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Some Ways to Think About Documentary

Documentary is one of three basic creative modes in film, the other two being narrative fiction and experimental avant-garde. Narrative fiction is well known as the feature-length and short story movies in theatres, on TV or computers, and now mobile phones and tablets. They grow out of literary, story-telling, and artistic and stage traditions. Experimental or avant-garde films are generally shown in nontheatrical film societies, in museums and art galleries, or are available in a few video anthologies; usually they are the work of individual filmmakers and the traditions of the visual arts and later aural experimentations mix with those of film.

Description

Traditionally, the characteristics most documentaries have in common, but that are distinct from other film types (especially from the fiction film), can be thought of in terms of: (1) subjects and ideologies; (2) purposes, viewpoints or approaches; (3) forms; (4) production methods and techniques; and (5) the sort of experiences they offer audiences, including actions that result from the films.

As for **subjects** – what they're about – documentaries for many decades focused on something other than the general human condition involving individual human feelings, relationships and actions; these were the province of

narrative fiction and drama. For example, a British documentary made by Paul Rotha entitled *The Fourth Estate* (1940) is about a newspaper, *The* [London] *Times*, whereas Orson Welles' *Citizen Kane* (1941) is more concerned with a fictional character who is modelled on William Randolph Hearst, the powerful American press lord, than with the publishing of newspapers. The National Film Board of Canada's *City of Gold* (1957) made by Wolf Koenig and Colin Low from still photographs taken in Dawson City, in the Yukon Territory, in 1898 was set within a brief frame of live action in then present-day Dawson. In terms of library catalogue headings, *City of Gold* would be listed under 'Canada. History. Nineteenth century', 'Gold mines and mining. Yukon', 'Klondike gold fields', and the like. On the other hand, if Charlie Chaplin's *The Gold Rush* (1925) were to be similarly catalogued, it would be in the Cs (alphabetically by author) under the general heading Fiction, Comedy, Chaplin. Though its unforgettable recreation of the file of prospectors climbing over Chilkoot Pass is remarkably painstaking, *The Gold Rush* is not really about the Klondike Gold Rush as much as it is about loneliness and longing, pluck and luck, failure and success, friendship and love personified in an actor, in this case a world-renowned movie star. Generally documentaries are about something specific and factual; traditionally they concerned public matters rather than private ones. People, places, processes, politics, problems and events in documentary are actual, and, except for strictly historical work, are contemporary. Much of this categorical approach has been challenged in recent years, but to understand those changes it is necessary to understand the roots of documentary philosophy.

The second aspect – **purpose/viewpoint/approach** – is what the filmmakers are trying to say with their films. Today they record social, cultural and personal, as well as natural, institutional and political phenomena in order to inform us about these people, events, places, institutions and problems. In so doing, documentary filmmakers intend to increase our understanding of, our interest in, our sympathy for their subjects, and perhaps our future actions. They may hope that through this means they will enable lives to be lived more fully and intelligently. At any rate, the purpose or approach of the makers of most documentaries is to record and interpret the actuality in front of the camera and microphone in order to inform and/or persuade us to hold some attitude or take some action in relation to their subjects.

Third, **form** evolves from the formative process, including the filmmakers' original conception, the sights and sounds selected for inclusion, the artistic vision and the structures into which they are fitted. Documentaries, whether scripted in advance or confined to recorded spontaneous action, are derived from and limited to actuality. Hybrids continue to multiply, but documentary is based in reality. Documentary filmmakers limit themselves to extracting and arranging from what already exists rather than making up content. They may recreate what they have observed, but they do not create totally out of imagination as creators of stories can do. Though documentarians may follow a chronological line and include people in their films, they do not employ plot or character development as standard means of organization as do fiction filmmakers. The form of documentary is mainly determined by subject, purpose and approach. Usually there is no conventional three-act dramaturgical progression from exposition and complication to discovery to climax to denouement. Documentary forms tend to be functional, varied, and looser than those of short stories, novels, or plays. Sometimes they are more like non-narrative written forms such as essays, advertisements, editorials, or poems. More and more documentaries in the last decade blur the boundaries between the forms.

Fourth, **production method and technique** refer to the ways images are shot, sounds recorded, and the two edited together. Arguments can be made for exceptions, but a basic requirement of documentary is the use of nonactors ('real people' who 'play themselves') rather than actors (who are cast, costumed and made up to play 'roles'). Another basic requirement is shooting on location (rather than on sound stages or studio back lots). In documentaries sets are very seldom constructed. Other than lighting for interviews, lighting is usually what exists at the location, supplemented only when necessary to achieve adequate exposure. Exceptions to these generalizations occur, of course; but, in general, any manipulation of images or sounds is largely confined to what is required to make the recording of them possible, or to make the result seem closer to the actual than inadequate technique might. Special effects might be used to make clear a point, as in a science film for example, but technological effects are not a primary element of documentaries. Experimental documentaries are quite different, but their categorization is always difficult.

Finally, the **audience response** documentary filmmakers seek to achieve is generally twofold: an aesthetic experience of some sort, and an effect on attitudes, possibly leading to action. Though much beauty can exist in documentary films, it tends to be more functional, sparse and austere than the constructed beauties offered by fictional films. Also, much documentary filmmaking offers more that would be described as professional *skill* rather than as personal *style*; communication rather than expression is what the documentary filmmaker is usually after. Consequently, the audience is responding not so much to the artist (who traditionally keeps under cover) as to the subject matter of the film (and the artist's more or less covert statements about it). Generally the best way to understand and appreciate the intentions of documentarians is to accept the precept of the Roman poet Horace that art should both please and instruct. Another key factor is to understand for whom the film was made; in other words, follow the money.

Definition

Traditionally, the English-language documentary is said to start with American Robert Flaherty's *Nanook of the North*, shot in Canada and released in the United States in 1922. Flaherty wanted to show his version of the Eskimos – the people whom he had gotten to know in his travels – to audiences who had little or no knowledge of them. In the early twentieth century, few had seen a photograph or moving image of Eskimo life. To accomplish this goal he fashioned a new form of filmmaking. The worldwide success of *Nanook*, along with the influence of his wife Frances, drew Flaherty further away from exploring (which had been his profession) and still photography, and into filmmaking. His second film, *Moana* (1926), prompted John Grierson – then a young Scot on an extended visit to the United States – to devise a new use for the word *documentary*. Grierson introduced the word, as an adjective, in the first sentence of the second paragraph of his review in *The New York Sun* (February 8, 1926): 'Of course, *Moana* being a visual account of events in the daily life of a Polynesian youth and his family, has documentary value.' 'Documentary' film slowly developed as a stand-alone noun, due in no small part to Grierson's own efforts.

Fig 1 Nanook of the North *(US, 1922, Robert Flaherty). Museum of Modern Art Film Stills Library*

Documentary has as its root word *document*, which comes from the Latin *docere*, to teach. As late as 1800, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, *documentary* meant 'a lesson; an admonition, a warning'. When Grierson wrote that *Moana* had 'documentary value', he would have been thinking of the modern meaning of document – that is, a record which is factual and authentic. For scholars, documents are 'primary sources' of information; for lawyers 'documentary evidence' is opposed to hearsay or opinion. Perhaps Grierson was also thinking of the French use of *documentaire to* distinguish serious travelogues/ethnography from other sorts of early films that featured mere scenic views. In any case, he would move the term from his initial use of it partially back to the earlier one of teaching and propagating, using the 'documents' of modern life as materials to spread the faith of social democracy. Flaherty, for his part, continued to document the subjects of his films as he saw them and, to some extent, as they wanted to present themselves to the world and to posterity.

After meeting Flaherty, Grierson carried the word and his developing aesthetic theory and sense of social purpose back to Great Britain. His personal definition of documentary became 'the creative treatment of actuality'. Beginning with his own first film (the only one he personally directed), *Drifters*, in 1929, British documentary advanced to become an established movement. Most of the characteristics we associate with the term *documentary* and see evident in the films to which it is applied were present in the Griersonian films by the mid-thirties.

Documentary, then, as an artistic form, is a technique and style that originated in motion pictures. There are still photographic precursors and analogues, to be sure: the Civil War photographs of Mathew Brady, the remarkable photographic documentation of turn-of-the-century New York City by Jacob Riis, and the photographs made during the Depression years for the United States Farm Security Administration by Walker Evans, Dorothea Lange, Ben Shahn, and others. Documentary radio began in the early thirties in pioneering broadcasts of the British Broadcasting Corporation and in 'The March of Time' weekly series on the Columbia Broadcasting System; documentary television (which usually means documentary film or video made for television) became standardized, and later bastardized. In literature the concept of documentary established itself as the nonfiction novel (Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* and Norman Mailer's *The Prisoner's Song*), and in newspaper reporting in the late 1960s and early 1970s as the 'new journalism' (Tom Wolfe's *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, Hunter Thompson's *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, or Norman Mailer's *The Armies of the Night*). More recently, television courtroom and survival programmes and other 'reality' entertainments have become popular. In fact, the word *documentary* is by now pervasive, and much abused. But Webster's *New Collegiate Dictionary* offers as the primary meaning of documentary: '*n*. A documentary film.' Even the highly questionable validity of Wikipedia defines the term in its traditional sense.

Intellectual Contexts

Though various forms of nonfiction film preceded and existed alongside the story film, the latter early on became the main line of both film art and film industry. In aesthetic terms, the fictional feature film is an extension of nineteenth-century artistic forms: theatre, the novel, drama, and Pre-Raphaelite still photography. The documentary mode appeared, was invented in a sense, to meet new artistic and communication needs arising in the twentieth century. Documentary is purposive; it is intended to achieve something in addition to entertaining audiences and making money. This purposiveness is reflected in the four traditions identified by Paul Rotha in his seminal book of theory and history, *Documentary Film* (1935), as feeding into documentary: 1. naturalist (romantic), 2. newsreel, 3. propagandist, and 4. realist. These categories were adopted by many writers, and remain a valid starting point today.

According to Rotha, the beginning of the **naturalist (romantic)** tradition, exemplified by the films of Robert Flaherty (1884–1951), roughly paralleled the development of anthropology as a social science. Sir James Frazer, a Scot who lived from 1854 to 1941, was an anthropological literary pioneer. His monumental survey of the evolution of cultures, *The Golden Bough*, was published in 1890 in two volumes; the twelve-volume edition appeared between 1911 and 1915. Flaherty began to film the Eskimos in 1913.

Almost exactly contemporary with Frazer was Franz Boas (1858–1942), a German-born American anthropologist and ethnologist. Boas maintained that the immediate task of anthropology should be to record endangered cultures that might vanish. He stressed the specifics of each culture and taught that only after extensive data had been collected through fieldwork could any conclusions be put forward. Fieldwork has been the foundation of anthropology ever since. Though Flaherty had no training as an anthropologist, he approximated fieldwork more closely than any filmmaker preceding him, living with and observing the Inuit of the Hudson Bay region many years before filming them.

Boas' work was followed by that of Polish-born Bronislaw Malinowski (1884–1942). Malinowski's *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* was published

in 1922 (the year *Nanook of the North* was released). It is about the people of the Trobriand Islands, located off the coast of New Guinea. Margaret Mead (1901–1978) published her *Coming of Age in Samoa* in 1928. Flaherty's *Moana*, dealing with Samoans, was released in 1926. What are accepted as the earliest academic attempts at film anthropology were undertaken by an 1898 expedition to the Torres Straits (a small group of islands near Northern Australia). The expedition was sponsored by Cambridge University and the four minutes of footage shot by the expedition's leader, Alfred Haddan, appear to be the first time that images purposefully intended for anthropological use were recorded in the field.

The **newsreel** tradition came out of the phenomenal expansion of journalism in the early twentieth century. The beginning of mass-circulation newspapers (and later of radio transmission) arrived at about the same time as the movies – 1896. The popular press, with its dramatization of the news, functioned not only as dispenser of information but also as informal educator for millions of avid readers. Newsreels appeared in movie theatres in regular weekly form from 1910 on. They were in some ways an extension into the motion pictures as the rotogravure (photographic) sections of the tabloids were to newspapers. Radio grew from its early pre-WW I military applications to an individual passion, to a mass medium. This trajectory from military technology developed for war then moving to industrial and wide consumer use is one that repeats itself throughout media history. It was present from the development of sound tape recording to the use of virtual reality.

The concept and term **propaganda**, Rotha's third tradition, goes back at least to the *Congregatio de propaganda fide* (Congregation for propagating the faith), a committee of Cardinals established by Pope Gregory XV in 1622. Interestingly, the purpose of this part of the Catholic Church remains responsible for establishing the Church in non-Christian countries and administering missions where there is no Catholic hierarchy. A subsequent use of propaganda grew out of the revolutionary theory set forth by German political philosopher and socialist Karl Marx (1818–1883). Film propaganda became a key concern of governments, especially Russian Communist leader Vladimir Ilyich Lenin (1870–1924). Following the Russian October Revolution of 1917, the new government – Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

– was the first to make sustained, extensive and coordinated use of film propaganda. Modern interest in propaganda is related to the intellectual disciplines of sociology, social psychology and political science, as well as proselytizing. The word has acquired a negative connotation over the years, but it is not necessarily derogatory.

Rotha's final tradition, **realist (continental)**, emerged as part of the European avant-garde of the 1920s, headquartered in Paris. One of its preoccupations was finding artistic means for dealing with the interrelatedness of time and space, thus the 'real'. Although 'real' is a slightly confusing and misused adjective here; Rotha's realist tradition became what today is called avant-garde or experimental. This modern understanding, originating in the physical sciences, was enunciated by Max Planck in his quantum mechanics, by Albert Einstein in his theory of relativity, and by others beginning about the turn of the twentieth century. Another preoccupation of the avant-garde was expressing the understanding of the unconscious human mind offered by Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung and others in the then new psychological science at about the same time. Thus Rotha's use of the word 'realist' referred to the emerging sciences.

Pre-Documentary Origins

Depending on how one defines documentary, it can be said to have begun with the birth of film itself. The filmed recordings of actuality in the experiments of technicians at the Edison laboratory in West Orange, NJ, might qualify. For example, the sneeze of an employee named Fred Ott was filmed in 1893, and two of the Edison workers dancing to phonograph music can be viewed during an attempt to synchronize sight with sound in 1896. Both of these are documents meant to be entertaining experiments. Closer in content and approach to subsequent documentaries are the first films produced by August and Louis Lumière and first projected for paying customers in a Paris café on 28 December 1895. Edison's use of a studio and very large camera is contrasted with Lumière's development of a relatively lightweight camera and outdoor shooting. The Lumière brothers' first films included *The Arrival of a*

Train at the Station, Feeding the Baby, and – most famously – *Workers Leaving the Factory*. A member of the audience at this showing is supposed to have exclaimed of the film being projected: 'It's life itself!'

In the very early following years of the motion picture, films were similarly brief recordings showing everyday life, circus and vaudeville acts, and skits. Only Georges Méliès used specially conceived narrative and fantasy to any extent before 1900, and even he began by recording snippets of life on the streets of Paris (*Place de L'Opéra, Boulevard des Italiens*, both 1896). Gradually, as the novelty of the moving photographic image began to fade, the subjects of actualities recorded by filmmakers were selected for extra-cinematic interest.

Foreign and exotic subjects had a strong appeal. Travelling projectionists and cameramen of the Lumière organization and other companies from England, Russia and the USA roamed widely, showing 'scenic views' of the Eiffel Tower and the Champs Elysées to audiences everywhere. In Russia they photographed troika rides and Cossacks, and in Spain Flamenco dancing and bull fights, to be shown to audiences in France and elsewhere. In addition

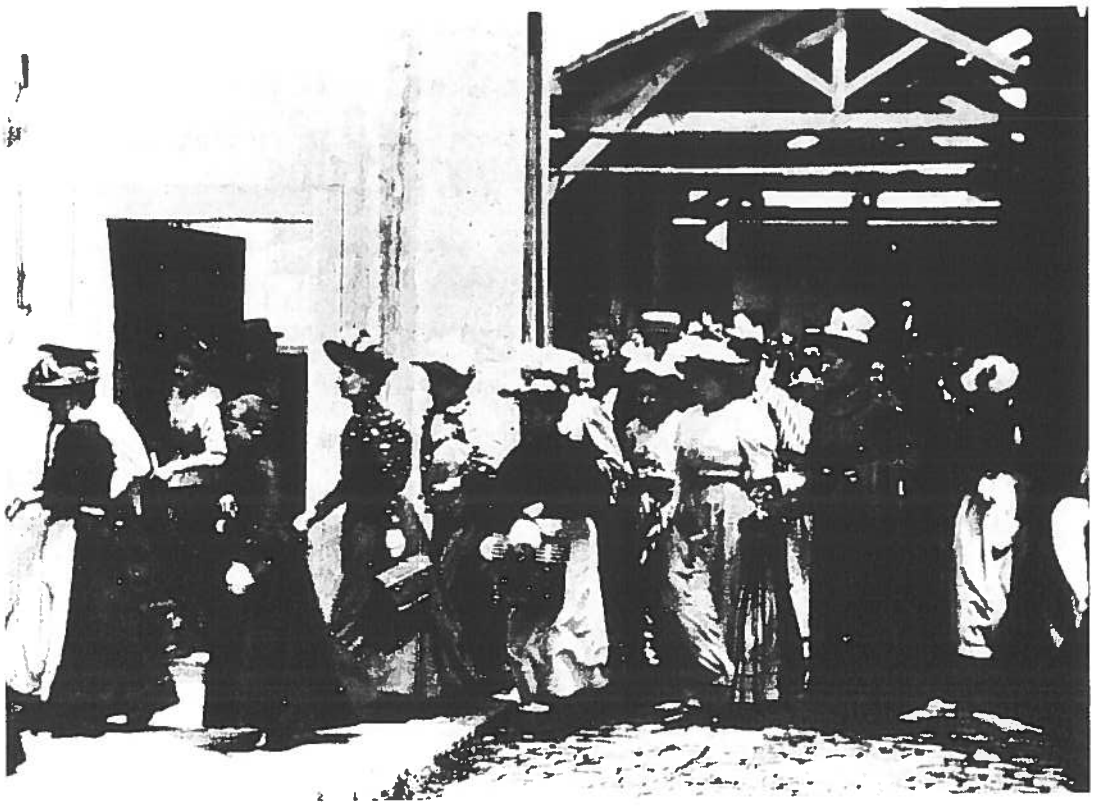

Fig 2 Workers Leaving the Factory *(France, 1895, Louis Lumière). National Archive Stills Library*

to such early travelogue forms – *Moscow Clad in Snow* (1909) is a French example (produced by Pathé Frères); *The Durbar at Delhi* (1911) a British one; *With Scott in the Antarctic* (1913) made by Herbert Ponting; *In the Land of the Head-Hunters* (1914) is a larger, more complex American film, produced by Edward S. Curtis. About the Kwakiutl Indians of the Pacific Northwest, it was the most ambitious experiment of its sort up to that time. Curtis was not only a professional photographer but also a trained and experienced ethnologist. Although working quite separately from Flaherty, he was headed in a somewhat similar direction. The Flahertys and Curtis met once in 1915 in New York City where they viewed each other's films.

The newsreel tradition may be said to have begun in France with Lumière's *Excursion of the French Photographic Society to Neuville*, 1895. Called 'interest films', the subjects quickly became events of greater newsworthiness. Many of them featured heads of state and ceremonial occasions. Examples include the crowning of a czar (*Coronation of Nicholas II*, 1896), the campaign of a presidential candidate (*William McKinley at Home*, 1896), and the final rites for a queen (*The Funeral of Queen Victoria*, 1901). Warfare was another frequent subject. The Spanish–American War (*Dewey Aboard the 'Olympia' at Manilla, Tenth US Infantry Disembarking*, both 1898), the Boxer Rebellion (*The Assassination of a British Sentry, Attack on a China Mission*, both 1900), and the Russo–Japanese War (*The Battle of the Yalu, Attack on a Japanese Convoy*, both 1904) had films made about them – though these were often re-enactments rather than actualities. In 1899 the great cameraman W. K. L. Dickson filmed the Boer War on location in South Africa. Among other examples that have lasted down to the present are *Launching of 'H.M.S. Dreadnought' by King Edward VII* (UK, 1906) and *Suffragette Riots in Trafalgar Square* (UK, 1909). Demand for war films was so keen that Harry Aitkin of Mutual Film paid Pancho Villa the enormous sum of $25,000 and a promise of net profit 50% for the exclusive right to film Villa in 1914 during the Mexican Revolution (1910–1920). The original contract still exists in a Mexico City museum. *The Life of Pancho Villa* also included many staged scenes with professional actors. The newsreel in weekly form was begun by Charles Pathé of France in 1910 with what became known as Pathé-Journal; newsreels made by Russians began in 1911.

Isolated examples of what might be called government propaganda films, in Rotha's sense of the term, appeared before the outbreak of World War I (1914). In the United States, the Department of the Interior produced and distributed motion pictures as early as 1911 to entice Eastern farmers to move to the newly opened land in the West. The US Civil Service Commission used a film, *Won Through Merit*, in a recruiting campaign in 1912. In the same year the city of Cleveland had a movie made as part of a programme to alleviate slum conditions.

WWI made film critical to victory. Training films were produced to instruct troops in warfare. Propaganda films were intended to instil in military personnel and civilians alike a hatred of the enemy and desire for victory. The multi-reel *Pershing's Crusaders* (USA, 1918), notable among these propaganda films, was meant to boost morale and the sale of war bonds, and such WWI documentaries were wildly popular in the US. Newsreels took on propaganda dimensions and the filmic documentation of warfare became much more comprehensive, skilful and actual than in preceding wars. *The Battle of the Somme* (1916), made by J. B. McDowell and Geoffrey Malins, and *The Western Front* (1919) are two British examples. Animated documentaries made their appearances during WWI. *Battle of the North Sea* (1918) is a completely animated diagrammatic account of the naval battle of Jutland. Silent, the film uses geometric outlines of cruisers, battleships, battle-cruisers, dreadnaughts, even radio waves and a zeppelin as they fight this inconclusive battle.

Perhaps the most important war documentary ever made is *The Battle of the Somme*. Long recognized as 'one of the jewels in the collection' of (England's) Imperial War Museum's Film and Video Archive, this opinion was formally endorsed in 2005 when the film became the first item of British documentary heritage to be accepted for inscription on UNESCO's 'Memory of the World' register. The reasons for this supreme honour are many. It is the first feature film to certifiably capture actual in-the-field combat and carnage during war, and is one of the most-seen documentaries of all time. This was, of course, at a time when commercial cinemas were the only place to see films. Shot by Geoffrey Malins and J. B. McDowell in June and July of 1916, *The Battle of the Somme* captures the grimness of filthy, pestilent, mud and poison

Fig 3 *Newsreel in wartime London (UK, 1917). From Strichting Nederlands Filmmuseum*

gas-filled trench warfare as the Allies and the Germans fought for five wretched months. The final result was a British advance of only about five miles. 420,000 casualties were suffered by the British (20,000 dead on the first day), 195,000 by the French and 650,000 by the Germans.

The film of this carnage was quickly edited and in August of 1916 released in thirty-four theatres across Britain. *The Battle of the Somme* shocked audiences who previously had seen only the 'Pack up Your Troubles in Your Old Kit Bag' glory of marching troops in newsreels. That the film was funded and endorsed by the British military was also significant. It laid bare the horrors and the human faces of war, a policy decision that governments from then until now have danced around. Scepticism about the authenticity of its battle scenes haunted the film for decades, but recent impeccable scholarship has proved that only about one minute and 12 seconds of a film running one hour and 14 minutes was faked.

Culturally and economically, filmmaking began as the exclusive province of white males from the upper and upper-middle classes, although the first audiences were mainly working-class. This was true in both fiction and documentary. It also began as a product of machine-age developments in Western Europe and North America, part of the breakneck rush to mechanical modernization that changed the world. Access to the new medium also required financial resources. Very few women and virtually no non-whites had access to the money or the technology needed for documentary-making. They existed merely as subjects in front of the camera. Although the same can be said to apply in other arts, the lack of non-white and female presence was more pronounced in film than in painting, literature, sculpture, or even still photography of the era, because films required large investments of money, and because filming required that its makers leave the confines of home.

During the silent era, a handful of women rose to prominence behind the camera in fiction filmmaking, and some blacks made movies, chiefly in the USA. The contributions of women to documentary filmmaking in its earliest years are themselves undocumented, and the exceptions have been glossed over by history. The best-known woman documentarian of the silent era, Frances Flaherty, would herself have never used the term filmmaker to describe her work, and she chose to spend her life building and promoting the

Fig 4 *'Mac' McDowell with a Moy and Bastie cine camera as he appeared during the Battle of the Somme. The 'head' mechanism which traversed and elevated the camera can be seen on the tripod. While he moved the camera on the tripod with his left hand, the right hand had to maintain a steady two revolutions per second. Information from Kevin Brownlow in the book* Ghosts of the Somme. *British Film Institute*

work and the myth of her husband Robert. The work of other notable women in silent documentary – Yelizaveta Svilova, Helen Van Dongen, Marguerite Harrison and Esther Shub – is described in this book to the extent that information is generally available. Van Dongen and a few others, among them John Grierson's sister Ruby, made films in the 1930s and 1940s, and a few women participated in experimental documentary-making in the 1950s and early 1960s. Hope Ryden was an important contributor to early cinema verité in America, as was Agnès Varda in France, but it was not until the late 1960s and 1970s that documentaries by women began to become more common. It was at this time, too, that people of colour began to have real access to documentary filmmaking, at least in the US.

In the four decades since then, much has thankfully changed. The triangular interaction of money/business, technology/equipment and artistry/aesthetics has shifted many times and continues to shift today. Thousands of people of every type raise money, make, and explore the world with documentaries. And whether one subscribes to, revolts against, partially accepts, or tries to escape from them, John Grierson's now 70-year-old 'first principles of documentary' remain part of the core of its history.

1) 'We believe that the cinema's capacity for getting around, for observing and selecting from life itself, can be exploited in a new and vital art form. The studio films largely ignore this possibility of opening up the screen on the real world. They photograph acted stories against artificial backgrounds. Documentary would photograph the living scene and the living story.'

2) 'We believe that the original (or native) actor, and the original (or native) scene, are better guides to a screen interpretation of the modern world. They give cinema a greater fund of material. They give it power over a million and one images. They give it power of interpretation over more complex and astonishing happenings in the real world than the studio mind can conjure up or the studio mechanician recreate.'

3) 'We believe that the materials and the stories thus taken from the raw can be finer (more real in the philosophic sense) than the acted article.

Fig 5 *John Grierson in the 1930s. Museum of Modern Art Film Stills Archive*

Spontaneous gesture has a special value on the screen. Cinema has a sensational capacity for enhancing the movement which tradition has formed or time worn smooth. Its arbitrary rectangle specially reveals movement; it gives it maximum pattern in space and time. Add to this that documentary can achieve an intimacy of knowledge and

effect impossible to the shim-sham mechanics of the studio, and the lily-fingered interpretations of the metropolitan actor.'

(from Essays in the Winter 1932, Spring 1933 and Spring 1934 issues of 'Cinema Quarterly')

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