

**Mapping Nichols' Modes in Documentary Film:
Ai Weiwei: Never Sorry and *Helvetica***

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Abstract

Bill Nichols' "modes" theory of classifying documentary films by describing them in terms of poetic, expository, observational, participatory, reflexive and performative "modes" is well established as an analytical model. Nichols' mode taxonomy is generally used to broadly describe the predominant mode present throughout a film and therefore operates at a macro level. It is proposed, however, that Nichols' concept of modes is also applicable at a micro level. By this is meant that in-depth scene-by-scene analysis is also possible in terms of Nichols' modes in order to better understand the film structure and the director's vision. To demonstrate the proposed approach, Nichols' theory of modes is used to analyse the structure of two recent films *Ai Weiwei: Never Sorry* (Klayman 2012) and *Helvetica* (Hustwit 2007) by categorizing scenes in terms of modes. It is shown that this empirical approach is useful for filmmakers and film critics and justifies the influential position of Nichols in film theory.

Keywords: *Ai Weiwei*, *Helvetica*, documentary films, Bill Nichols, narrative.

Introduction

American film scholar Bill Nichols has received widespread and enduring attention as an author of nine books and over a hundred film articles, but beyond this, he is best known for his “modes” theory of classifying documentary films at a macro level by examining genres, structures, and aesthetics.

An overview of several models of film analysis theory reveals the difficulty of finding an appropriate model for analysing documentary films. A noted scholar of documentary films, Michael Renov, proposed four tendencies of documentaries – to record, persuade, analyse or express, – but these categories are rather too generalized and simplistic, and by the scholar’s own admission a difficult model to adapt to the nuances of contemporary documentaries (Renov). An earlier approach, highlighting four documentary traditions, is Paul Rotha’s model (incorporating naturalist, realist, news-reel and propagandist traditions), which offers more detailed categorical distinctions than Renov’s.

A more comprehensive mapping of documentary films, however, has been created by Bill Nichols (2010). Among Nichols’ six modes of documentaries there are a few similarities with Rotha’s traditions. The realist tradition, for example, is somewhat akin to Nichols’ poetic mode; the news-reel tradition shares similar traits with Nichols’ observational mode and the propagandist tradition fits into Nichols’ description of the expository mode. Nichols’ departure from Rotha’s model lies in his detailed mapping of each mode in cinematic terms in order to uncover the filmmaker’s distinctive voice as well as the film’s overall framework (Nichols 2010). Nichols admits that each documentary film does not necessarily fall into one mode but can consist of a combination of modes. At the same time, the fluidity of the modes opens up the possibility for a variety of interpretations for documentary films. As Nichols remarks, “most films incorporate more than one mode, even though some modes are more prominent at one time or place than another. These modes serve as a skeletal framework that individual filmmakers flesh out according to their own creative disposition” (Nichols 2010: 143). He goes on to emphasize that “we can accept this fluidity as cause for celebration” (Nichols 2010: 143). Therefore, in contrast to the majority of theories which adopt a single, hermetic approach to dissecting documentary film, Nichols’ theory rather uniquely allows for, and even seeks out, multiple dimensions within any well-directed documentary.

The following summarizes features for each of the six Nichols’ modes of documentary film:

1. The poetic mode exhibits Modernist characteristics typified by the qualities of fragmentation, emotionalism, expressiveness and ambiguity.
2. The expository mode’s purpose is to disseminate information or to persuade. Images and footage are used to strengthen spoken narrative. A common feature is an authoritative voice-over as used in news and TV programs.
3. The observational mode uses film footage to chronicle a scene as it occurs. Seeking to be objective, the unobtrusive camera takes on the role of the audience, watching and observing the action.
4. The participatory mode relies on interviews, considering them to be a credible source of knowledge about the subject.

5. The reflexive mode focuses on the act of filming to apprise the viewer of the filmmaking process. An example is when one camera films a recording session taken by another camera.
6. The performative mode is identified as being subjective. Performed acts with an emotional intensity or uniqueness of vision are recorded to express the director's personal vision or enhance the narrative.

As clear and useful as Nichols' taxonomy is, criticism has been directed at the model, for instance, by identifying the modes as too reductive in the case of Bruzzi (2002) and sometimes inconsistent in the case of Ward (2005). Referring to his taxonomy as "Nichols' family tree", Bruzzi not only finds problems with its "breathtakingly simplistic" nature, but also finds that documentaries are too experimental and "heterogeneous" to be assigned to one mode (Bruzzi 3). Even mixing the various modes in one film, she suggests, also questions their overall usefulness in contemporary documentary film analysis.

Ward also points out that categorizing modes as representative of certain eras results in inconsistencies. For example, expository documentaries were not just restricted to the 1920s, and reflexive documentaries are not just a modern development. Ward also notes that the term "documentary" is now so broad that it is difficult to categorize many of these films. However, Nichols defends his model by noting the following: "The differing documentary modes may seem to provide a history of documentary film, but they do so imperfectly. Not only were most of them present from the outset, a film identified with a given mode need not be so entirely" (Nichols 159). He goes on to say that "the modes do not constitute a genealogy of documentary film so much as a pool of resources available to all" (Nichols 159).

Despite these concerns, Cagle argues that since documentaries are frequently hybrids of Nichols' modes, this actually confirms the usefulness of his taxonomy, particularly because hybridization tends to enrich a film. Cagle supports the notion of hybridization using Nichols' modes in analogizing it to a sun-centred universe evolving into one involving intricate planetary alignments: "Where the taxonomies and models of documentary have moved, in Copernican fashion, from basic generalizations to increased complications and exceptions, a Keplerian alternative should be possible" (Cagle 47). He goes on to support this extended view of Nichols' modes by showing, through a close reading of three films, that documentaries can be effective by combining multiple modes to carry the story.

In this article it will be shown that the Nichols' model can be even more useful as a tool of analysis at the micro level or more specifically through a scene-by-scene dissection. This emphasis on the micro level is perhaps merely a more expanded interpretation of Nichols' own theoretical approach to film analysis. Nichols acknowledges the foundation for understanding the style and grammar of movies lies within the "continuum of images which it frames and punctuates with gaps (cuts, dissolves, fades, etc.) that are constantly shifting, with units that are limitless" (Nichols 1975: 35). Similarly in documentary films, Nichols says that "photographic images do not present concepts, they embody them" (2010: 99). It can be said then that the key to a fuller understanding of the documentary film lies within each image or scene. The concepts that emerge from each image or scene will invariably enable us to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the film. As Nichols himself puts

it, the “combination of the two,” the micro level (individual scenes) and the macro level (overall organization), “gives the documentary tradition its power and fascination” (Nichols 2010: 101). The micro-level analysis can also provide more evidentiary proof of the documentary film’s overall concept, “expressive power” and cinematic value.

To test Nichols’ modes taxonomy at this micro level, two generically different documentaries were chosen. *Ai Weiwei: Never Sorry* is a striking portrayal of the artistry and social activism of contemporary Chinese superstar-provocateur, Ai Weiwei. *Helvetica* is a literary, almost poetic narrative, an aesthetic critique and demographic appraisal of a typeface. From this in-depth analysis, it will become clear that Nichols’ modes, when applied at a micro level in combination with each other, are the most effective means of reading and dissecting contemporary “hybridized” documentaries.

The Documentaries: *Ai Weiwei: Never Sorry* and *Helvetica*

These two documentary films chosen to test Nichols’ modes taxonomy analysis are both critically acclaimed films. Alison Klayman’s *Ai Weiwei: Never Sorry* (2012 – henceforth *Ai Weiwei*) was positively reviewed as “an inspiring and important documentary portrait of the Chinese artist and political dissident” (Morgenstern) and a film which is a “lively, informative, funny and inspirational portrait of a courageous, charismatic, highly original man” (French). The second film, Gary Hustwit’s *Helvetica* (2007), is described as being a series of “provocative, lively interviews with graphic designers and theorists” (Seitz) and being “enjoyable to watch them rhapsodise sans serifs and spacing” (Clarke).

The favourable critical response to *Ai Weiwei* could also be attributed to what academic Christian Sorace describes as Ai Weiwei’s iconic status in the international art world, which enables him to “uncover the substratum of politics” in his struggle with the powerful Chinese Communist Party and use it as both a source for his experimental artwork and to illuminate social injustices (417).

The film showcases the mercurial personality of Ai Weiwei, the avant-garde Chinese artist, whose work has received accolades throughout the contemporary art and political spheres. The narrative draws the viewer into the fascinating world of a complex creative spirit who openly defies Chinese authorities, organizes social activist campaigns and creates large-scale art installations including his 2010 “Sunflower Seeds” exhibition at the London Tate Modern. The film’s director, Alison Klayman, also portrays Ai Weiwei as something of a paradox. Ai Weiwei’s life and ideals are in a constant state of flux as evidenced by his active condemnation of the “bird’s nest” stadium, the Olympic facility that he personally helped to design yet later on criticized because residents in the area of the stadium had been displaced. At the same time, grappling with his heritage as the son of the politically controversial poet Ai Qing, also explains his indefatigable activism.

The documentary *Helvetica* highlights the design and widespread adoption of the typeface Helvetica. The director’s vision colours the storytelling through interviews with graphic and type designers associated with the development of the typeface since the 1950s. There seem to have been few challenges to its rise as the dominant

contemporary typeface which can be seen everywhere today. However, dramatic tension in the film, lies in the strongly expressed opposing views of those on the one hand who see Helvetica as a clean elegant type which can be used anywhere, while others see it as a bland and banal default font. The winner is the Helvetica font itself; it is found nowadays in all countries.

Both films exhibit an approach to documentary filmmaking which Chris Cagle has described as “post-classical narrative” (47). By this he means a documentary film which is neither traditionalist documentary nor art documentary but which lies somewhere between. Yet the two films are also generically quite different. *Ai Weiwei* is the account of an artist/social activist’s life, whereas *Helvetica* is a lyrical, historical account of the proliferation of a ubiquitous typeface.

Microanalysis of Nichols’ Modes in the Two Films: Overview of the Findings

All the modes were indeed present in both films as can be seen from Table 1, which summarizes the proportion of modes observed in both films across 116 scenes (79 scenes from *Ai Weiwei* and 37 scenes from *Helvetica*). The expository and participatory modes accounted for nearly two thirds of the total number of scenes in both films (59.0% of *Ai Weiwei* and 59.4% of *Helvetica*).

The other modes demonstrated different patterns of distribution. Even though the poetic mode was observed in both films, the number of scenes illustrating this mode was higher in *Helvetica* (21.7%) than in *Ai Weiwei* (13.5%). Perhaps this was because *Helvetica* dealt with the aesthetics of a typeface, whereas *Ai Weiwei* was heavily focused on the political activism of the artist himself. More observational scenes (15.4%) of *Ai Weiwei* (engaged in political activism) were counted than observational scenes in *Helvetica* (5.4%). The reflexive and performative modes were almost equally present in both films, even though they represented a minor portion of the data (11.3% of *Ai Weiwei* and 13.5% of *Helvetica*).

Table 1: Scenes classified by Nichols’ modes in *Ai Weiwei: Never Sorry* and *Helvetica* (first 24 minutes of each film)

Modes	<i>Ai Weiwei</i>	<i>Helvetica</i>
Poetic	16.5% (13)	21.7% (8)
Expository	24.1% (19)	24.3% (9)
Observational	15.2% (12)	5.4% (2)
Participatory	32.9% (26)	35.1% (13)
Reflexive	6.3% (5)	8.1% (3)
Performative	5.0% (4)	5.4% (2)
	Total Scenes 79	Total Scenes 37

Both films demonstrate a similar profile in that they open with a series of “poetic” scenes, flashes or fragments to create a subjective impression of the topic. A scene here is defined as single or multiple shots edited to present a narrative sequence. As such, scenes can include multiple images or shots linked by subject. Overall, *Ai Weiwei* contained a greater number of scenes than *Helvetica* in the first twenty-four minutes. *Ai Weiwei* changed scenes more quickly than *Helvetica*, which included lengthier interview sequences.

The expository mode with a narration and a more controlled rhetorical argument then appeared, with both films using the voices of the social actors being interviewed to provide voice-overs of scenes before moving into the interviews which characterise the participatory mode. The opening twenty-four minutes of both documentaries were also punctuated with observational camerawork, looking in on the life of *Ai Weiwei*, and showing examples of typographers' work in Helvetica, sometimes with hand-held camera footage. Both films also included some reflexive mode scenes, with external cameras filming the actual filming of *Ai Weiwei*, and test takes being highlighted in the case of *Helvetica*. Only a few examples of the performative mode could be positively identified in either *Ai Weiwei* or in *Helvetica*.

1. Poetic Mode

Nichols acknowledges the modernist characteristics within the poetic mode, typified by the qualities of fragmentation, emotionalism, expressiveness (in form), and ambiguity (2010: 162). More specifically, he goes on to say that the filmmaker manipulates the "spatial juxtapositions" of images and creates "temporal rhythms" in order to convey a subliminal message or feeling. As Nichols puts it rather succinctly, the "film form" is the filmmaker's primary objective in these sequences, not the "social actors" (2010: 162).

Imparting information through narrative storytelling is, of course, the more familiar cinematic technique, so it can be a much more challenging task to clearly identify the poetic mode. Nichols' poetic mode originates from the early cinematic period of poetic experimentation (the 1920's), therefore recognizing these historical roots can lend more clarity to an understanding of the poetic mode. The most radical development which emerged from this early cinematic period, Nichols explains, is that "the filmmaker's way of seeing things took higher priority than demonstrating the camera's ability to record what it saw faithfully and accurately" (2010: 129).

It may also be useful to turn to the characteristics of postmodernism to gain even more insight into the complexities of the poetic mode. Cultural theorist Linda Hutcheon describes postmodernism as "deliberately undermining" traditional notions of "value, order, meaning, control and identity" (13). Therefore creating a unique "film form," even within a limited number of poetic mode sequences, challenges our traditional notions and in that premise perhaps lies the key to identifying the poetic mode. If a particular film sequence illustrates any of the qualities of discontinuous fragmentation, ambiguity or surrealism, then perhaps it may well fall under the category of the poetic mode.

Similarly, Lyotard's description of postmodernist artists also applies to filmmakers engaging in the poetic mode, when he says that postmodernist artists are "not in principle governed by pre-established rules" (110), but rather create their own parameters in their works which can also converge with their personal lives as evidenced in the film, *Ai Weiwei*. Alison Klayman's selection of the title suggests Ai Weiwei's sense of self-aggrandizement contributes to his attitude of self-empowerment, leading to his social activism and his stance of never regretting anything, even to the extent of running up against the rules of censorship and protest in a Chinese context.

The filmic concept of focusing on a material object as opposed to a dynamic person or a compelling sociopolitical issue also clearly places Gary Hustwit's *Helvetica* within the postmodern context of "undermining" identity and values. Ascribing identity to a type font and placing importance on the value of a font in our cultural society perturbs our traditional notions, in essence transforming the unrepresentable into a representable artistic creation (Lyotard).

Poetic Mode in *Ai Weiwei*

Given that postmodern characteristics are present in both films, it is easy to understand the high percentage of poetic mode examples (16.5% and 22%) that occur, as shown in Table 2. Montage is the predominant focus. Series of fragmentary images (montages) occur as exemplified in the stills of vivid red and green vases, the bicycle installation and the blue arm sculpture (Table 2, ex. 4). Metaphorical images also come to life in this mode with, for example, the same arm sculpture appearing in white (Table 2, ex. 2) and reappearing again in Ai Weiwei's famous "finger defying" photos, which express his opposition to governments and authority. Another image of the white cat serenely settled below a towering blue cylindrical sculpture (Table 2, ex. 3) represents serenity and a simple life in the midst of a frenetic urban landscape. The pace of editing in these fragmentary images varies, as can be seen in the slow rhythm of the work camp still (Table 2, ex. 1) which lasts a notable eight long seconds. Poetic nuances are also revealed in the framing of shots, illustrated by the director's partial framing of Ai Weiwei's face with no eyes, only showing his mouth (Table 2, ex. 6).

Elements of memory become apparent during the scene where Ai Weiwei talks about his personal impressions of his father's persecution during the Chinese Cultural Revolution, when he says, "These are experiences I cannot erase" (Table 2, ex. 6). Klayman deftly edits a montage of archival family and historical stills to visually illustrate the factual side of his family history (Table 2, ex. 5). Abrupt shifts of time and space (temporal and spatial juxtapositions) consistently occur between, for example, Ai Weiwei's Chengdu hotel room and his art exhibition preparation in Munich.

Poetic Mode in *Helvetica*

Instances of the poetic mode in *Helvetica* are listed in Table 3. For the most part these are a series of fragments, still shots, sound bites from interviews, snatches of music, intercut shots, tinting of the image and framing of the shot. All these devices could be seen as the director seeking to "aestheticize," particularly, the beginning of the film, to make it seem as if the font Helvetica has origins in an atelier rather than a printing house.



Series of fragments or montages occur frequently in *Helvetica*. Montages include a series of book covers and street scenes of Helvetica signage in New York and Amsterdam (Table 3, ex. 4 and 5). A slower editing rhythm is utilized when the camera lingers on the 14th St/Broadway-Lafayette subway platform (Table 3, ex. 1) as a means to emphasize the importance of this signage in contemporary Helvetica history. In a manner similar to *Ai Weiwei*, Hustwit uses abrupt shifts of time as evidenced by the intercutting of interviews in offices and montages of street scenes,

such as bicycle parking in Amsterdam. In addition, the moderate tempo music score echoes the mood of the visuals.

Several metaphorical images emerge in the New York street scenes, specifically in the shot of the yellow taxi positioned between the truck and the bus, which is visually tied to the voice-over comment, “It’s hard to get your head around something that big.” In the same vein, a visual of the Monza Grand Prix is shown together with the voice-over, “And it’s Swiss designers in the 1950’s who are really driving that along” (Table 3, ex. 3).

Elements of memory are covered in such interview comments as “The 1950’s was an interesting period in the development of graphic design”; “It was in 1993 that I bought my first computer”; “...and working on a poster took us days”; and “I started late with the computer” (Table 3, ex. 6 and 7).

Table 2: Sample scenes in *Ai Weiwei* identified as poetic mode categories

Poetic Mode Subcategories	Illustration	Corresponding Frame
Editing: slow rhythm	1. Work camp still: length of shot is 8 seconds.	
Metaphorical representation	2. White arm sculpture reappears in Ai Weiwei's famous “finger defying” photos. 3. White cat serenely settled below a towering blue cylindrical sculpture.	











Series of fragments	4. Fragmented art images.	
Use of historical footage	5. Reference to Ai Weiwei's father in <i>The Long March</i> .	
Framing of the shot	6. Partial framing of Ai Weiwei's face with no eyes, only showing his mouth.	

Table 3: Sample scenes in *Helvetica* identified as poetic mode categories

Poetic Mode Subcategories	Illustration	Corresponding Frame
Editing: use of slow motion	1. Shot lingering on 14 th St/Broadway-Lafayette Signage, NY subway.	

Metaphorical representation # 1	2. Visual tied to voice-over comment, "It's hard to get your head around something that big."	
Metaphorical representation # 2	3. Visual tied to voiceover comment, "And it's Swiss designers in the 1950's who are really driving that along."	
Series of fragments: New York	4. New York street.	
Series of fragments: Amsterdam	5. Amsterdam street.	
Historical footage # 1	6. "It was in 1993 that I bought my first computer" (Wim Crouwel).	
Historical footage # 2	7. "...and working on a poster took us days."	

2. Expository Mode

The expository mode presents a more organized narrative than the poetic mode. Where the poetic mode highlights aesthetic elements, the expository mode presents a more organized, narrative approach. Nichols describes the basic elements of the expository mode as “indexical images of reality; poetic, affective associations; story-telling qualities; and rhetorical persuasiveness” (2010: 167). He emphasizes this by saying that the expository mode “addresses the viewer directly with titles or voices that propose a perspective or advance an argument” (Nichols 2010: 167). Features of the expository mode include “voice of God” off-camera narration to lend an authoritative tone to the production by subjugating images to the role of merely backing up what is said. The goal of this is “to build a sense of credibility from qualities such as detachment, neutrality, disinterestedness, or omniscience” (Nichols 2010: 169).

Expository Mode in *Ai Weiwei*

Archival and news footage is an important element in the expository mode (see Table 4, ex. 1 and 2: the Long March, the schoolbags of child victims after the Chengdu earthquake, news footage from the earthquake, television broadcast news stories and the Beijing Olympic displacement footage), lending a sense of realism and authenticity to the film’s structure. Further illustrations of the presentation of objective images are seen in the numerous slides with white text on a black background conveying simple factual messages such as “More than 70,000 people died in the earthquake” (Table 4, ex. 7). In addition to these expository mode scenes, however, there are basically expository scenes where one is left with the impression that, through his inventiveness and charisma, the subject of the film, Ai Weiwei, displaces the director’s agenda and voice. In Table 4, ex. 3 and 4, for example, the film focuses on Ai Weiwei himself talking directly to the camera, explaining his approach to art and activism. “I consider myself more of a chess player,” he claims, a statement that is accompanied by images from his Twitter post (Table 4, ex. 5). Linked to these are staged scenes of Ai Weiwei working on his computer (Table 4, ex. 6), and shots of a cat opening a door to illustrate the metaphor, “Out of 40 cats one knows how to open the door” (Table 6, ex. 7), implying that only the select few will challenge the status quo and become activists. Archival and news footage is also an important element in this mode. In *Ai Weiwei*, news footage of the Chengdu earthquake, television broadcast news stories and footage of the displacement caused by the Beijing Olympics lend a sense of realism and authenticity to the film’s structure.

Expository Mode in *Helvetica*

In *Helvetica* (Table 5), a series of experts on typography introduce the narrative. Considerable use is made of their voices beginning off-camera, introducing an image then intercutting with interview head shots of the narrator talking on camera (Table 5, ex. 1 and 2). The footage thus supports the comments made by font designers as they often introduce opposing views on Helvetica, some maintaining that it is a simple clean design, others claiming that its very simplicity makes it banal. This dichotomy of views of the typeface becomes a subplot in the narrative. The director uses a mix of

still images, indoor and outdoor footage of Helvetica signage in a number of countries and contexts to emphasize its ubiquity (Table 5, ex. 4).

The narrative expository of both films is thus told through a mix of voice-over commentaries supported by still images and footage (Table 5, ex. 3 and 5).

Table 4: Sample scenes in *Ai Weiwei* identified as expository mode categories

Expository Mode Subcategories	Illustration	Corresponding Frame
Montage of fragments: rhetorical/argumentative frame	1. Ai Weiwei's father on the Long March.	
Image supports basic claims	2. School bags after the Chengdu earthquake.	
Direct address of viewer	3. Ai Weiwei talks to the camera directly.	
Explanation	4. "I consider myself more of a chess player."	
Image gives further support to commentary	5. Twitter computer screen shots.	




Controlled arrangement	6. Ai Weiwei typing on his blog, with continuing cat motif.	
Staging of events	7. Cat metaphor.	
Use of titles	8. White text/black background: "More than 70,000 people died in the earthquake."	

Table 5: Sample scenes in *Helvetica* identified as expository mode categories



Expository mode subcategories	Examples <i>Helvetica</i>	Images
Argument proposed	1. Rick Poynor puts forward the view that typefaces can influence the message they carry.	
Argument advanced	2. Erik Spiekermann argues that Helvetica is ubiquitous, like McDonald's.	

Image gives further support to commentary	3. Matthew Carter reports where his interest in typography came from.	
Visual illustration of commentary	4. Pervasiveness of Helvetica signage in New York.	
Images support basic claims	5. Originators of Helvetica.	

3. Observational Mode

The observational mode functions in much the same way as the housebound magazine photographer in the classic Hitchcock movie, *Rear Window*, who spends his days and nights observing his neighbours. Anything that happens in “observational” film sequences is portrayed as objective reality in the documentary. It is essentially akin to how we respond to television news footage. The silent, unobtrusive camera becomes our eyes and ears, and we believe that we are “there” in much the same way that television reality programmes voyeuristically make us believe we are genuinely sharing experiences with participants.

The observational mode occupies a lower ranking in both films (15.2% and 5.5%), compared with the expository and participatory modes, as shown in Table 1. This mode, examples of which are listed in Tables 6 and 7, is also subtle like the poetic mode but easier to detect. The viewer is compelled to extrapolate the underlying message because the filmmaker has become an “observer,” too. The filmmaker has, in effect, retired “to the position of observer,” Nichols explains, by relinquishing control over the action and subjects during filming and editing (2010: 174). The filmmaker is thus sharing his observations with the viewer, which in turn “calls on the viewer to take a more active role in determining the significance of what is said and done” (Nichols 2010: 174).

Observational scenes are more apparent and easier to categorize than the poetic mode because they have the look and feel of what film scholar and documentary filmmaker David MacDougall describes as “rushes” (raw footage from a day’s shooting). He suggests that sometimes filmmakers are attracted to this *cinéma vérité* style because it

“reinjects into their film some of the qualities perceived in the rushes,” which ultimately adds another dimension of excitement to the film for both the filmmaker and the viewer (MacDougall 42).



Observational mode in *Ai Weiwei*

Considerable use was made of hand-held smartphone footage. During Ai Weiwei’s confrontational scenes with local police authorities (both in a hotel room and on the streets), the smartphone footage showed the emerging pattern of shocking events while at the same time lending more credence to the veracity of Ai Weiwei’s accounts (Table 6, Ex 4). In another long scene, Klayman aims to reveal aspects of the artist’s character by showing his adoration and respect for cats (Table 6, ex. 1), to the point of this becoming the basis for some of his own personal philosophy. Another scene illustrates Ai Weiwei’s love of food and the importance he places on spending social time with friends and staff (Table 6, ex. 3). Footage of a security camera in one scene (Table 6, ex. 3) serves as a metaphorical representation of observation.

Observational mode in *Helvetica*

In *Helvetica*, as seen in Table 7, the sense of participation is intensified through unedited footage that serves, presumably, to enhance the sense of documentary spontaneity and is a nod to the aesthetics of *cinéma vérité*. At Broadway-Lafayette station in New York, the unobtrusive camera shows a man walking along the platform, sitting down on the bench and leaning over to kiss his friend (Table 7, ex. 1). The cinematic technique used during an interview with Massimo Vignelli (Table 7, ex. 2) clearly resembles the unsteady nature of a hand-held camera as opposed to a formal camera setup. Body language is a major consideration in some of the interviews with Rick Poynor and Wim Crouwel, where the interviewees are frequently using hand gestures and a variety of body positions.

Table 6: Sample scenes in *Ai Weiwei* identified as observational mode categories

Observational Mode Subcategories	Illustration	Corresponding Frame
Aspects of Ai Weiwei’s character revealed	1. Cat scene.	
Raw footage, like “rushes”	2. Ai Weiwei places importance on food and social time with friends/staff.	





Camera as a tool	3. The security camera serves as a metaphor for observation/surveillance.	
“Rushes”	4. Hand-held camera-phone in police confrontation hotel scene.	

Table 7: Sample scenes in *Helvetica* identified as observational mode categories

Observational Mode Subcategories	Illustration	Corresponding Frame
Unedited footage, like “rushes” # 1	1. Actions of commuters at Broadway-Lafayette Station, New York.	
Unedited footage, like “rushes” # 2	2. Hand-held camera during interview with Massimo Vignelli.	

4. Participatory Mode

Interviews serve as the foundation for the participatory mode as well as a credible source of knowledge about the film’s subject. They are the most important element of investigative news programmes; hence they serve as the persuasive mechanism charged with convincing the audience of the film’s veracity. It is not only the mere presence of interviews, but also the variety of voices and opinions from multiple individuals that enhance our belief in the film’s credibility.

In contrast to the observational mode, the participatory mode is infused with the filmmaker’s perspective, as Nichols explains, and it “gives us a sense of what it is like

for the filmmaker to be in a given situation and how that situation alters as a result” (2010: 181). Subtle clues about the filmmaker-subject relationship also become more apparent in this mode. Nichols goes on to say that “as viewers we have the sense that we are witness to a form of dialogue between the filmmaker and his or her subject... that stresses situated engagement, negotiated interaction, and emotion-laden encounter” (2010: 187). Moreover, the way in which the filmmaker edits the interviews, leads to a clearer understanding of the filmmaker’s subjective relationship with the film’s issues.

The participatory mode is also the most frequently used category in these two films, as shown in Table 1 (32.9% and 36.2%), implying that both filmmakers believe that by exploring multiple viewpoints they will present a more fair and balanced perspective of their issues, an approach that news analysts certainly subscribe to in order to gain public trust.

Participatory Mode in *Ai Weiwei*

In the case of *Ai Weiwei*, Klayman uses interviews (Table 8) as a means “to represent broad social and historical perspectives” (Nichols 2010: 187). It is easy to place the following interviews within this category: that with Chen Danqing, a fellow artist who recounts details about Ai Weiwei’s early career as an artist (Table 8, ex. 3); that with Ai Dan, Ai Weiwei’s brother, who talks about their previous family life (Table 8, ex. 4), and that with magazine publisher Hung Huang (Table 8, ex. 5). Through the interviews with Huang and art curator Ethan Cohen, we also see evidence of Klayman’s distinctive voice, which is one of admiration and praise for Ai Weiwei. The individual voices of the earthquake volunteers represent the voice of the common people and thereby lend another perspective to the tragic 2008 Chengdu earthquake.

“We’re hired assassins” (Table 8, ex. 2) is the metaphorical comment by Li Zhan Yang, Ai Weiwei’s assistant, which is revealing of the artist’s work regime. It could be construed as a somewhat negative comment, but it can also be seen as the filmmaker’s attempt to present a more balanced view of her subject.

Participatory Mode in *Helvetica*

The intercutting between participatory and observatory modal elements is a noteworthy element of this film. Interspersing footage of the actual interview and observational footage of Massimo Vignelli, a font designer who tells the story of Helvetica is an example of this. Hustwit’s voice finds expression in the differing views of interviewees on the aesthetics and merits of Helvetica, but it would seem that his narrative perspective is most closely aligned with Vignelli’s (Table 9, ex. 1). Matthew Carter, type designer, provides an historical overview by talking about his father (Table 9, ex. 2) and the origins of Helvetica. Primary source material is included in this mode, such as Vignelli’s American Airlines logo pictures. Like Klayman, Hustwit includes references to broad social issues and historical perspectives. Interviews with four type designers also provide further details about Helvetica’s apparent ubiquity, as well as the range of attitudes towards the font (Table 9, ex. 3 and 4).

Table 8: Sample scenes in *Ai Weiwei* identified as participatory mode categories










Participatory Mode Subcategories	Illustration	Corresponding Frame
Filmmaker and subject respond to each other. Filmmaker's role: engaging and collaborative	1. Ai Weiwei leaning toward filmmaker.	
Interview: enriches commentary with grain of individual voices	2. Ai Weiwei's assistant, "We're hired assassins."	
Interviews: filmmaker presents broad social issues and historical perspectives	3. Chen Danqing fills in details about Ai Weiwei's early career.	
Interviews: oral history	4. Ai Weiwei's brother, Ai Dan, talks about their previous family life.	
Interviews: filmmaker presents broad social issues and historical perspectives	5. Praise for Ai Weiwei by curators & journalists, e.g. Hung Huang, magazine publisher.	

Table 9: Sample scenes in *Helvetica* identified as participatory mode categories

Participatory Mode Subcategories	Illustration	Corresponding Frame
Primary source material (visual history)	1. Visual representation of Vignelli's American Airlines logo.	
Interviews: oral history	2. Matthew Carter talks about his father and the origins of Helvetica.	
Interviews: filmmaker presents broad social issues and historical perspectives	3. Type designers Hoefler and Tobias talk about Helvetica's ubiquity and the range of attitudes towards the font.	
Interviews: oral history	4. Wim Crouwel talks about the computer's role in typeface design.	

5. Reflexive Mode

The reflexive mode focuses on the act of filming to make the viewer more aware of the filmmaking process, beyond the theme and content of the film itself. Nichols describes this mode as “*how* we represent the historical world as well as... *what* gets represented” with the goal of helping the viewer “to see documentary for what it is: a construct or representation” (2010: 194). The reflexive mode might therefore be manifested in scenes of the social actors in the process of being filmed or being prepared for filming as the following examples show.

Reflexive Mode in *Ai Weiwei*


In Table 10, examples of reflexivity in *Ai Weiwei* are presented. Ai Weiwei is filmed by a secondary camera as he talks to the primary camera (Table 10, ex. 1, 2 and 3). These scenes are fairly straightforward instances of the reflexive mode, depicting the act of Ai Weiwei being filmed and having his photograph taken. The filmmaker is thus employing reflexivity in what Nichols calls a “formal perspective, in that reflexivity draws attention to documentary form itself” (2010: 194). But there are also scenes where Ai Weiwei is filmed taking a picture of himself and using a camera to photograph evidence of police activities.

Reflexive Mode in *Helvetica*

Examples of reflexivity in *Helvetica* (Table 11) reveal the process of the filmmaker making his subjects feel comfortable, allowing them time to compose themselves, to question themselves and to seek confirmation from the director that they are on the right track. In employing this mode, Hustwit seems to address the issue of “What to do with people?” by including artisan Vignelli’s questions, “How should I talk? Should I not talk? You want me to say something? Say something? Say nothing?” In contrast, Hustwit only uses participatory mode footage of Rick Poynor, with no reflexive introduction, as if to distinguish between the characters and roles of the two social actors: studio designer and the professional typeface commentator.

The inclusion of such reflexive scenes in both films reveals some of their approach to the process of filmmaking, and their relationship with their interviewees. Klayman’s reflexive scenes reveal that Ai Weiwei might have had considerable influence in the making of her film because he was so confident in front of the camera. In Hustwit’s film, the reflexive scenes show a slight diffidence on the part of some commentators (“How should I talk?”) suggesting that even though these people are experts in their field and are focused on seriously evaluating Helvetica, they are not so confident in front of a camera (Table 11, ex. 1 and 2). In both films, the reflexive scenes also serve as transitions between scenes.

Table 10: Sample scenes in *Ai Weiwei* identified as reflexive mode categories

Reflexive Mode Subcategories	Illustration	Corresponding Frame
Contextualization	1. Ai Weiwei being prepared for filming.	



Metacommunication	2. Camera films Ai Weiwei speaking to another camera.	 A still from a video showing Ai Weiwei, a man with a beard and a green jacket, speaking directly to a camera. A large professional video camera is visible in the foreground on the left. Subtitles at the bottom read: "I've been asking everyone around me for good ideas." A timestamp "00:03:31" is in the top left corner.
Contextualization	3. The act of photographing Ai Weiwei.	 A still from a video showing two men in a courtyard. One man is standing against a brick wall, and the other is holding a camera up to take a picture of him. A timestamp "00:00:32" is in the top left corner.

Table 11: Sample scenes in *Helvetica* identified as reflexive mode categories

Reflexive Mode Subcategories	Illustration	Corresponding Frame
Reflexive introduction # 1	1. Massimo Vignelli, "How should I talk? Should I not talk? You want me to say something? Say something? Say nothing?"	 A close-up still of Massimo Vignelli speaking. Subtitles at the bottom read: "You want me to say something?" A timestamp "00:03:41" is in the top left corner.
Reflexive introduction # 2	2. Wim Crouwel, "Shall I begin?" (Filmmaker making subject comfortable)	 A still of Wim Crouwel, an older man with white hair, speaking. The background shows a wall with some graffiti.

6. Performative Mode

The performative mode, in which performed acts are recorded with an emotional intensity or uniqueness of vision, conveys a personal and subjective vision or narrative. It is sometimes difficult to distinguish from the participatory mode, as Nichols himself acknowledges. Nichols emphasizes that he does not deploy the term in a linguistic sense.¹ Rather, his discussion of "performative" is closer to the ideas of

¹ Linguists, such as Austin, have defined "performative" language as being "illocutionary," where using language becomes a speech act. For instance, a minister at a wedding ceremony declaring, "I pronounce you man and wife."

sociologist Goffman, who talks about performative elements of acting by real people or social actors who “present themselves in everyday life in ways that differ from a consciously adopted role or fictional performance” (Nichols 2010: 8). However, Nichols goes on to emphasize that where the performative mode differs from the other modes is in the way that social actors’ performances draw “more heavily on the tradition of acting as a way to bring a heightened emotional involvement to a situation or a role... They want us to feel on a visceral level rather than on a conceptual level” (2010: 203).


Performative Mode in *Ai Weiwei*

Examples of performativity in *Ai Weiwei* are presented in Table 12. The dropping of a Han dynasty vase is shown through a sequence of stills (Table 12, ex. 1). The vase is valuable and evokes a subjective response, which might otherwise be seen as an outrageous and wanton act of vandalism. Another unique Ai Weiwei performance occurs when he sits in a large cooking pot with the lid on his head (Table 12, ex. 2). A third example is at a group photo shoot when one girl mimics Ai Weiwei’s signatory finger gesture as he steps in and joins the event (Table 12, ex. 3). These examples of performativity, infused as they are with an emotional message and carrying the narrative, are powerful images underscoring how fortunate the filmmaker was to be able to work with such a performative artist.

Performative Mode in *Helvetica*

As shown in Table 13, examples of performativity in *Helvetica* include a girl walking by the Helvetica film crew shooting her own film, thus suggesting an element of reflexivity (Table 13, ex. 1) as well as being performative. A second example is the demonstration by Matthew Carter showing how he designs a typeface on a computer screen (Table 13, ex. 2).

Table 12: Sample scenes in *Ai Weiwei* identified as performative mode categories

Performative Mode Subcategories	Illustration	Corresponding Frame
Demonstration of an extraordinary or outrageous act	1. Ai Weiwei breaking Han vase.	




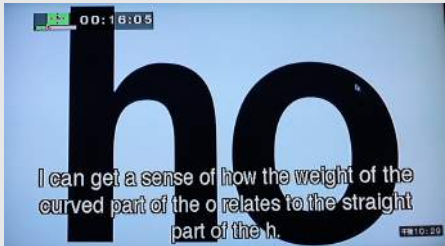
Performance # 1	2. Ai Weiwei in a cooking pot.	
Performance # 2	3. Ai Weiwei and girls make finger gestures spontaneously in group photo shoot.	

Table 13: Sample scenes in *Helvetica* identified as performative mode categories

Performative Mode Subcategories	Illustration	Corresponding Frame
Involvement of passers-by	1. Girl filming the filmmaking against Helvetica background.	
Demonstration: how a task is performed	2. Designing a typeface.	

Conclusion

As documentaries come to occupy a more important role in the visual culture landscape, it is all the more imperative to find effective means of analysis that take into account the mode's latest trends and developments. This research shows how an empirical approach to film analysis can supplement and enhance the more traditional approaches to film theory.

Indeed, we are now able to return to the initial conjecture regarding Nichols' modes: that adapting Nichols' approach from a macro level to a micro level provides an equally effective approach to analysing hybrid documentary films. The question of whether Nichols' taxonomy could be applied on a microanalytical level has been answered through the preceding analysis of 116 scenes from *Ai Weiwei* and *Helvetica*, all of which could be categorized into one of the theorist's six modes. This empirical approach, which is set out by highlighting the relative proportional representations of the respective modes, revealed the dominance of participatory, poetic and expository modes, which account for three-quarters of the scenes in both works. The other three modes – observational, reflexive and performative – constituted approximately one quarter of the scenes examined.

Beyond merely identifying modes present within given scenes, it is essential to consider how these enable us to excavate the "message" of the film and the voice of the director. Reading a film can be said to be analogous to a jigsaw puzzle consisting of many pieces where the pieces are scenes and the shapes are the modes. Understanding how the pieces fit together is like reading a musical score where the composer's vision can be revealed. The microanalysis of Nichols' modes helped us to more clearly comprehend the skeletal framework of the films and the directors' visions. It also suggests that a director requires both a macro level and micro level awareness of modes in order to produce a sophisticated documentary.

Nichols has intimated at the need for both broad and focused analysis of documentary films. He claims that the link between modes at the macro level and micro level "gives the documentary tradition its power and fascination" (Nichols 2010: 101). This mingling of modes, Cagle (46) agrees, is also reflective of the enriched "hybrid" nature of contemporary documentaries. In view of this tendency towards hybridization, and more generally towards a conflation of more heterogeneous, experimental, avant-garde, and "post-classical" forms, it can be argued that Nichols' modes, applied at a micro level, provide an effective tool for analysis.

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