6. Documentarist as . . Bugler

Definition(s):
The “bugle-call film”—adjunct to military action, weapon of war—a “call to action” (note that both *Listen to Britain* and the *Why We Fight* series literally begin with bugle calls over the opening credits); the filmmaker’s task—to stir the blood

Key Concepts & Issues:
Use of battle footage—e.g., expanded newsreels in the *German Weekly Review*
Repurposing of captured footage—in WWII, both sides engaged in this (e.g., *Why We Fight*)
“Documenting” a thesis with fiction excerpts (e.g., footage from *Drums Along the Mohawk, The Good Earth, Marco Polo*, and many others in the *Why We Fight* series; use of footage from Fritz Lang’s *M*, clips from Hollywood films and of supposed Jewish performers in Fritz Hippler’s anti-Semitic Nazi propaganda film *The Eternal Jew* (1940))

Key Documentarists:
Humphrey Jennings (1907-1950)
A new member of “Grierson’s Boys” (including Alberto Cavalcanti, Paul Rotha) at the GPO Film Unit, which became the Crown Film Unit.
A Cambridge graduate with broad arts background, his style was “precise, calm, rich in resonance.”
Among his films, one earned him a world-wide reputation: *Listen to Britain*: (a) Featured Jennings’ specialty, vignettes of human behavior under extraordinary stress—they are heeding the government’s 1939 call to “Keep Calm and Carry On”; (b) Typical of Jennings’ war films—the film never explains, exhorts, or harangues—it observes; (c) The soundtrack is an “anthology of the sounds of Britain at war.”
[Note Jennings’ involvement in the “Mass Observation” social research organization, a sort of early crowd-sourcing program that enlisted a panel of 500 volunteers across Britain to observe and record everyday life from 1937 through the 1960s.]
[From Leach’s chapter on *Listen to Britain* from the Grant and Sloniowski book: Leach identifies three criteria for what he calls the “poetry effect” in this work: (1) The filmmaker’s use of a personal vision—which in this case is more the “personality” of the British people than of the auteur; (2) The lack of an omniscient (voice-of-God) narrator; (3) Rather than constraining footage to a “public gaze,” the filmmaker introduces footage that reflects a “private eye,” with a “peculiar intimacy of observation.”]

The Soviets
Shot unique war footage “up close.”
The state film academy—founded in 1919 in the middle of the revolution—added combat photography to its curriculum.
*Cameraman at the Front* (1946), by Vladimir Sushinsky, shows the cameraman’s own death.
Important practitioners included Leonid Varlamov (*Stalingrad*, 1943), Roman Gregoriev (newsreel editor), Mikhail Slutsky (*Day of War, 1942*).
Frank Capra

Already an important narrative filmmaker in the Hollywood Studio System (e.g., *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939), *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* (1936), *It Happened One Night* (1934), later *It’s a Wonderful Life* (1946)), he was tapped by the U.S. War Department to make indoctrination films for new draftees after Pearl Harbor. He had never before made a single documentary. He produced the seven *Why We Fights* between 1942 and 1945. Drawing on a wide variety of Hollywood talent, he created simplistic films with tough-talking VOs, films that were a “strange amalgam” of (a) real combat footage (both U.S. and captured from the enemy), (b) fiction film excerpts, (c) animated sequences.

Others—Migrant or migratory documentarists:

Note the strange cases of Paul Zils--from UFA in Germany/Goebbels to defection in Paris to Bali and other eastern ports to a prison camp during WWII to India and Ceylon Joris Ivens (and yet again!)--who worked on some of Capra’s *Why We Fights* and then produced *Indonesia Calling* (1946) in support of Indonesian independence from the Dutch [A 2009 documentary titled *Indonesia Calling: Joris Ivens in Australia* focuses on the importance of a very small film at a critical point in history.]