5. Documentarist as... Advocate

Definition(s):
John Grierson coined the term “documentary,” supposedly in a review of Robert Flaherty’s *Moana*. Key quote from Barnouw (p. 99)—“Grierson and his movement had in a few years changed the expectations aroused by the word ‘documentary.’ A Flaherty documentary had been a feature-length, close-up portrait of a group of people, remotely located but familiar in their humanity. The characteristic Grierson documentary dealt with impersonal social processes; it was usually a short film fused by a ‘commentary’ that articulated a point of view—an intrusion that was anathema to Flaherty.”

Propaganda—Communications that are intended to be persuasive

Key Concepts & Issues:
The Politicizing of the Documentary—“not a Grierson innovation but a world phenomenon, a product of the times” (p. 100)
Government Sponsorship of Film—In Germany (under Hitler), not a surprise, but in the U.S. (during the Great Depression), it was viewed with suspicion by Hollywood

Key Documentarists:
John Grierson  [See documentary about John Grierson at the National Film Board of Canada site—Grierson, 1973, Roger Blais, 58:00.]
Studied at Glasgow University, then in the U.S. at U. of Chicago, met Walter Lippmann and Robert Flaherty (love-hate relationship)
Helped prepare *Battleship Potemkin* for U.S. release, and then for the London film Society; influenced by the film, he began *Drifters*
His work for the *Empire Marketing Board* in Britain included *Drifters* (1929; as director; this film “brought the daily work of the herring fisheries to life in a way that astonished the audience”), *Industrial Britain* (1933; as producer; Flaherty began it before being fired), and *Song of Ceylon* (1935; as producer, Basil Wright directed); in 1934, the EMB was dissolved and the film unit was moved in the General Post Office to become the GPO Film Unit.

*Song of Ceylon* (1935) had 4 parts: (1) The Buddha, (2) The Virgin Land, (3) The Voices of Commerce, and (4) The Apparel of a God. The first two are limited to a view of Ceylon (later Sri Lanka) as authentic in its integrity and antiquity, with an emphasis on the beauty of the country and its people, using quotes from a 1680 travel book by Robert Knox, that was still applicable; the latter two parts indicate the introduction of British commerce, largely via use of nonsynchronous sound (e.g., VOs), but leaving the viewer to decide at the end what is the impact of British imperialism. [Alberto Cavalcanti, a Brazilian-born filmmaker working primarily in France and the U.K., was at the EMB/GPO from 1933 to
1940; he made a significant contribution to innovative sound development, including on this film.]

Established the National Film Board of Canada after being dispatched to Canada in 1939

Joris Ivens (Again! He crossed so many boundaries—geographically and philosophically. The Forrest Gump of documentarists!)

Moving from “painterly” docs such as *Regen (Rain)* to advocacy, Ivens focused on the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) for:

**The Spanish Earth** (1937). From Waugh chapter in Grant and Slonowski book: Advocating an “international solidarity” in support of the Spanish loyalists, *The Spanish Earth* was written by Ernest Hemingway, with folk and other music collected by Virgil Thomson. It is an “improvised hybrid” of three main filmic modes: (1) Stagings of “real” actors in “real” settings, with non-sync sound (2/5 of film); (2) Spontaneous mode—“men cannot act before the camera in the presence of death” (from film narration); (3) Newsreel mode (e.g., parades, officials). An original plan to “personalize” the film, with the village of Fuenteduena as a microcosm was foiled when the focal person, Julian, died, and the civil war action shifted.

[Note: Re the Spanish Civil War: The “Spanish loyalists” were the Republicans, supported by the Soviet Union and Mexico; they fought against the Nationalists, led by Francisco Franco and supported by Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany.]

Luis Bunuel

*Land Without Bread* (*Las Hurdes*, 1932). In this film, the famed surrealist filmmaker (*Andalusian Dog*, *L’Age D’Or*) brought a “sardonic” view to an examination of a remote region of Spain.

From Sobchack chapter in Grant and Slonowski book: With an astounding voiceover that at many points contradicts the visual, Bunuel sets up a Hegelian dialectic (thesis + antithesis = synthesis); Bunuel demands that we synthesize.

Bunuel may have created the first “mockumentary.”

Bottom line--what is “true” in this film?

Leni Riefenstahl

Was a dancer, actor, and pin-up beauty before directing. Her work as star and director began with German “mountain films,” a genre comparable to American Westerns.

Adolph Hitler came to power in 1933; admiring Riefenstahl, he asked her to produce film(s) for him. Given near-total control, she directed *Triumph of the Will* (1935), a record of the 1934 Nuremberg Nazi rally; she used 30 cameras, 4 sound trucks, and 120 employees total. Later, she directed the two-part *Olympia* (1938).
Many details of her arrangements with the Nazi party are examined in the documentary, *The Wonderful, Horrible Life of Leni Riefenstahl* (1994). She died in 2003 at age 101.

**Pare Lorentz**

Raised in West Virginia, his home life was “saturated in the arts.” *The Plow that Broke the Plains* (1936; will watch with “Promoter” unit). Lorentz’s first film, it was funded by the RA (Resettlement Administration), which wished to expand its purview beyond still photography (e.g., Walker Evans, Dorothea Lange, Margaret Bourke-White, Ralph Steiner, Paul Strand, Leo Hurwitz, Willard VanDyke). Way over budget, Lorentz and composer Virgil Thomson combined music and images to illuminate a national problem (i.e., the Dust Bowl) “with strong documentation, and with emotional power and beauty” (p. 117). This was followed by the important film *The River* (1938), with a focus on the Mighty Mississippi.

Other notable concepts and people:
- Film and Photo Leagues in the U.S.
- *The March of Time*
- Frontier Films
- Akira Iwashaki
- Fumio Kamei