



# THE AUDIOVISUAL LANGUAGE OF DOCUMENTARIES APPLIED TO TELEVISION SERIES Rhetorical Strategies and Hybridisation Between Fiction and Non-Fiction in Television<sup>1</sup>

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*Documentary*  
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## ABSTRACT

*This research paper examines the application of the audiovisual language of the documentary genre in television series. The main objective is to identify and analyse the documentary techniques present in fiction series. Once the stylistic conventions of the documentary have been identified, a formal audiovisual analysis is carried out on a sample of representative series. The results confirm that the series incorporate documentary strategies and stylistic conventions such as the use of a hand-held camera, on-camera testimonies, voice-over or the inclusion of archive material. These strategies provide an appearance of authenticity and veracity, blurring the boundaries between fiction and non-fiction*

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## 1. Introduction

The hybridization of fiction and non-fiction in audiovisual formats enables the exploration of novel storytelling avenues while encapsulating the intricate nuances of contemporary audiovisual creation, encompassing the specificities of its distribution and consumption. This combination responds to social, technological and cultural transformations that challenge the previous boundaries between genres (Gordillo, 2020).

A documentary is a film genre that depicts real or historical events with the intention of providing information, education (Nichols, 2017; Winston, 2008), influencing public opinion (Nichols, 2017), evoking an emotional and cognitive impact upon the viewer (Winston, 2008) or prompting critical reflection (Aufderheide, 2007). The objective is to achieve the greatest possible veracity and authenticity, offering an in-depth and analytical perspective on reality through a range of film and narrative techniques (Ellis & McLane, 2005), including direct observation and interview methods (Renov, 2004). This approach is geared towards the documentation of reality (Winston, 2008).

In contrast, a television series can be described as a fiction format, or a sub-genre thereof. As defined by Carrasco Campos (2010), it consists of "the serialised narration of different fictional stories, fragmented into different chapters" (p. 183). Despite the conceptual divergence between documentary and fiction series, the convergence of formats and the transfer of linguistic conventions have facilitated the production of serialised fiction content for television that shares stylistic similarities with the documentary.

The distinction between fiction and non-fiction has been a topic of extensive debate within the field of literary theory. One of the most significant contributions to this debate is that of Genette (1993), who differentiates between fictional narratives and "factual narratives," the latter of which he refers to as non-fictional narrative formats (Martín Jiménez, 2015). In his work *Fiction and Diction*, Genette (1993) posits that fiction is never entirely invented or fabricated; rather, it is composed of reworked elements of the real world. For Genette, the defining characteristic of fiction is the intentional use of language to elaborate imaginary narratives, even when elements of reality are incorporated into the fictional world.

However, subsequent research has challenged the precision of the distinction between fictional and factual narrative, as well as the indices of fictionality identified by Genette. This is because they are unable to fully account for the role of fiction in argumentative discourse (Rabaté, 2021; Vaugeois, 2022). In this regard, Montalbetti (2001) concluded that the formal distinction between fictional narrative and factual narrative was untenable, resulting in the development of pragmatic typologies.

Similarly, Schaeffer (2005) also employs pragmatic criteria rather than semantic ones in his concept of artistic fiction. Schaeffer puts forth the notion of fiction as a form of playful experience, positing the "contract de feintise ludique" (playful simulation) and the implicit agreements that are established between the creator and the receiver of fictions as the basis for differentiating fiction from reality in the documentary (Stam, 2023).

Feria-Sánchez (2023, p. 145) observes that research on non-fiction film must confront the challenge of defining its boundaries and the invitation to explore the absence of those limits. Indeed, the boundaries between fiction and documentary have been the subject of considerable debate in a large number of works, which concur in identifying a "tension" between the two modalities (Robbins, 2009; Rodríguez-Mangual, 2008), "blurred boundaries" (Nichols, 1994) or "negotiation of identity in terms of genre" (Blum, 2023, p. 50).

In light of the aforementioned issue of identity, Nichols (2017) posits that the distinction between documentary and fiction, as with other forms of creative expression, "hinges on the extent to which a narrative aligns with authentic experiences, occurrences, and individuals, as opposed to being a mere product of the filmmaker's imagination" (pp. 8-9).

Renov (1993) is unequivocal in stating that, although not all documentaries are fiction, they are at the very least fictive in nature. This is evidenced by their construction of characters, articulation of dramatic arcs, use of poetic language, emotive narration, musical accompaniment, and other filmmaking techniques that will be discussed in greater detail later on.

Anishchenkova (2018) concurs with this author's viewpoint: "Documentaries are, above all, fictions" (p. 812). This is evidenced by their sharing with fiction the presence of "plots, characters, situations and events" (Renov, 1993, p. 107), as well as "their use of introductory gaps, challenges or dilemmas; the

building of exacerbated tensions and dramatic conflicts; and their ending with a resolution and closure." This is in accordance with Bruzzi (2006, p. 107).

In conclusion, the interconnection between fiction and documentary "is inherently unstable, given that documentary employs the techniques of fiction" (Ellis, 2021, p. 143). As with fiction, "documentaries do not represent or present reality in its absolute form, but rather function as discourses" (Fiorini, 2023, p. 150).

The distinction between the two can be attributed to the ethical responsibilities inherent to each genre (Plantinga, 2007). "The documentary ensures the veracity and trustworthiness of the images and sounds presented, otherwise the implicit contract with the viewer will be breached, and the filmmaker will be perceived as lacking competence or integrity" (Fiorini, 2023, p. 148). The distinction between fiction and non-fiction, therefore, is a convention based on the symbolic connection between history and fiction (Stam, 2023). In this way, the act of "audiovisual falsification endangers the credibility of the spectator by appropriating the modes and conventions of non-fiction" (García Martínez, 2011, p. 303).

The indistinct boundaries between formats and the arbitrary nature of their formal conventions ultimately result in the emergence of various forms of mockumentary, including docufiction (Rhodes & Parris Springer, 2006), documentary fiction (Rancière, 2006), factual fiction (Rodríguez-Mangual, 2008), and auto-fictional documentary (De la Torre Espinosa, 2015), among others.

This research project builds on the concept of linguistic transfer between non-fiction and fiction formats, with Thompson (2007) and García Martínez (2011) representing its immediate predecessors. In his 2007 study, Thompson examines the production style of some contemporary television comedies that resemble observational documentaries. He refers to this format as 'comedia verité,' combining film and television theories with case studies to analyse it. Thompson views this approach as a potential means of reinvigorating the conventional sitcom, imparting it with a renewed vitality and dynamism that can meet the expectations of the audience and the creative aspirations of the producers, largely due to the apparent reduction in the financial resources necessary for its production.

García Martínez (2011) employs a qualitative analysis to investigate the ways in which fake documentaries utilise diverse mechanisms and rhetorical strategies to simulate reality, deceive the viewer and challenge the veracity of documentary images. He concludes that, despite its heterogeneity, the mockumentary employs rhetorical and stylistic strategies to lend credibility to the fake and challenge the conventions of the traditional documentary.

The findings of these two research projects are instrumental in identifying precise strategies and techniques that can be adapted to different audiovisual formats and that result in the simulation of filmed reality.

## 2. The Audiovisual Language of Documentaries

Blum (2023) posits that "the viewer's identification of the film's fictionality and/or factuality is contingent upon the visual and aural elements" (p. 43). As previously stated, both fiction and documentary possess a discursive nature (Fiorini, 2023). This introduces the differentiation between fiction and documentary into the realm of the materials with which the discourse is constructed, and therefore into the articulated audiovisual language itself.

Arijon (1987) makes a more general observation regarding the language of news content, noting that the filmed incident is unique and that those who film it act as spectators, thereby reducing their ability to control the filmed event. This notion aligns with the perspectives put forth by Allen and Gomery (1995), or Bordwell and Thompson (1995) regarding the documentary's diminished capacity to exert control over the subject matter in comparison to fiction: "The distinction between a documentary film and a fiction film is often made on the basis of the degree of control exercised during production" (p. 29). However, Nichols (1997) identifies this notion as a misleading assumption, "perpetuating a confusion about the nature of documentary filmmaking that is as problematic as the truth claims of documentary representation or factual evidence" (p. 44).

In the case of informative content, Arijon (1987) posits that "it can be said that this type of filming produces a series of discontinuous shots, recording fragments of the total event" (pp. 13-14). In contrast, the documentary format permits a greater degree of variation, allowing for the grouping of multiple situations into a sequence, the introduction of new visual elements, or alterations in the presentation of

events. In this regard, Nichols (1997) asserts that "the structure of the documentary typically relies on an evidential montage, wherein conventional narrative techniques undergo substantial modification" (p. 50). Consequently, "documentaries employ the elision of temporal boundaries within and between sequences. The same editing conventions are observed" in both fiction and documentary (Ellis, 2021, p. 144).

From this synthesis of techniques and structures, it can be postulated that the documentary is not subject to the standardisation of an audiovisual grammar, in a similar manner to how audiovisual fiction is not constrained by the application of the techniques of the Model of Institutional Representation (M.R.I.) since 1916, as theorised by Bürch (2017). This research commences with an apparently paradoxical premise: on the one hand, it can be posited that there is no standardisation or grammatisation of documentary language at the same level as fiction (therefore, grammatised and with paradigmatic and exemplary practices); however, on the other hand, this work argues from its approach that, even if we cannot speak of a grammar or standardisation of audiovisual language in documentaries, it is possible to identify frequent practices in the language of documentaries. In other words, while a language may be identified, a grammar cannot be.

In light of the assertion that "the processes of formation of institutionalised languages in audiovisuals arise from the identification of patterns and their standardisation" (Pérez-Ruffi & Castro-Higueras, 2023, p. 103), it is possible to posit the existence of habitual patterns or practices in the language of documentaries. It is only on this basis that the proposition can be advanced that there is a transfer of languages between the documentary and the television series.

The various modalities of documentary – expository, observational, participatory, reflexive or performative (Lloga, 2020; Nichols, 1997; Nichols, 2017) – shape the audiovisual language. As a common strategy derived from different parallel techniques, Bradbury and Guadagno (2020) highlight the presentation of evidence intended to be argued in discourse, which they term "indexical evidence" or "indexical documentation" (p. 341). This includes the presentation of documents, archival material, interviews, photographic animations, and other forms of audiovisual documentation. It is thus proposed that the presence of these audiovisual resources be considered as part of the language of the documentary. Furthermore, Bradbury and Guadagno (2020) identify the "authoritative voice" (either spoken or written) as a rhetorical technique employed to address the audience, which is regarded as a defining feature of documentary language.

As previously indicated, Renov (1993) draws a comparison between documentary and fiction by identifying the use of techniques such as "exaggerated camera angles, distances and editing rhythms" (p. 198) as a means of creating a more stylised and imaginative approach to the medium (Renov, 1993, p. 198). In considering the similarities between a feature-length fiction film and the documentary, Canet (2013) proposes that the term 'strategies' to give "false authenticity" (p. 40) may be more appropriate than the terms 'resources or techniques'. Among these strategies, he cites filming in natural locations, with all the symbolic charge to which such spaces can be associated; the representation of reality as authentically as possible by concealing the *mise-en-scène*; allowing actors to improvise during filming; the pursuit of naturalness through the simplicity of the scenes; and the elimination of the distinction between those in front of and behind the camera. In conclusion, these are strategies related to staging, which has traditionally included set design, lighting, shot composition, characterisation and the interpretation of the cast.

León (2007) concurs with the notion of the natural setting in the portrayal of marginal Latin American cinema, which employs a visual style characteristic of the documentary genre. Furthermore, he posits that: The style of this filmmaking seeks high contrasts, grainy images, chromatic saturation, and the instability of the shoulder-mounted camera. He employs the techniques of direct cinema and *cinéma vérité*, which he terms an "aesthetic of urgency" or "aesthetic of hunger."

Ellis (2021, p. 145) observes that documentaries produced for television formats similar to reality shows employ a range of techniques, including the use of multiple cameras, mobile cameras, images from security and satellite cameras or other technologies, and interviews. Citing the case of Iris Zaki, Ellis (2021, p. 147) goes so far as to expose the conditions of its production, demonstrating the necessity of considering the technological arrangements as a key aspect in understanding the filmic encounters. This approach aligns with the aforementioned disappearance of the division between in front of and behind the camera (Canet, 2013). In this context, the protagonists of the story share *diegesis* with the creators of the discourse, endowing them with a sense of authenticity. However, the creators also

become characters in the story, highlighting the complex and multifaceted nature of the production process.

Fiorini (2023) posits that the utilisation of sound can be conceptualised as an evidential resource in the context of the true-crime documentary: "The sound of the voice serves to substantiate the veracity and credibility of the documentary" (p. 144). In addition to the human voice, diegetic sounds and audio recordings of the scene contribute to the realistic impression, in contrast to the effect of music or non-diegetic sounds incorporated into the editing.

In examining the specific influence of the language of the non-fiction format on the contemporary sitcom, Thompson (2007) identifies the application of techniques such as the use of a hand-held camera, natural lighting, the breaking of continuity, aggressive reframing, and filming in real locations (which, for example, leads to the blurring of number plate numbers on vehicles), the apparent improvisation of actors and the actual capture of the shot, the inclusion of interviews or monologues in front of the camera, the presence of explanatory graphics, voice-over narration, the use of archive material, and in short, the "visual imperfections" and "noise" of the shot, are also noteworthy.

Although it may be superfluous with respect to Thompson, the following rhetorical and stylistic strategies adopted by the mockumentary, as highlighted by García Martínez (2011), are worthy of mention: Such techniques include the use of hand-held-camera shots, camera movements and zooms that simulate the spontaneity of observational documentary, the incorporation of authentic archive footage, the recreation of textures, interviews, voice-overs, and the presentation of the filmmakers themselves.

More recent strategies and resources may be incorporated into this approach, including the simulation of the vernacular language utilized by social network and live streaming platform users. This may entail the use of vertical video formats, capturing users in selfie mode, close-up shots in movement, the insertion of effects, graphics, emojis, or texts (extradiegetic) of interaction in real time, split screens or picture-in-picture, the simulation of video calls on Zoom-type platforms, and so forth (Pérez-Rufi & Castro-Higueras, 2023). These techniques are not exclusive to documentaries; indeed, they have been integrated into the audiovisual language of news and non-fiction formats in parallel with their expansion. In conclusion, as García Martínez (2011) asserts, "if the director is able to emulate the modes, conventions and textures of the documentary, the desired effect can be achieved, even if it is not a true non-fiction piece" (p. 312).

### **3. Objectives and Hypotheses**

The principal aim of this study is to ascertain the extent to which techniques, strategies and resources characteristic of the audiovisual language of the documentary and other non-fiction formats are present in fictional television series. The objective is therefore to examine and elucidate the methods by which television series integrate elements of non-fiction audiovisual formats into their linguistic expression.

In relation to the aforementioned objective, this research proposes the hypothesis that it is possible to identify a series of patterns or frequent practices applied to the audiovisual language of the documentary, which can then be applied to fictional formats such as the television series. Consequently, the television series assumes the visual and aural characteristics of the documentary, yet it does so from the perspective of fiction. Such a format would therefore be a hybrid, combining the audiovisual language of the documentary with the narrative of fiction. This would be similar to the mockumentary and other related forms, but with the serialised and fragmented structure typical of the series.

### **4. Methodology**

Marzal Felici and Martín Núñez (2011) highlight that the utilisation of "discursive hybridisations" (p. 20) necessitates the development of innovative methodologies for the analysis of filmic discourse, which are more expansive and intricate in their approach. In this instance, and with the objective of guaranteeing a meticulous and methodical approach, we have initiated our investigation with a comprehensive bibliographical and theoretical review. This has enabled us to discern techniques and strategies that are distinctive to the audiovisual language of the documentary.

Secondly, a corpus of fiction series produced in the 21st century that are known for integrating documentary techniques has been selected in a purposeful manner. Purposive sampling "is carried out

according to criteria pre-established by the researcher, guided by prior theory about the problem or based on empirical evidence for the definition of inclusion and exclusion criteria" (Pérez-Luco et al., 2017, p. 1117). This approach is commonly used in qualitative research to enable a focused investigation of the research problem.

It has been proposed that, due to the work's particular emphasis on audiovisual language, the sampling technique is the most effective method for achieving significant results. This decision is typical of research based on the analysis of television series. In a systematic bibliographical review, Mateos-Pérez (2021) notes the frequency with which academic work on series based on content analysis employs "a purposeful selection according to the subject to be analysed" (p. 176). As the sample is intentionally selected, the titles chosen are inherently representative. Based on the totality of series produced in the current century and informed by prior viewing experiences, the criteria for the sample align with the identification of strategies or resources characteristic of the audiovisual language of the documentary, as outlined in the theoretical framework.

The sample (N: 33) consists of the following series: *Sex and the City* (HBO: 1998-2004), *FreakyLinks* (Fox: 2000-2001), *Malcolm in the Middle* (Fox: 2000-2006), *Cuéntame cómo pasó/Tell Me About It* (RTVE: 2001-2024), *Desperate Housewives* (ABC: 2004-2012), *The Office* (NBC: 2005-2014), *How I met your mother* (CBS: 2005-2014), *Modern Family* (ABC: 2009-2020), *Parks and Recreation* (NBC: 2009-2015), *The Walking Dead* (AMC: 2010-2022), *Black Mirror* (Netflix: 2011-), *Homeland* (Showtime: 2011-2020), *American Vandal* (Netflix: 2017-2018), *Arrested Development* (Fox: 2003-2006; Netflix: 2013-2019), *Peaky Blinders* (BBC: 2013-2022), *Jane, the Virgin* (The CW: 2014-2019), *Mr. Robot* (USA Network: 2015-2019), *Fleabag* (BBC: 2016-2019), *Paquita Salas* (Flooxer: 2016; Netflix: 2019-), *Limbo* (RTVE: 2018), *Barry* (HBO: 2018-2023), *Russian Doll* (Netflix: 2019-), *What We Do in the Shadows* (FX: 2019-), *The Umbrella Academy* (Netflix: 2019-2024), *Los Espookys* (HBO: 2019-2022), *Valeria* (Netflix: 2020-2023), *At Home* (HBO, 2020), *Diarios de la cuarentena/Quarantine Diaries* (RTVE: 2020), *Never Have I Ever* (Netflix: 2020-2023), *Everything Else* (HBO: 2021), *Wandavision* (Disney+: 2021-), *Heartstopper* (Netflix: 2022-) and *Found Footage: The Series* (Apple TV: 2024-).

A formal audiovisual analysis is conducted on the basis of this sample. As previously stated, the distinction between fiction and documentary in the audiovisual domain can be attributed to the materials utilized in the construction of the discourse, beyond the intentions and ethical considerations underlying their production. This observation leads to the formulation of the proposed methodology. The objective of formal audiovisual analysis is to deconstruct the constituent elements of an audiovisual work, with a particular focus on aspects such as visual composition, image planning and recording, sound, scenography, lighting and other technical and stylistic components (Bordwell & Thompson, 1995; Casetti & Di Chio, 2017).

In the case proposed here, the formal audiovisual analysis identifies, describes and categorises the techniques and strategies of the audiovisual language of the documentary previously mentioned, in its transfer to the serialised fiction format. The findings of the formal audiovisual analysis are presented through the classification, enumeration and description of the resources identified in the sample series.

Therefore, the principal outcome of the analysis is the establishment of a taxonomy of discursive strategies that are distinctive to the audiovisual language of the documentary in its transfer to a fiction format. Accordingly, a tripartite division is proposed, comprising image-based, sound-based and editing-based strategies. In the subsequent presentation of the results, ordered lists of these strategies will be provided, with specific examples from the series included in the analysis sample.

Ultimately, once the identified techniques have been categorised and ordered, the results obtained are interpreted. This involves reflecting on the relationship between the television series as a fiction format and the documentary and non-fiction audiovisual. This is done in order to gain a deeper understanding of the audiovisual language in each of the formats and to understand the consequences of the hybridisation of languages.

## 5. Results and Discussion

The categorisation of the results into three principal rhetorical strategies is intended to reflect the considerable diversity of techniques identified. It is our contention that this categorical perspective allows for a more coherent organisation of the results obtained, thus facilitating the presentation of the trends and patterns identified in the application of documentary language in fiction series.

The deliberate selection of a sample of series that employ techniques and utilise resources characteristic of the language of documentary has resulted in the presence of all the defining elements of the genre. Nevertheless, the transfer of languages between audiovisual formats is more pronounced in certain series than in others. Series such as *The Office* (NBC: 2005-2013), *Modern Family* (ABC: 2009-2020), *Parks and Recreation* (NBC: 2009-2015), *Arrested Development* (Fox: 2003-2006; Netflix: 2013-2019), *Paquita Salas* (Flooxer: 2016; Netflix: 2019-), *What We Do in the Shadows* (FX: 2019-), and *Found Footage: The series* (Apple TV: 2024-) uses the 'imperfections' of shot composition, the recording of testimonies (interviews) and interaction with the camera through direct glances as its main stylistic features, placing it squarely in the realm of mockumentary.

### 5.1. Image-Based Rhetorical Strategies

- 1) The instability of the shot, as observed in the use of a hand-held camera.

The use of a hand-held camera is a recurring feature in documentaries that adopt a more journalistic approach, which conveys a sense of instability and improvisation in the face of certain elements, including reframing, blurring or apparently unplanned entries and exits of shots. The act of recording images thus simulates the capture of news content, the development of which is inherently unpredictable. This lack of control over the unfolding of events is what gives the image a certain degree of 'roughness.' This proximity to the audiovisual language of an informative nature gives rise to the convention that explains the effect of realistic representation, first in the documentary and then in fiction.

This criterion may be employed in the image of another character (*The Office*, NBC: 2005-2013) or as a subjective camera, as in very specific scenes in series such as *Mr. Robot* (USA Network: 2015-2019), *Homeland* (Showtime: 2011-2020), *The Walking Dead* (AMC: 2010-2022) or *Peaky Blinders* (BBC: 2013-2022). This technique is also employed in fiction series filmed during the 2020 confinement caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, with performers themselves assuming the role of cameramen (*At Home*, HBO: 2020).

This approach is heir to the forms used by cinema vérité or the Nouvelle Vague. It conveys not only a strong impression of instability and tension, but also of improvisation and flexible planning that adapts to the capture of spontaneous events or details that are of interest to the filmmaking and production team. This approach thus adopts a technique that is typical of observational documentary.

- 2) Found footage.

As an alternative to the previous technique, in this case most of the series or specific scenes are based on the narration of an audiovisual document filmed at home, with errors in the recording of images and sound. This is often used in mockumentary or fictional films that pretend to be home recordings. In this case, the 'roughness' of the image is justified by the fact that it was recorded with domestic equipment, which gives the impression of the realism of the unplanned and spontaneous, improvised recording. The 'cleanliness' of the image required by professional filming is subordinated to the interest of the content being recorded, as is often the case in news formats. This technique is used in series such as *FreakyLinks* (Fox: 2000-2001) and *Found Footage: The Series* (Apple TV: 2024), which openly refer to mockumentaries. Again, the reason for the reference to mockumentary comes from the frequency with which found footage has been integrated into factual or news formats, making it a conventional resource.

- 3) Testimonials (camera gaze).

In this instance, two variations of the testimonial plane are evident, contingent on whether it constitutes a component of the narrative or generates a disruption in the diegesis.

On the one hand, the testimonial plane may be considered as part of the narrative. In such instances, the disruption of the fourth wall is not anomalous and is justified by the diegesis itself. Indeed, the shot can even be opened up to reveal the person or camera to whom the character is speaking (*WandaVision*, Disney+, 2001). This is a strategy that recurs frequently in the documentary genre. It is a convention that corresponds to the conduct of interviews and is therefore used in this way when a fiction series is

developed around the production of a documentary (for example, *The Office*, NBC: 2005-2013) or a report (for example, *Sex and the City*, HBO: 1998-2004). However, it can also be incorporated into the narrative without sufficient rationale (*Modern Family*, ABC: 2009-2020).

In all of these cases, it is observed that all of the main characters and some of the secondary characters employ this strategy, which allows them to address the camera directly in response to a question that is ostensibly posed to them or to provide commentary on a particular point or anecdote (although the question itself is not audible, the character will often make reference to it). Furthermore, in these instances, the name and reference (occupation, relationship) of the character are labelled, although this typically occurs only in the inaugural episode of the series or in the character's initial appearance. Nevertheless, images illustrating the process of filming these testimonies are absent, including details such as micro-focusing, focusing, framing, make-up and hairdressing touch-ups.

Conversely, the testimonial plane, situated externally to the diegesis, may be considered. In such instances, the fourth wall is breached, with the character directly addressing the viewer and going unnoticed by the other characters. This rhetorical strategy is exemplified in series such as *Malcolm in the Middle* (Fox: 2000-2006) or *Fleabag* (BBC: 2016-2019). It is not a common occurrence, but in these instances, it is accepted within the narrative and integrated into the series' language as a distinctive element. When this resource is employed in this manner, it is not universally available to all characters; it is typically reserved for the principal character. Furthermore, there is no indication that this is a deliberate strategy. A distinctive feature of this convention is that in the second season of *Fleabag*, another character (the priest played by Andrew Scott) is able to discern the instances when the protagonist breaches the fourth wall. In any case, although this formula responds to a production technique typical of documentaries, it is not used for the same purpose as in documentaries. In this case, the character's dialogue to the camera is interpreted as a confession, the expression of a thought aloud or his own introspection.

#### 4) The replication of domestic recording and videoconferencing platforms and devices.

This technique was particularly prevalent during the period of social distancing and self-isolation caused by the coronavirus pandemic, when some series were filmed almost exclusively in a video call format (*Diarios de la cuarentena/Quarantine Diaries*, RTVE: 2020). Nevertheless, this technique has been observed in earlier examples, such as the episode entitled "Connection Lost" from the television series *Modern Family* (season 16, episode 6), which is assembled through videos captured on various mobile devices. Furthermore, this resource is also evident in the episode entitled "Nosedive" (E.1, T.6) of the Netflix original series *Black Mirror* (2011 onwards), as well as in the Spanish-language series *Limbo* (RTVE: 2018). In both instances, the editing of shots taken from electronic device interfaces, including social media platforms, video calls, recordings, and photographs taken with a mobile phone, is the primary technique employed.

The popularity of collective video-calling platforms (such as Zoom or Meet) in the wake of the pandemic caused by the Covid-19 virus had a parallel in the visual language of television fiction series, through the representation of interfaces reminiscent of such platforms and short shots of characters looking directly into the camera of what appeared to be mobile devices or webcams. In the series *Never Have I Ever* (Netflix: 2020-2024), this is represented in two different ways. Firstly, the shot with the interface of the platform or video call app is edited directly into the discourse. Secondly, the device (mobile phone or laptop) from which the characters communicate is shown.

The incorporation of video calls as a means of recording testimonies in factual audiovisual formats is a relatively recent phenomenon. Consequently, it may be premature to identify it as a convention of the audiovisual language of the documentary and of the fictional formats that simulate it. Nevertheless, its incorporation into news formats since the pandemic has rendered it a popular and potentially enduring resource.

## 5.2. Sound-Based Rhetorical Strategies

### 1) The presence of a voice-over.

A voice-over is defined as an omniscient narrator who, in a fictional series, does not typically correspond to a real character who is part of the plot. This is similar to the resource used in documentaries, as



exemplified by the television series *Jane the Virgin* (The CW: 2014-2019). It is, however, possible that this voice is simply another character who introduces himself, as in the case of John McEnroe in *Never Have I Ever* (Netflix: 2000-2023), or a character in the narrative who is no longer alive at the time the plot develops, as in the case of Mary Alice in *Desperate Housewives* (ABC: 2004-2012), or a character situated at another point in history, as in the case of Carlitos in *Cuéntame cómo pasó/Tell Me About It* (RTVE: 2001-2024). In the case of a series in which the narrator is identified with a real person, such as John McEnroe, the voice-over assumes the role of an "authorised voice" (Bradbury & Guadagno, 2020), a device typical of the documentary genre that attempts to imbue the fictional narrative with the verisimilitude that comes with the recognition of the narrator.

In some instances, the voice-over may belong to the protagonist of the narrative, thus assuming the role of the auto diegetic narrator. This is exemplified by the character of Ted Mosby in the television series *How I Met Your Mother* (CBS, 2005-2014) and the character of Carrie Bradshaw in the HBO series *Sex and the City* (1998-2004). This resource has even been employed extradiegetically and diegetically when the narrator's voice ultimately becomes that of a character at the conclusion of the series (*Everything Else*, HBO: 2021).

The use of the voice-over, as in documentaries, serves a number of functions. Primarily, it guides the narrative, provides a focus on the images that are shown, develops explanations that make certain arguments evident, or provides information that conditions and influences the audience's perception. As Genette (1993) notes, in factual narrative, the author and narrator are typically the same person, whereas in fiction, there is a clear separation between author and narrator, with greater creative freedom permitted. In the aforementioned instances of hybridisation, the form of the factual narrative is adopted, yet it is populated with fictional content.

#### 2) The registration of noise or difficulties in capturing it.

The incorporation of noise or an 'imperfect' audio track serves to align with the objective of 'distorting' the sequence, not only in relation to the image, as previously discussed, but also with regard to the audio. In this manner, the 'distortion' of the sound serves to reinforce the impression of a simulation of reality, which is characteristic of observational documentaries. From a narrative perspective, series such as *Limbo* (RTVE: 2018) illustrate the rationale behind the incorporation of noise as a result of the emulation of domestic appliances or imagery through video calls. In this context, internet connectivity issues are depicted through the introduction of interference.

### 5.3. Rhetorical Strategies Based on Editing or Montage

#### 1) Labelling

In fictional series, it is common practice to include labels indicating the name of the city, place or date in which the narrative is set. As previously stated, the incorporation of labels bearing the names of the characters serves as a resource, inspired by the interview technique. This is exemplified in *Paquita Salas* (Flooxer: 2016; Netflix: 2019).

This strategy is applicable to non-fiction formats such as documentaries, as well as other news genres that require the provision of such information. Once more, this is a convention of the audiovisual language of factual or informative audiovisual formats. The information provided in the form of extra-discursive texts allows for the contextualisation of the images and the potential connotations or symbolism implied by the spaces, as evidenced in documentaries (Canet, 2013). This is exemplified by series with time jumps, such as *The Umbrella Academy* (Netflix: 2019-2024).

In the case of character labels, they serve to legitimise the information presented as a source of information, thereby simulating reality in a manner consistent with the intentions of the documentary.

#### 2) Incorporation of visual materials.

The discourse incorporates graphic resources that emulate the style of communication typical of instant messaging platforms such as WhatsApp or FaceTime. This resource is particularly prevalent in young and/or romantic series such as *Valeria* (Netflix: 2020-2023), *Never Have I Ever* (Netflix: 2020-2024) or *Heartstopper* (Netflix: 2022-).

The incorporation of graphic elements, including text, emoticons, stickers, and other such features, effectively emulates the visual language of instant messaging software and user-generated video streaming platforms.

3) Archival material.

The incorporation of archival material represents a key resource within the documentary genre, particularly in works pertaining to historical or popular culture. This element can be observed in fictional series belonging to the same genre, including both authentic and graphically manipulated material. *Cuéntame cómo pasó/Tell Me About It* (RTVE: 2001-2024) is an illustrative example. The utilisation of this resource enables serialised fiction to be contextualised within a specific historical period and geographical location, thereby partially fulfilling the documentary function of the archive material employed. Consequently, the fictional narrative strives to attain a certain degree of veracity.

The incorporation of archive material represents a well-established convention within the domain of audiovisual documentaries, which are integrated and merged with other purely fictional resources in series and other fictional audiovisual formats.

**Table 1.** Adapting the audiovisual language of documentaries to television series

1. Image-based rhetorical strategies			
Strategy	Description	Function	Series
<b>Instability of the shot</b>	The hand-held camera is used to convey instability, improvisation and proximity to documentary realism.	Generate an impression of realism and spontaneity. Inherits techniques from <i>cinema vérité</i> and the <i>Nouvelle Vague</i> .	<i>The Office, Parks and Recreations, Mr. Robot, Homeland, The Walking Dead, Peaky Blinders, At Home</i>
<b>Found footage</b>	Use of domestic or amateur recordings with image and sound faults, typical of the mockumentary.	It provides a sense of authenticity and spontaneous registration.	<i>FreakyLinks, Found Footage: The Series</i>
<b>Testimonials</b>	The character breaks the fourth wall and looks at the camera or is interviewed to give a testimony.	It brings realism or introspection. It breaks up the diegesis or is integrated into it, depending on each case.	<i>The Office, Modern Family, Fleabag, Malcolm in the Middle</i>
<b>Imitation of home registration and video conferencing</b>	Recreation of video call interfaces and mobile devices to represent remote communication.	Simulates the use of everyday online interpersonal communication technologies.	<i>Diarios de la cuarentena/Quarantine Diaries, Modern Family, Black Mirror, Limbo, Never Have I Ever</i>
2. Sound-based rhetorical strategies			
Strategy	Description	Function	Series
<b>Voice-over</b>	Omniscient or autodiegetic narrator who guides the plot.	It provides verisimilitude or guides the fictional account.	<i>Jane the Virgin, Never Have I Ever, Desperate Housewives, Cuéntame cómo pasó/Tell Me About It</i>
<b>Noise</b>	Noise or defects in the audio track simulate the spontaneously captured reality.	It reinforces the perception of documentary capture of reality.	<i>Limbo</i>

3. Rhetorical strategies based on editing or assembly			
Strategy	Description	Function	Series
<b>Signage</b>	Use of labels for names, places or times, inspired by documentary interviews.	It contextualises the narrative and legitimises the characters as sources.	<i>Paquita Salas, The Umbrella Academy</i>
<b>Graphic resources</b>	Integration of graphics that mimic instant messaging or video calling platforms.	It simulates the use of modern applications and generates a contemporary aesthetic.	<i>Valeria, Never Have I Ever, Heartstopper</i>
<b>Archival material</b>	Use of real or graphically falsified archive material.	It adds historical or cultural veracity to the fictional narrative.	<i>Cuéntame cómo pasó/Tell Me About It</i>

Source: Own elaboration, 2024

## 6. Conclusions

The main objective of this study was to identify and analyse the techniques, strategies and resources typical of documentary formats that have been incorporated into television series. This would therefore represent a transfer of the audiovisual language of documentaries and other non-fiction formats to serialised television fiction. In light of the supposition that specific patterns or modes of documentary practice are transferred to series, an investigation has been conducted into the extent to which these techniques can imbue series with a visual and auditory aesthetic that is characteristic of the documentary genre, even when situated within the context of fiction.

The hypothesis was validated by the findings. By undertaking a formal audiovisual analysis of a representative sample of fiction series produced in the 21st century, it is possible to identify and categorise the various rhetorical strategies and styles of documentary language that have been brought to fiction series. This facilitates a more comprehensive comprehension of the hybrid audiovisual language that emerges from this synthesis, which has become a prevalent and efficacious practice in contemporary series production.

The identified strategies were fundamentally based on the integration within the discourse of the series of elements that 'cause imperfections' in both the image and the sound. This was the result of the utilisation of a handheld camera, the simulation of domestic recording devices, or the incorporation of noise or defective sound capture. However, in order to circumvent this 'imperfections', alternative strategies are employed. These include the incorporation of direct testimonies captured on camera or interviews, the introduction of visual or graphic elements characteristic of digital platforms or social networks, the integration of archival material or found footage (real or simulated), and the use of a voice-over as a means of updating the role of the narrator in various ways.

As observed in the commentary on the audiovisual language of non-fiction formats, these techniques, which are commonly used in documentaries, imbue fiction series with an impression of authenticity and truthfulness that can blur the boundaries between capturing reality and fiction. In any case, the discussion concerns stylistic conventions and impressions that refer to these conventions through precise rhetorical strategies, both in the case of non-fiction audiovisuals and fiction audiovisuals. The codification of resources or languages associated with fiction or non-fiction enables the audience to subsequently decode them. The fusion of fiction and non-fiction is a consequence of the manipulation of language through the use of techniques such as play, simulation and confusion in the encoding and decoding processes. These techniques give rise to the conventions that underpin the formulation of language in both fiction and non-fiction.

In any case, the incorporation of these resources (such as the depiction of social network interfaces and other discursive elements of the internet) does not always align with the objective of establishing credibility and veracity through their resemblance to the documentary format. Rather, it is driven by the pursuit of creativity and the introduction of engaging elements for a younger demographic that perceives its daily experiences reflected in the imagery of fiction. The television series is a genre that is

flexible and sensitive to the representation of current themes and motifs. Furthermore, the audience's relationship with technological devices and online communication platforms has been transferred to the narratives and visual language of contemporary audiovisuals that seek to represent the social profiles with which their audience identifies.

It is important to acknowledge that this research has been subject to several limitations, which must be taken into account in order to contextualise the results obtained and inform future research. Firstly, the selection of the analysis sample conditions the results obtained. While the sample comprises paradigmatic series in the integration of documentary resources, it is not exhaustive. The inclusion of a greater number of series or the analysis of productions from disparate cultural and historical contexts could provide a more expansive and diverse perspective. However, it has been postulated that an augmented sample would merely yield redundant results in comparison to those obtained.

Furthermore, the intrinsic subjectivity of formal audiovisual analysis represents a significant potential limitation. Despite efforts to apply a rigorous and systematic approach, the identification and categorisation of documentary techniques remains largely subjective, dependent on the interpretation of the analysis and its results. It is also important to note that formal audiovisual analysis, which is focused on discourse analysis, does not take into account audience reception. Consequently, this research has not considered audience perception or the decoding or interpretation that they would make of the application of documentary language in the fictional series.

Regarding prospective extensions, and commencing with the initial limitation previously outlined, this work lends itself to application within defined formats and genres. In this regard, an investigation into the influence of the true crime format could be conducted, for instance, in fictional television series based on real criminal cases. Examples of such series include *El Caso Asunta/The Asunta Case* (Netflix: 2024) and *El cuerpo en llamas/Burning Body* (Netflix: 2023). Similarly, the research can be applied to specific case studies in which documentary resources such as found footage give rise to a fictional series, as in *Archive 81* (Netflix: 2022), or extend beyond the boundaries of conventional audiovisual analysis to encompass audience reception.

Conversely, the ongoing technological advancement in the domain of audiovisual production, distribution and consumption on digital platforms necessitates an update to this work, encompassing both fiction and non-fiction.

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