8. Documentarist as . . . Poet

Definition(s):
After WWII, a loosening definition of documentary. Even the fictional, narrative film On the Waterfront (D: Elia Kazan, 1954) was (erroneously, I think) referred to as a “documentary.”

Key Concepts & Issues:
These films experimented with techniques: Time-lapse photography, distorting mirrors, lenses, prisms, reverse action, and manipulations of the sound track (using magnetic recording technology, invented in 1898 but largely ignored until the Germans perfected it during WWII)

Key Filmmakers:
Arne Sucksdorff  (1917-2001)
Drawing on his background in woodland exploration, his first short films were “hymns to the Swedish summer”; his first film for Svensk Filmindustri, A Summer’s Tale (1941), followed the actions of a fox; his Gull! (1944) was interpreted as a parable of Nazism. He was known to engage in reconstructions of events of nature (e.g., the owl and the mouse). He is quoted as saying that a film that is not open to interpretation is a “dead film.” Perhaps his more enduring piece: The Great Adventure (1953), a story of two young brothers living on a Swedish farm, and their interactions with foxes and otters over the course of a year—with substantial use of re-enactments, it’s often categorized as a “drama” rather than a “documentary.” He won an Academy Award for his city symphony film of Stockholm, Människor i Stad (Symphony of a City, 1947). [Weirdly, while the original cannot be seen online, a number of strange “remixes” that use footage from the film can be found.]

Bert Haanstra (1916-1997)
A Dutch photographer, he started making films after WWII. His Panta Rhei (1951) visually equated clouds (speeded up) with rushing water (slowed down); leaves blowing in an autumn wind with a flock of birds taking off; etc. Other Haanstra films include Spiegel Van Holland (Mirror of Holland) (1950), Zoo (1962), and Alleman (The Human Dutch) (1964). His most important film, Glass (1958; 10 min.), “plays subtly on mixed audience emotions toward industrialization,” showing the breakdown of a glass factory assembly line (although funded by the glass company, which also received from Haanstra a more traditional documentary on the topic).

[Norman McLaren (1914-1987)
A Scottish artist who studied at the Glasgow School of Art, his innovative draw-on-film shorts, influenced by the Soviet Montage, caught the eye of John Grierson. Grierson hired him at the British GPO Film Unit in the 1930s; at the dawn of WWII, McLaren moved to NYC, then to Canada in 1941, after being invited to join the National Film Board of Canada by Grierson. Identified mainly as an innovative animator (working in stop-motion, scratching on film, using pinscreens, etc.), he is also known for (a) trying to create visual versions of music (e.g., Boogie Doodle, 1948), and (b) advancing work in synthetic sound (what would become electronic music). For the latter, he (1) painted on clear film, (2) scratched on black leader, and (3) photographed sounds on film. A good example of this type of experimental filmmaking is Synchromy (1971); also, the short documentary Pen Point Percussion (1951; 6 min.) shows McLaren explaining his method. Strangely, his memorable live-action and stop-motion film, Neighbours (1952; 8 min.) won the Academy Award for Best Documentary Short (?!?).]