9. Documentarist as... Chronicler

Definition(s):
Chronicler = Historian = Looking backward for footage and other material, rather than always generating new footage

Key Concepts & Issues:
The “compilation film” (introduced by Esfir Schub and others) acquired new status as newsreel footage began to accumulate (an issue of critical mass).
Television as an important source of support for compilation documentaries.
A flurry of new techniques:
- “Photo animation”—using camera movement across still photos (later to be elaborated on and called the “Ken Burns” effect!)
- Use of other still images (e.g., engravings, cartoons, paintings, posters, tapestries, illuminated manuscripts) to illustrate the sound track, usually consisting of VO and music
- Use of objects and locations (e.g., palaces, sculptures, architecture) to illustrate the sound track
- “In the first two postwar decades, the film chronicler learned to consider almost any historic relic or artifact a potential narrative instrument.”
The fall of the newsreel, and--
The rise of film reporting by anthropologists.
Going new places:
- Under the sea (e.g., Jacques Cousteau)
- Within the human body (via X-ray cinematography and miniature cameras)
- Outer space

Key Filmmakers:
A wide range of people and institutions:
Erwin Leiser (Mein Kampf, 1960 (no English subtitles);
Eichmann and the Third Reich, 1961)
Paul Rotha (The Life of Adolf Hitler, 1961)
NBC’s Victory at Sea TV series (1952-53)
CBS’s Twentieth Century (example episode) TV series (1957-66)
National Film Board of Canada’s City of Gold (1957)
Stanley Hawes’ establishment of the Commonwealth Film Unit in Australia
(sent by John Grierson)
Joris Ivens (he’s everywhere!) and his missionary-like work in Bulgaria, Poland, China, Mali, Cuba, and Chile, spreading the use of documentary form
Disney Studio and its “anthropomorphizing” animal life in live-action films,
e.g., its series True-Life Adventures (see excerpt from 1953’s The Living Desert,
one of 14 documentaries in the series)
MANY others
Other examples:

The Times of Harvey Milk (Rob Epstein, U.S., 1984)—according to your instructor, perhaps the most perfect “standard” documentary ever made. . . a compilation of existing or “found” images and footage from Harvey Milk’s private and public lives (including substantial local news footage), new interviews with key narrators who knew Milk (a real matrix of individuals who are gay or straight, male or female, insider or outsider-who-became-insider; spokespersons who represent just about every viewpoint on Milk), and an intense omniscient VO by gay activist/playwright Harvey Fierstein. And of course a completely compelling story. A deserving Academy Award-winner! (It’s on Kanopy—please view on your own if you have not seen before.)

Henri Langlois: Phantom of the Cinematheque (Jacques Richard, France, 2005)—a very dense chronicler-type documentary that takes multiple viewings to absorb it all; a compilation of a wide array of sources, both old and new (e.g., interviews). A must-see for those studying film history. (It’s on Kanopy—please view at least part.)

These Amazing Shadows (Paul Mariano & Kurt Norton, U.S., 2011)—a chronicler-type documentary on the history and film preservation activities of the National Film Registry, a collection of American films deemed, by the Library of Congress, to be “culturally, historically or aesthetically significant.” Since 1989, 25 films a year have been archived. This documentary includes compelling clips from the films, interviews with members of the Registry’s Board and with prominent filmmakers and stars, and behind-the-scenes footage of the film preservation process. Nitrate Film Archivist George Willeman makes an unlikely featured player in the film (and he also apparently gives the film its title). (It’s on Kanopy—please view at least part, if we do not watch it in class.)

Fantastic Female Filmmakers (Mickey Peters, U.S., 2012)—A CSU Honors student project, this 30-minute chronicler documentary traces the impact of female filmmakers (writers, directors, editors, etc.) on the early history of film, ending with Leni Riefenstahl.)