G.Nasy-rov	27,000,000
2012	Megaproekty N.Nazarbaeva (10 films)		189,500,000
2012	"Men korgen sogys" "Bakhytbek Smagul		5,000,000
2012	«Kamal Smailov»		10,000,000
2012	Khabibanyng Zhusipbegi		9,000,000
2012	«Doroga lyudei» («Mukhtar Auezov i Manas»)		7,000,000
2012	"Khudozhnik.Pavel Zaltsman"		13,043,478
2012	"Moi kinoteatr" ("Dorogoi, iduschei v dal...")		7,000,000
2012	T.Abdikuly		6,500,000
2012	Nezavisimyi Kazakhstan		8,390,000
2012	Kamal Ormantaev	Zh.Zhetiruov	7,000,000
2012	Kto Vy, gospodin A.?	B.Kirbekov	10,000,000
2012	Isabekov əlemi	N.Sadygulov	10,000,000
2012	Sherkhan Murtaza	I.Iskakov	9,226,000
2012	Ayagan	D.Kozhakhan	1,822,000

2012	Nezrimyi front 2	B.Sharip	7,000,000
2012	Ashtyk	E.Rakishev	15,000,000
2012	Abdolla Karsakbaev	T.Karsakbaev	9,600,000
<b>2012</b>	<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>352,081,478</b>

### Documentary films 2013

Year	Title	Director	Budget in KZT
2013	Tysyachi sudeb Dukenbaya Doszhana	I.Gonopolskii	3,000,000
2013	Sobranie sochinenii	R.Suleimenov	175,000,000
2013	Doroga lyudei. Zhas Tulpar		8,000,000
2013	Erbolat Tolepbai. Zagadka tvorchestva	E.Shinarbaev	10,000,000
2013	Sultan Khodzhikov	B.Nusipbekov	6,500,000
2013	Mukhtar Bakhtygereev	M.Omarov	1,900,000
2013	Tozim		5,000,000
2013	M.Zholdasbekov	Zh.Zhetyruov	7,000,000
2013	Nezrimyi front 3	B.Sharip	3,900,000
<b>2013</b>	<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>220,300,000</b>

### Documentary films 2014

Year	Title	Director	Budget in KZT
2014	A.Khaidarov. Skazochnye khroniki	A.Baigozhina	3,000,000
2014	Drevo zhizni. Nasipkali Marabaev	B.Kairbekov	14,000,000
2014	Takhavi Akhtanov	O.Tastanov	7,000,000
2014	Shaken Aimanov: chelovek i legenda	B.Nusimbekov	15,000,000
2014	Säken-seri	O.Zhunusov	8,500,000
2014	Azattyk asuy	N.Sadygulov	15,000,000
2014	OzenMunaigaz – 50 let	Zh.Zhetiruov	
2014	Madina Besbaeva	A.Baimuratov	3,200,000
2014	Əshirbek Sygai. Syn Sardary	K.Umarov, A.Umarov	7,500,000
2014	Nurlan Orazalin	D.Salamat	7,500,000
2014	Temir narkom – Temirbek	E.Rakishev	
2014	Kak sokhranit semyu	A.Aituarov	7,500,000

2014	Gainiken	Zh.Zhetiruov	
2014	Safi Utebaev	Zh.Zhetiruov	10,000,000
2014	Mädi Bəpiuly	E.Tleutaev	7,000,000
2014	Təttimbət Kazangapuly	G.Nasyrov	7,000,000
2014	Volya k pobede	T.Karsakbaev	5,000,000
2014	Nezrimyi front – 4	R.Irzhanov	3,900,000
2014	Beket ata	Zh.Zhetiruov	7,500,000
2014	Iskusstvo Kazakhstana za rubezhom	film 3	
2014	Mailykozha Sultankozhyuly	K.Kuanyshbaev	7,000,000
2014	Miry Morisa Simashko	A.Golovinskii	15,000,000
<b>2014</b>	<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>150,600,000</b>

### Documentary films 2015

Year	Title	Director	Budget in KZT
2015	Ulytau torinde	O.Tastanov	7,000,000
2015	Tangbaly tas - kazak khandygynyng bastauy	O.Tastanov	7,000,000
2015	Ketbuga	O.Tastanov	7,000,000
2015	Poslanie Prezidenta RK Nazarbaeva N.A.: Khronika modernizatsii	R.Suleimenov	200,000,000
<b>2015</b>	<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>221,000,000</b>

### Documentary films 2016

Year	Title	Director	Budget in KZT
2016	Mənggilik El-Uly tagdyr. Mənggi El	O.Bayalbaev	200,000,000
2016	Nurtas Ongdasynov	O.Tastanov	5,000,000
2016	Beisetai Dərenbekov zhəne 12 tagdyr	K.Kuanyshbaev	7,000,000
2016	Kəuken zhuldyzy	G.Nasyrov	7,000,000
2016	Umitsiz kun kelmeidi	M.Esirkepov, M.Esenaliev	7,000,000
<b>2016</b>	<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>226,000,000</b>

### Documentary films 2017



Year	Title	Director	Budget in KZT
2017	13 – kilometrov	T. Vladimir	22,000,000
2017	Alash tuy astynda	E. Tokmurzin	40,000,000
2017	Altyn Emel. Zhemchuzhina prirody Kazakhstana	O. Belyalov	33,000,000
2017	Asanəli Əshimov. Syr tungan - Aisberg	O. Bayalbaev	25,000,000
2017	Astana 2017. Epitsentr mirovoi kultury	A. Kamenskii	20,000,000
2017	Garmoniya ottenkov	E. Lumpov	7,230,000
2017	Zolotoi voyn	D. Watson	150,000,000
2017	Igra na operezhnenie	A. Kamenskii	27,000,000
2017	Kazakhskii renessans. Zhumat Shanin	K. Aleksei	22,000,000
2017	Kazakhskii tanets	G. Nasyrov, A. Sadykova	22,000,000
2017	Keiki batyr	A. Abdikov	9,477,000
2017	Mavzolei Aisha bibi i Khodzha Akhmeta Yassau	D. Watson	150,000,000
2017	Mentalnyi razlom	N. Ryblova	23,000,000
2017	Nairi	K. Rakhimova	8,800,000
2017	Patsany zovut ego Batya	A. Akhmetzhanova	8,670,000
2017	Pod nebom pravdy	K. Kuanyshbaev	14,650,000
2017	Potomu chto lyublyu	K. Berdimuratova, K. Abdeldinova	7,700,000
2017	S chego nachinaetsya rodina	E. Bekturov	7,600,000
2017	Energiya buduschego. Energiya sozidaniya	A. Kamenskii	20,662,000
2017	Kaz dauysty... bi	G. Nasyrov, E. Toleutai	30,000,000
2017	Usta	E. Mergalym	12,000,000
2017	Əbish Kekilbaev	Zh. Zhetiruov	10,000,000
<b>2017</b>	<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>670,789,000</b>

## Documentary films 2018

Year	Title	Director	Budget in KZT
2018	60 dnei voyny	N. Raisov	20,566,000

2018	The amazing race	A. Ibraev	200,000,000
2018	Travel Show Of Kazakhstan	A. Kodarova	200,000,000
2018	Alatau	O. Belyalov	15,703,000
2018	Araldyng arda perzenti	S. Tekeev	10,000,000
2018	Basty rolde – Dimash Akhimov!	G. Nasyrov	3,000,000
2018	Vkus tsveta	K. Abdeldinova	6,800,000
2018	Zhetysu – o skazochnoi prirode Kazakhstana	O. Tastanov	10,000,000
2018	Zhizn spetsialnogo naznacheniya	G. Nasyrov, A. Er-nazarov	10,000,000
2018	Nasledie predkov	B. Zhakhanov	9,252,500
2018	Nit	N. Saduova	9,685,000
2018	Ogon, mertsayuschii v sosude	B. Kairbekov	65,805,500
2018	Oralkhan Bokeev	S. Azimov	19,943,000
2018	Osobennaya zemlya. Qyzylorda	A. Kamenskii	15,703,000
2018	Priroda Kazakhstan: Vsled za khangulom	V. Chernov	15,703,000
2018	Priroda Kazakhstan: Na rodine tyulpanov	O. Belyalov	15,703,000
2018	Tunggysh	S. Tauekel	5,000,000
2018	Chuvashi. Kazakhstan – moya vtoraya rodina	D.Manabai	8,347,000
2018	Katonkaragai-Katynkaragai Kotankaragai	G.Dosken	15,972,000
2018	Әулікөл zhәне zheti myng kol	G. Dosken	15,971,000
<b>2018</b>	<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>673,154,000</b>

## Documentary films 2019

Year	Title	Director	Budget in KZT
2019	Adai zhylykysy	D. Kulmakov	20,000,000
2019	Bayanaul	O. Belyalov	20,000,000
2019	Kalibek Kuanyshbaev. Glavnaya rol	S.Revaeva	20,000,000
2019	Karkaraly	O.Belyalov	20,000,000
2019	Kokshetau	A. Kairzhan, A.Raibaev	20,000,000
2019	Moi Zhansugurov	A.Cherendinova	20,000,000

2019	Serke Kozhamkulov. Igrat po nastoy- aschemu...	A.Kamenskii	20,000,000
2019	Ya vernus	A. Ernazarov	21,100,000
<b>2019</b>	<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>100,000,000</b>

**Appendix B.** Data for State Support for National Cinema ‘Kazakh Cinema’ from 2019-2023

### First Pitching

Year	Title	Director	Budget in KZT
2019	Turkestan – vchera, segodnya, zavtra	V.Tyulkin	32,000,000
2019	Vozvrashchenie uchitelya	S. Azimov	20,822,545
<b>2019</b>	<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>52,822,545</b>

### Second Pitching

Year	Title	Director	Budget in KZT
2020	Batyry Velikoi Otechestvennoi: Rakhimzhan Koshkarbaev, Grigorii Bulatov	K. Kharlampidic	14,996,341
2020	Goryashchii oktyabr 1941	N. Raisov	49,361,580
2020	Poslednii rubezh	E.Kovardakova	13,174,000
2020	Vlastitelnitsy Evrazii	A. Kamenskiy	34,339,935
2020	Qyz-Jibek: retsept liubvi i uspekha	A. Utekeshova	29,097,000
2020	Kasym Dzhakibaev	K.Berdimuratova	15,000,000
2020	Batu. Istoricheskii detektiv	R. Nugmanov	209,913,088
2020	Tsikl dokumental’nykh fil’mov «Slova nazidaniya Abaya	B.Abishev	175,103,040
2020	Tsikl dokumental’nykh fil’mov «Alystagi agayin	B.Seitkazyev	51,978,080
2020		V.Vilkoviskiy	100,000,000
<b>2020</b>	<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>692,963,064</b>

### Second Pitching

Year	Title	Director	Budget in KZT
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2020	Batyry Velikoi Otechestvennoi: Rakhimzhan Koshkarbaev, Grigorii Bulatov	K. Kharlampidic	14,996,341
2020	Goryashchii oktyabr 1941	N. Raisov	49,361,580
2020	Poslednii rubezh	E.Kovardakova	13,174,000
2020	Vlastitelnitsy Evrazii	A. Kamenskiy	34,339,935
2020	Qyz-Jibek: retsept liubvi i uspekha	A. Utekeshova	29,097,000
2020	Kasym Dzhakibaev	K.Berdimuratova	15,000,000
2020	Batu. Istoricheskii detektiv	R. Nugmanov	209,913,088
2020	Tsikl dokumental'nykh fil'mov «Slova nazidaniya Abaya	B.Abishev	175,103,040
2020	Tsikl dokumental'nykh fil'mov «Alystagi agayin	B.Seitkazyev	51,978,080
2020	Vozvrashcheniya Morya	V.Vilkoviskiy	100,000,000
<b>2020</b>	<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>692,963,064</b>

## Forth Pitching

Year	Title	Director	Budget in KZT
2022	Hranitel'	A. Rahmetaliyev	25,000,000
2022	Sputnik	E.Nesipbekov	32,000,000
2022	Inohodec		21,000,000
2022	Lednik	Ya.Ibraimov	29,000,000
2022	Zhel paida bolgan zher	Zh, Murtazin	28,000,000
2022	Toi	K. Baisekeyev	42,000,000
2022	Pogovori so mnoi Manshuk	M. Baimukhamedov	24,500,000
2022	Sokraty	A. Kairzhan	7,000,000
2022	Prayniki dlya ee otca, moego pradede, ee deda	A. Mustafina	20,000,000
2022	Arkau Ozok	A. Or-Altai	18,698,852
2022	Aul strategicheskogo znacheniya	B. Nusumbekov	20,000,000
2022	Bibugul Tulegenova	B. Nusumbekov	54,888,960
2022	Eva. Batyr-kyz	T.Amanzhol	53,158,056
2022	Molitva Leily	S. Tekeev	15,000,000
2022	Velikiy kazakhskiy samoed	S. Tekeev	15,000,000

2022	Oshibka molodosti (Shumerskaya boginya)	B, Kairbekov	200,000,000
2022	Kiin-Kerish		24,200,000
<b>2022</b>	<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>629,445,868</b>

## Fifth Pitching

Year	Title	Director	Budget in KZT
2023	My zdes zhivem	Zh, Kurmasheva	50,000,000
2023	Songy paryz	A. Narymbetov, A. Mahmutov	47,200,000
2023	Zdrasvtvui dobriy zhelovek	T. Itenov	41,700,000
2023	Mangistau - krai okeana Tetis	K. Kuanyshbayev	40,325,000
2023	Bizdin zamanymyzga den	S. Bisembin	30,000,000
<b>2023</b>	<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>209,225,000</b>