

Chris Latson

cclatson@earthlink.net

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Early Documentary Filmmakers

Robert Flaherty is the father of the documentary film. Flaherty's film *Nanook of the North* in 1922, documented the life of an Eskimo he named Nanook. The film was acknowledged by critics as a great work and was a huge success in theaters. With the success of *Nanook of the North*, "documentary suddenly acquired a financial legitimacy it had not had for years" (Barnouw, p. 42).

Flaherty's approach to documentary films was to become completely and totally absorbed within it. In a Flaherty film, you could expect to see the characters attempt to interact with the audience, by doing such things as acknowledging the camera or the filmmaker. He was interested in filming and making films that displayed life as it actually happened. This is what is commonly referred to as a "real approach" to documentary film. He used subtitles that were not very flashy, yet appropriate for the moment in a film. Because there was no synchronous audio with his early films, the subtitles played an important role in relaying a message that was not clearly portrayed with images. Flaherty understood this, and used this to his advantage by using subtitles to explain actions enough to inform, but never over-explain anything that was happening. His films did not make use of narrators or commentator.

His purpose for making film was to tell a story, and provide the audience with a view of something or someone in which they would have no other way of viewing were it not for his films. "The urge that I had to make *Nanook* came from the way I felt about these people, my

admiration for them; I wanted to tell about them” (Barnouw, p. 45). He loved "salvage ethnography", which was shooting films about vanishing cultures, and wanted to film these cultures as they naturally lived, and not the way the white man had transformed them. “Flaherty had a vested interest in portraying his subject’s way of life as timeless and unchanging” (Rothman, p. 24). Most of his documentaries were feature-length films, which presented the audience with a close and personal view of a group of people, that were located far away from the audience, but with whom the audience could still relate to on some level (Barnouw, p. 99). But he was not without his critics, who often noted that he placed his films’ characters in extremely dangerous situations.

Although Flaherty basically established the documentary genre, he did not call it that. His apostle, John Grierson, would later coin the word documentary. Grierson wanted to “bring the citizen’s eye in from the ends of the earth to the story, his own story, of what was happening under his nose” (Barnouw, p. 85). He believed that he was a propagandist first and a filmmaker second. Unlike Flaherty, Grierson’s documentaries were usually impersonal short films that made use of narrators and commentators. His documentaries were true government propaganda, which often dealt with impersonal social processes, which used a narrator or commentator to articulate a certain point of view.

Grierson respected his predecessor Flaherty and often paid tribute to him, but also believed that he and others were better served using his style or another style and approach to documentary.

“Flaherty has been one of the great film teachers of our day, and not one of us but has been enriched by his example and, I shall add, but has been even more greatly enriched by failing in the final issue to follow it” (Barnouw, p. 97).

Grierson's film, *City Symphony*, is a great example of how he believed film should contribute to society. He used his films to force an idea or perception on the audience, like a hammer, rather than reflect life and society as it naturally occurs, like a mirror. His films made characters appear happy and content with their lives and occupations, even those in bad situations, so that people in those "real-life" situations would feel happy and content as well.

Like Grierson, Leni Riefenstahl was a propagandist, whether it was her initial intention or not. She made German films for Nazi leader Adolf Hitler during the 1930s. Her films were called "documents", so that they would be thought of as true reality documents of what was happening in Germany, but they actually were not. As a filmmaker she had a relentless drive and always paid extreme close attention to detail in her films. The strengths of her films lay in their choreography of images and sounds, which might have been due to her background as a dancer earlier in her life. Riefenstahl, like Flaherty, did not make use of narrators or commentators in her films. She actually considered the narrator and commentator an "enemy of film"

Riefenstahl's films, like Flaherty's, helped give audiences a view of something or someone in which they would have no other way of seeing, were it not for her films. Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* shared the Hitler rally experience to others in Germany who couldn't be there, and would have no other way of viewing the event, if it were not for her film. However, similar to Grierson's films, her films did not accurately display the events as they naturally happened, but, as a propagandist, the way the government and ruler wanted the events to be portrayed.

Dziga Vertov made films that addressed the question of how are films made. He believed that the viewer must be able to fully understand how to view a film in order to do so with any kind of sophistication. Vertov called for "Leninist film-proportion", in which every film program

had a balance between fiction and actuality material. Like Flaherty, he wanted to display reality and truth in his films. His style was to display technical tricks and exhibit the superhuman versatility of the film camera. He thought of himself as a reporter whose mission it was to get out the news, though like Riefenstahl and Grierson, his films would serve as propaganda, except for the fact that they were for the Soviet government.

Vertov shot films that present visual essays of film truth and reality. His film, *Man with a Movie Camera*, contained many scenes of many different people, actions, and things happening in the background and set to music that played on the mood of the images. The emphasis in the film was placed on motion and action for any angle or perspective available. “*Man with a Movie Camera* presents a kaleidoscope of daily life in the Soviet Union” (Barnouw, p. 63). But while Vertov believed in producing film truth, *Man with a Movie Camera* still contained some staged sequences.

Pare Lorentz was an articulate and competent man, who lacked a strong background in filmmaking. Lorentz made films that were funded by the government and looked upon by others as being socialists, yet he strived in his films to change this notion. He had dreams of making films that would be able to compete with Hollywood films, because he wanted his films to play to large crowds as well. The strength of his films was in his artistic presentation of images and sound, largely due to the fact that he worked with composer Virgil Thompson on several of his films.

In Lorentz’s films, editing and composition in his films were unified, and the two did not seem as if they were just added together after the film was done, as they constantly complemented each other. Lorentz’s film, *The Plow that broke the Plains* in 1936, was about the American Dust Bowl, and provided a wonderful display of artistic images and music, with a nice

touch of narration. “The Plow that Broke the Plains illuminated a national problem with strong documentation and with emotional power and beauty” (Barnouw, p. 117).

Joris Ivens approach to documentary was to turn the camera around and film the environment around him. Like Vertov, his work created visual essays and short essay types of films. He stressed the importance of images, not sound are stressed in his films. He was completely opposed to the “voice-of-God” narration and commentary used in other films, as well as, ‘newsreel-style’ shots and images in his films, although sometimes they were the only way to achieve synchronous sound.

Ivens was interest in showing intense and complex action in films. He represented a dying breed of painter-as-documentarist filmmaker that would not last very long in the field. His films often made use of lots of interesting and complex shots, which were held for a long time, without any narration or commentary. Ivens film *Spanish Earth*, was the first major documentary about war. “The Spanish Earth was also the prototypical cultural product of the Popular Front, a moment that brought the left closer to the American mainstream than at any other time previously or since” (Waugh, p. 136).

In conclusion, these six early documentary filmmakers all have similarities and differences that have lead the way for the development of documentary film, as well as, make them unique artists. Whether their interests lie in propaganda, artistic displays, or fascinating character stories, they all have a specific and important place in the history of the documentary film.