4. Documentarist as . . . PAINTER

Definition(s):
Painters defined film as a “pictorial art in which light was the medium”

Key Concepts & Issues:
Painters infiltrated the ranks of filmmakers in the 1920s; with other artists, they joined cine-clubs (anti-commercial)
Transference of principles of the work of painter-artists to the world of the filmmaker-artist—pictorial, with little emphasis on plot or climax
Two factors resulted in a lessening of the importance of the painter filmmaker: (1) the coming of sound, and (2) the tension introduced by the depression (the functions of the documentary would necessarily change)

Key Documentarists:
1. Abstract film as documentary
   Viking Eggeling (Sweden) and Hans Richter (Germany), both Dadaists, began experiments in abstract film, using familiar objects and materials
e.g., Richter’s *Race (Racing) Symphony* (1928), which used horserace footage—what Dziga Vertov called “fragments of actuality”—Barnouw calls the film “Muybridge fused with abstractionism”
Fernand Leger and Dudley Murphy’s *Ballet Mecanique* (1925), an “abstract documentary”
Jean Painleve—Painleve’s films “gave the avant-garde filmmakers a link with science.” A trained scientist, his films merged surrealism, science, and documentary [see the 2009 Criterion Collection *Science is Fiction: 23 Films by Jean Painleve*].
   *L’Hippocampe* (excerpt; The Seahorse, 1934) examined the life and sexual habits of the seahorse, closeup and anthropomorphized, with a score by avant-garde composer Darius Milhaud
   *Le Vampire* (1939) juxtaposes multiple “real” elements of horror to make a social commentary about Nazis(!) with selected score of Duke Ellington’s jazz

2. Beyond these experiments--The City Symphony
   Charles Sheeler and Paul Strand’s *Manhatta* (1921)—a 6-minute visual essay on the urban island
   Walter Ruttmann—a painter and architect who worked with Eggeling and Richter, and later advised Leni Riefenstahl on editing *Olympia*. With DP Karl Freund, he directed *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* (1927) and released it generally, establishing a new theatrical genre, the “City Symphony.”
Berlin is characterized by:
1—rhythms and patterns/people as objects, incidental
2—shows a day in the life of a city
3—machines, often without human operators
4—a “crossbreeding” of all the arts
[5—distinct “movements,” like a music symphony; remember Man with a Movie Camera]

Joris Ivens—His Rain (Regen) (1929), shot over four months in Amsterdam, depicts a “single” rain storm (like Richter’s Race Symphony, truth but not reality??); has been called “the most perfect product” of documentarist as painter.

Jean Vigo (D) and Boris Kaufman (DP)—for Apropos de Nice (On the Subject of Nice) (1930), Kaufman shot the boardwalk from a wheelchair with a camouflaged camera in his lap. (Like his brother, Dziga Vertov, he wanted to film “life caught unawares”!) The film adds satire to the city film repertoire; through strategic juxtapositions, social commentary is evident. Quoting Vigo: “The last twitchings of a society that neglects its own responsibilities to the point of giving you nausea and making you an accomplice in a revolutionary solution.” Vigo went on to make only three more films (one short doc and two narrative features) before dying at age 29, one of the great cinema legends.

NOTE: Most of the documentaries indicated above are silent, and different versions of these films may have widely different music accompanying them; pay attention to how your response to the film is moderated by the music!