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Documentary Film and the Modernist Avant-Garde

Bill Nichols

Overture

How is it that the most formal and, often, the most abstract of films and the most political, and sometimes, didactic of films arise, fruitfully intermingle, and then separate in a common historical moment? What motivated this separation and to what extent did it both succeed and fail? Our understanding of the relationship between documentary film and the modernist avant-garde requires revision. Specifically, we need to recon-

This essay grew from numerous sources of encouragement and stimulation. A commission to write on the coming of sound to documentary for *La Transición del mudo al sonoro*, vol. 6 of *Historia general del cine*, ed. Javier Maqua and Manuel Palacio (Madrid, 1996) first caused me to wonder if the early history of documentary did not require significant revision. An invitation by Kees Bakker, director of the Joris Ivens Foundation, to deliver a keynote address at an international conference on Ivens's career in 1998 led me to take my first extended look at the relationship between early documentary and the modernist avant-garde. The conference papers were published as *Joris Ivens and the Documentary Context*, ed. Kees Bakker (Amsterdam, 1999). In the fall of 1999, the acting director of the Getty Research Institute's Scholars and Seminars Program, Michael Roth, invited me to give a talk, "Documentary Film and Modernism," in a lecture series on "The Construction of Historical Meaning" that provided the occasion for me to revisit the history of documentary in a sustained way. I am extremely grateful to the Getty Research Institute for their support during the 1999–2000 academic year when I conducted research and prepared the present, revised version of my lecture, and, especially, to Sabine Schlosser, for editorial assistance. I benefited greatly from the comments and suggestions made during the question-and-answer session following my lecture there and from written feedback by Stefan Jonnson.

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sider the prevalent story of documentary's "birth" in early cinema (1895–1905). How does this account, inscribed in almost all of our film histories, disguise this act of separation? What alternative account does it prevent?

Ostensibly, the origin of documentary film has long been settled. Louis Lumière's first films of 1895 demonstrated film's capacity to document the world around us. Here, at the start of cinema, is the birth of a documentary tradition. Robert Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* (1922) added plot development, suspense, and delineated character to recordings of the historical world. He gave the documentary impulse fresh vitality. And, in 1929, John Grierson, the documentary film movement's greatest champion, used his own film portrait of North Sea fishing, *Drifters*, to convince the British government to establish a filmmaking unit within the Empire Marketing Board, an agency charged with the circulation of food products and the promotion of "empire" as, in Grierson's words, not the "command of peoples" but "a co-operative effort in the tilling of soil, the reaping of harvests, and the organization of a world economy."¹ Grierson presided over an institutional base for documentary film production, and, thus, documentary film practice reached maturity. It was not until I had the opportunity to prepare a paper comparing and contrasting the careers of Dutch avant-garde and documentary filmmaker Joris Ivens and Russian suprematist painter Kazimir Malevich that I began to wonder if this story of documentary's beginnings did not belong more to myth than history.²

The established story of documentary's beginnings continues to perpetuate a false division between the avant-garde and documentary that obscures their necessary proximity. Rather than the story of an early birth and gradual maturation, I will suggest that documentary film only takes

Feedback from an abbreviated presentation of these arguments at Visible Evidence VIII (Utrecht, August 2000) helped me make a series of refinements to the paper.

I benefited most importantly from repeated, extensive feedback and editorial assistance from Catherine M. Soussloff. This article would not have been possible without her unstinting encouragement.

1. John Grierson, "The E.M.B. Film Unit," *Grierson on Documentary*, ed. Forsyth Hardy (New York, 1971), p. 165.

2. See Bill Nichols, "The Documentary and the Turn from Modernism," in *Joris Ivens and the Documentary Context*, ed. Kees Bakker (Amsterdam, 1999), pp. 148–59.

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form as an actual practice in the 1920s and early 1930s. Earlier efforts are less nascent documentaries than works organized according to different principles, both formal and social. The appearance of documentary involves the combination of three preexisting elements—photographic realism, narrative structure, and modernist fragmentation—along with a new emphasis on the rhetoric of social persuasion. This combination of elements itself became a source of contention. The most dangerous element, the one with the greatest disruptive potential—modernist fragmentation—required the most careful treatment. Grierson was greatly concerned by its linkage to the radical shifts in subjectivity promoted by the European avant-garde and to the radical shifts in political power promoted by the constructivist artists and Soviet filmmakers. He, in short, adapted film's radical potential to far less disturbing ends.

Modernist techniques of fragmentation and juxtaposition lent an artistic aura to documentary that helped distinguish it from the cruder form of early *actualités* or newsreels. These techniques contributed to documentary's good name, but they also threatened to distract from documentary's activist goals. The proximity and persistence of a modernist aesthetic in actual documentary film practice encouraged, most notably in the writings and speeches of John Grierson, a repression of the role of the 1920s avant-garde in the rise of documentary. Modernist elitism and textual difficulty were qualities to be avoided. The historical linkage of modernist technique and documentary oratory, evident since the early 1920s in much Soviet and some European work, failed to enter into Grierson's own writings. The same blind spot persists in subsequent histories of documentary film. But even though the contribution of the avant-garde underwent repression in the public discourse of figures like Grierson, it returned in the actual form and style of early documentary itself. Repression conveys the force of a denial, and what documentary film history sought to deny was not simply an overly aesthetic lineage but the radically transformative potential of film pursued by a large segment of the international avant-garde. In its stead a more moderate rhetoric prevailed, tempered to the practical issues of the day. For advocates like Grierson, the value of cinema lay in its capacity to document, demonstrate, or, at most, enact the proper, or improper, terms of individual citizenship and state responsibility.

My primary thesis is that a wave of documentary activity takes shape at the point when cinema comes into the direct service of various, already active efforts to build national identity during the 1920s and 1930s. Documentary film affirms, or contests, the power of the state. It addresses issues of public importance and affirms or contests the role of the state in confronting these issues. These acts of contestation, more than affirmation, were what initially drew me to the documentary tradition that ran from the work of the film and photo leagues in the 1930s to Newsreel in

the 1970s.³ The radical potential of film to contest the state and its law, as well as to affirm it, made documentary an unruly ally of those in power. Documentary, like avant-garde film, cast the familiar in a new light, not always that desired by the existing governments. The formation of a documentary film movement required the discipline that figures like Grierson in Great Britain, Pare Lorentz in the United States, Joseph Goebbels in Germany, and Anatoly Lunacharsky and Alexander Zhadanov in the Soviet Union provided for it to serve the political and ideological agenda of the existing nation-state.

The modernist avant-garde of Man Ray, René Clair, Hans Richter, Louis Delluc, Jean Vigo, Alberto Cavalcanti, Luis Buñuel, Sergei Eisenstein, Dziga Vertov, and the Russian constructivists, among others, exceeded the terms of this binary opposition of affirmation and contestation centered on the bourgeois-democratic state. It proposed alternative subjects and subjectivities until the consolidation of socialist realism, the rise of fascism and Stalinism, the necessities of exile, and the exigencies of the Great Depression depleted its resources. From the vantage point of the avant-garde, the state and issues of citizenship were obscured by questions of perception and consciousness, aesthetics and ethics, behavior and the unconscious, actions and desire. These questions were more challenging imperatives than those that preoccupied the custodians of state power.

The Story of Origins and a Question of Models

By 1930, with the adoption of sound in the cinema and the onset of a global depression, documentary stood recognized as a distinct form of filmmaking. What brought it into being? The standard histories assume the existence of a documentary tradition, or impulse, that long precedes the formation of a documentary movement or institutional practice. This ancestral pedigree guarantees documentary's birthright, but, as we shall see, it also poses a problem. If the documentary form was latent in cinema from the outset, why did it take some thirty years before Grierson would bestow the name *documentary* to it?

In the familiar story of documentary's ancestral origins, it all begins with cinema's primal love for the surface of things, its uncanny ability to capture life as it is. Documentary represents the maturation of what was already manifest in early cinema with its immense catalog of people, places, and things culled from around the world. British documentary filmmaker and historian Paul Rotha wrote in 1939 that documentary left the confines of fiction for "wider fields of actuality, where the spontaneity

3. See Nichols, *Newsreel: Documentary Filmmaking on the American Left* (New York, 1980).

of natural behaviour has been recognized as a cinematic quality and sound is used creatively rather than reproductively. This attitude is, of course, the technical basis of the documentary film.”⁴

Film historian Jack Ellis followed a similar line some fifty years later: Documentary “could be said to have begun with the birth of film itself. The filmed recordings of actuality in the experiments of technicians at the Edison laboratory in West Orange, N.J., might qualify.”⁵ Erik Barnouw, author of the most widely used history of documentary film, opens his account with a reference to the early pioneers of the 1890s who “felt a compelling need to *document* some phenomenon or action, and contrived a way to do it. In their work the documentary film had prenatal stirrings.”⁶

In these origin stories, Rotha, Ellis, and Barnouw associate nascent documentary film production with the photographic, or indexical, documentation of preexisting phenomena.⁷ The passage from document to documentary then follows an evolutionary progression. Prenatal stirrings become adult strides once we add an infusion of mature narrative stock in the form of Flaherty’s *Nanook of the North* and Grierson’s robust organizing skills. Like a Promethean hero, Grierson animates this slumbering

4. Paul Rotha, *Documentary Film: The Use of the Film Medium to Interpret Creatively and in Social Terms the Life of the People as It Exists in Reality* (London, 1935), p. 79; hereafter abbreviated *DF*.

5. Jack C. Ellis, *The Documentary Idea: A Critical History of English-Language Documentary Film and Video* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1989), p. 9.

6. Erik Barnouw, *Documentary: A History of the Non-fiction Film* (New York, 1993), p. 3.

7. Among other documentary histories, Richard Meran Barsam’s account distinguishes travelogues, newsreels, and other nonfiction forms from documentary proper but tends to graft his own, latter-day conception of documentary back onto this history rather than provide an origin story as such. “Documentary” simply appears, once Grierson names it in 1926, as a distinct form of nonfiction, complete with American, British, Soviet, and Continental variants. See Richard Meran Barsam, *Nonfiction Film: A Critical History* (New York, 1973).

Brian Winston prefers to begin his account with a fellow Britisher, John Grierson. Although he, too, notes other forms of nonfiction that precede the documentary, it is Grierson, the early and less heralded example of Edward Curtis with his *In the Land of the Headhunters* (1915), and Flaherty, with his colonial baggage and insistence of making art from life, that provide the primary moment of origin. Winston does suggest somewhat deeper roots in nineteenth-century realism after Courbet: this seems to lay the groundwork for the aesthetic principles that transfer over to film in some incompletely specified way. See Brian Winston, *Claiming the Real: The Documentary Film Revisited* (London, 1995), pp. 8–10, 19–23, 26–29. The sense of relatively untroubled passage from photographic realism to documentary representation remains strong in all these accounts. Kristin Thompson and David Bordwell’s excellent general history of the cinema, *Film History: An Introduction* (New York, 1994) also follows the same line but in less exaggerated form. They introduce documentary work in the 1920s thusly: “Before the 1920s, documentary filmmaking had largely been confined to newsreels and scenic shorts,” an assertion that smoothes over any sharper distinction between early uses of photographic realism and the actual emergence of documentary proper in the 1920s (p. 202). They imply that the documentary tradition traces back to early cinema even though their own history tends to minimize the force of this myth.

giant all by himself: "The burgeoning of the documentary mode resulted largely from the efforts of Scottish-born John Grierson."⁸ As Grierson himself puts it, "There is money for films which will make box-office profits, and there is money for films which will create propaganda results. These only. They are the strict limits within which cinema has had to develop and will continue to develop."⁹ Documentary film form thus brings to life the cinema's unfulfilled propagandistic (or oratorical) potential. Put differently, this origin myth begs the question. If photography and film possessed the capacity to document from the outset, why must we wait three decades after the beginnings of cinema for an actual documentary film movement to appear? Is this not necessarily a decisive historical act rather than a natural evolutionary progression?¹⁰

The alternative history presented here stresses how the appearance of documentary film involves conditions peculiar to the moment of its inception after World War I rather than its purported ancestry. Well-established elements of cinema are brought into play. They only take documentary form in specific historical circumstances that function as "innovative spurs, movements that launch new energies."¹¹ Apart from such circumstances, potentialities would remain dormant or contribute to quite different waves or genres.¹² Origin myths of distant ancestors and

8. Thompson and Bordwell, *Film History*, p. 352.

9. Grierson, "The E.M.B. Film Unit," p. 165.

10. Abigail Solomon-Godeau points out that work such as Matthew Brady's Civil War photographs and Samuel Bourne's photographs of India and Nepal in the 1860s did not produce a documentary form or tradition directly; on the contrary, it was taken for granted that such work conformed to the basic function of the photographic image to document a preexistent reality. To label such images documentary would produce a tautology: "Because the preponderance of photographic uses previous to the term's introduction [in the 1920s] were what we would now automatically designate as documentary, it becomes clear that the documentary concept is historical, not ontological." Even Jacob Riis's photographic illustrations for *How the Other Half Lives* (1890), though a possible progenitor for the documentary movements of the 1930s in Solomon-Godeau's account, did not spark such a movement directly or immediately. It took an extended period of symbolism and aestheticism in the form of photographic pictorialism to allow documentary to escape tautology and name a distinct form (Abigail Solomon-Godeau, "Who Is Speaking Thus? Some Questions about Documentary Photography," in *The Event Horizon: Essays on Hope, Sexuality, Social Space, and Mediation* in Art, ed. Lorne Falk and Barbara Fischer [Toronto, 1987], pp. 193, 195).

11. See Maureen Turim, "The Ethics of Form: Structure and Gender in Maya Deren's Challenge to the Cinema," in *Maya Deren and the American Avant-Garde*, ed. Nichols (Berkeley, 2001).

12. The first decade of cinema produced an astonishing array of material gathered by itinerate cinematographers from around the world. To the extent that many countries, including those still yoked to Europe by colonial domination, experienced the beginnings of a motion picture industry, it was in relation to the production of actualités detailing local places and events. Early histories of cinema, and of documentary, however, such as Rotha's *Documentary Film* do not acknowledge any formative work from Third World countries, only work from the Soviet Union and continental Europe. Histories devoted to Third World cinema written more recently continue this neglect. Some refer to these early efforts but

elaborate pedigree legitimate a new genre by equipping it with a distinctive lineage traceable back to the birth of cinema itself. Not coincidentally, such myths deflect scrutiny from the similarity and overlap between 1920s documentary and contemporaneous practices, most notably the avant-garde. They also rationalize the enforcement of boundaries to separate documentary from “obviously” unrelated alternatives.

In fact, of the four elements that contribute to the formation of a documentary film wave only one had been in place since 1895: the capacity of cinema to record visible phenomena with great fidelity. To this capacity, we must add three more contemporaneous elements: (1) the gradual elaboration of narrative codes and conventions distinct to cinema (1905–1915) that allow any film to utilize a storytelling structure capable of inspiring belief in its representational gestures, largely through a stress on vivid characters, linear actions, and the cinematic organization of time and space via continuity, parallel, and point-of-view editing; (2) the least acknowledged element: a wide array of modernist, avant-garde filmmaking practices that flourish throughout the 1920s; and (3) a range of rhetorical, persuasive strategies that provide a distinct form of viewer engagement.

None of these elements alone leads to the appearance of documentary film. Each leads elsewhere as well. Rather than tracing a line of descent for documentary, it will be more profitable to describe each element briefly and to indicate how it came to contribute to the appearance of a documentary film form in the period between the wars.

Photographic Realism

Like scientific documentation, the “cinema of attractions,” described by Tom Gunning as the prevalent pre-1906 mode of representation, relies on the authenticating effect of camera optics and photographic emul-

draw minimal implications for their significance to the development of national cinemas or documentary film practices as such.

It is not entirely surprising that a history of Third World documentary film production prior to World War II is sometimes acknowledged but generally discounted. Historians tend to define the emergence of a national cinema as the appearance of a sustained feature fiction mode of production. However, Catherine Benamou, in informal conversation, has asserted that documentary did definitely exist in Mexico in the period prior to World War II, as it probably did in other countries as well. *Mexican Cinema*, ed. Paulo Antonio Parana-guá (London, 1995) offers hints of this in an essay by Aurelio de los Eyes, “The Silent Cinema,” pp. 63–78, in which he describes documentary work in the ‘teens that “set out to inform . . . had developed its own mode of representation and carefully documented, unhindered, the major national events with complete freedom” (p. 69). Much of the work appears to be documentation more than documentary, and the book’s overview chronology claims that “the documentary is definitely put to rest” by 1917 (p. 23) as a *film d’art*, import model gains dominance, but de los Eyes’s detailed account offers substantiation to Benamou’s claim. It remains an area of film study in need of extended investigation.

sions to generate images that bear a precise set of relations to that which they represent. Both scientific evidence and carnival-like attractions exhibit noteworthy aspects of the world with indexical precision. Such images readily serve as documents, but not documentaries.¹³ In science, they offer proofs or record phenomena beyond what the eye can see. As “attractions,” they solicit “spectator attention, inciting visual curiosity, and supplying pleasure through an exciting spectacle—a unique event, whether fictional or documentary, that is of interest in itself” (fig. 1).¹⁴

Unfettered from narrative structure or scientific analysis, a cinema of attractions is a form of excitation, exhibitionism, or spectacle. It engenders an effect comparable to the effect of reality TV shows such as *Cops* or *Survivor*, namely, “Isn’t this amazing!”¹⁵ We witness strange, violent, dangerous, or catastrophic events but receive only minimal analysis of them. A program on ABC in January 2000 entitled, “Out of Control People” provided a latter-day *Mondo Cane*-like catalogue of soccer rioting, college student rampages, prison uprisings, and other examples of its own title with small snippets of commentary from “experts” who make reference to mob behavior and group psychology. The intent of the program was clearly sensationalistic far more than it was educational. The sensationalism gained immeasurably from the use of “documentary” images of actual events.

As the surrealists were eager to demonstrate, the language of sensationalism could also readily insinuate itself into the protocols of science. Lisa Cartwright has carried this insight into the belly of scientific experimentation to chronicle the misuses of documentary images in work that purports to follow scientific procedure but detours toward issues of mor-

13. Documents have long been regarded as factual elements of the historical record, free of the editorializing stratagems of the orator or the interpretative leanings of the historian. Documentaries, on the other hand, are the product of a persuasive, or at least poetic, intent to have an audience see and act differently. When John Grierson praised *Moana* for its “documentary value” (but not its documentary form) he acknowledged its value as a document of Pacific island culture despite the fictional pretext of a coming-of-age story. The qualities of the document lurked amidst the fabrications of the fiction.

In *Documentary Expression and Thirties America* (New York, 1973), William Stott argues convincingly that the documentary tradition “carries and communicates feeling . . . feeling comes first” (pp. 7, 8). The rhetorical tradition, of which the documentary film tradition is a specific manifestation, has always granted great importance to feeling or emotion as the means by which an audience comes to be predisposed or moved toward a set of values or course of action. The poststructural fillip that documents are themselves rhetorical constructs designed to bear greater evidentiary weight in an overall argument by dint of their apparent objectivity does not diminish the signal importance of emotion coupled to a persuasive intent that gives rhetoric, and documentary film, its social significance.

14. Tom Gunning, “The Cinema of Attractions,” in *Early Cinema: Space, Frame, Narrative*, ed. Thomas Elsaesser and Adam Barker (London, 1990), p. 58.

15. See my “At the Limits of Reality (TV),” *Blurred Boundaries* (Bloomington, Ind., 1994), pp. 43–62 for an extended discussion of reality TV programs and their relation to the documentary film tradition.

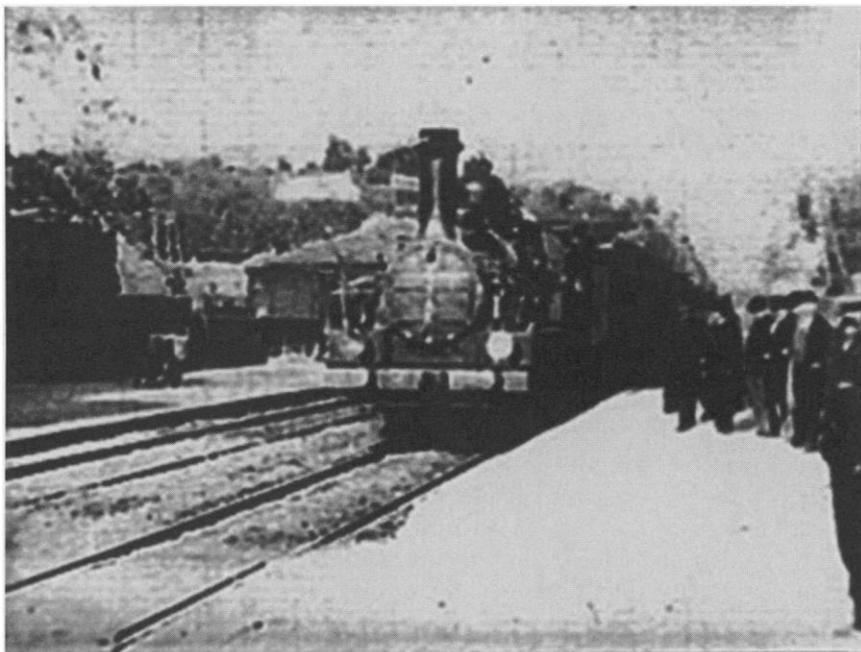


FIG. 1.—Lumière, *L'Arrivée d'un train* (1895). Already the “documentary” value of the photographic image confronts the sensational effect of life brought to the screen.

bidity and spectacle.¹⁶ Such an effect underscores a sense of amazement, and sometimes outrage, rather than rational understanding. Allan Sekula notes that documentary work can amass a mountain of evidence, “and yet, in this pictorial presentation of scientific and legalistic ‘fact,’ the genre has simultaneously contributed much to spectacle, to retinal excitation, to voyeurism, to terror, envy and nostalgia, and only a little to the critical understanding of the social world.”¹⁷

In classic surrealist/dadaist form, the pretensions to knowledge that allow exotic travelogues to masquerade as scientific statement became the direct target of Luis Buñuel’s unsettling account of poverty in the Hurdanos region of Spain, *Land without Bread* (1932), itself a work with a fascinating precursor in Adrian Brunel’s mock travelogue of a trek across the Sahara desert, *Crossing the Great Sagrada* (1922). Buñuel’s film is heavily informed by a written ethnography of a poor region of Spain published

16. See Lisa Cartwright, *Screening the Body: Tracing Medicine’s Visual Culture* (Minneapolis, 1995). Cartwright offers a very wide-ranging catalogue of examples that demonstrate an abuse of scientific method as well as a pseudoscientific use of medical imaging.

17. Allan Sekula, “Dismantling Modernism, Reinventing Documentary (Notes on the Politics of Representation),” *Against the Grain: Essays and Photo Works 1973–1983* (Halifax, 1984), p. 57.

a few years earlier, but it turns science on its head to underscore the sensationalism that surrounds "attractions" concocted from elements of everyday Hurdano life. *Land without Bread* condemns the very procedures of fieldwork, detailed description, and humanistic empathy that were to form the backbone for ethnographic encounter in the decades to come (figs. 2 and 3).¹⁸

Spectacle in early cinema, like visual evidence in science, relied on an impression of photographic realism the better to convince us of the authenticity of remarkable sights. One of the most vivid conjunctions of spectacle and photographic realism occurs in pornography. Markers of authenticity affirm that an actual sex act has occurred, even if this act occurred, like most fiction-based acts, solely for the purpose of being filmed. It is safe to conclude that the documentary potential of the photographic image does not lead directly to a documentary film practice. Neither spectacle and exhibition, nor science and documentation, guarantee the emergence of a documentary film form. Movements involve historical contingency, not genetic ancestry. Something more than the ability to generate visual documents, however useful this may be, is necessary.

Narrative Structure

If the indexical image and cinematic document lends itself to multiple purposes, it may well be a necessary if not sufficient condition for the appearance of documentary film. Narrative enters into the equation in a similar fashion. Narrative clearly leads elsewhere, toward fiction, so much so that its value to documentary can be easily underestimated. Few would claim documentary as the evolutionary culmination of cinema's narrative endowment. What narrative does is make time something more than simple duration or sensation. Through the introduction of a temporal axis of actions and events involving characters or, more broadly, agents (animals, cities, invisible forces, collective masses, and so on), narrative imbues time with historical meaning. Narrative allows documentary to endow occurrences with the significance of historical events. Narrative overcomes the fetishizing lure of spectacle and the factual conclusiveness of science. It restores the mystery and power of historical consciousness.¹⁹

Narrative not only facilitates the representation of historical time, it

18. The written ethnography is Maurice Legendre's doctoral dissertation, "Les Jurdes: Études de géographie humaine," School for Advanced Spanish Studies, 1927. Buñuel was also, according to John Baxter's biography, familiar with Miguel de Unamuno's description of the region in his 1922 book *Andanzas y visiones españolas*. See John Baxter, *Buñuel* (New York, 1994), pp. 136–46.

19. See Hayden White, "The Question of Narrative in Contemporary Historical Theory," *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore, 1987), pp. 26–57.



FIG. 2.—Buñuel, *Land without Bread* (1932). Buñuel puts ethnography on end partly by means of a callous and incredulous commentary. The Hurdanos live a series of double binds that make death and disease seem like the dominant forms of social experience.



FIG. 3.—Buñuel, *Land without Bread* (1932). The commentary tells us that goats are only eaten after they fall accidentally from the steep cliffs. In this shot, however, we see a puff of gunsmoke enter the frame as the goat tumbles to its death.

also supplies techniques by which to introduce the moralizing perspective or social belief of an author and a structure of closure whereby initiating disturbances can receive satisfactory resolution. Such resolution gives an imprimatur of conclusiveness to the arguments, perspectives, and solutions advanced by the film. Typically centered on a main character or hero in classic narrative fiction, such a structure proves detachable from individualized agents or heroes; social issues such as inadequate housing, floods, the isolation of remote regions, or the exploitation of an entire class can establish the story's initiating disturbance. Resolution follows less from a hero's actions than from the documentary's own solution to social problems: slum clearance in *Housing Problems* (1935); the creation of the TVA in *The River* (1937); railroad construction in *Turksib* (1929); and a workers' strike in *Misère au Borinage* (1934).²⁰ The form of such films takes over the work customarily assigned to the heroic efforts of an individual protagonist.

Modernist Practices

The modernist avant-garde of the 1920s introduces a third contribution to the appearance of a documentary film form. It is this milieu, with its own formal conventions and social purpose, its own amalgam of advocates and practitioners, institutions and discourses, and its own array of assumptions and expectations on the part of audience and artists that provides both representational techniques and a social context conducive to a documentary movement.

Individuals such as Buñuel, Vigo, Dziga Vertov, Richter, Delluc, and Joris Ivens moved readily between a stress on the effects of form itself, in keeping with the modernist tradition, and a stress of social impact, in keeping with a documentary impulse.²¹ Films that shared an avant-garde

20. Character development and the centered consciousness of the individual, although a staple of classical film narrative, is something few documentarians adopt in the late 1920s and early 1930s, apart from Robert Flaherty (who completes *Nanook of the North* (1922) and *Moana* (1926) before the term *documentary* even comes into common use). This form of focalization becomes far more prevalent after the appearance of *cinéma vérité* and direct or observational cinema in the late 1950s and 1960s; it continues in the wide variety of documentaries that rely on interviews as a primary aspect of their structure from the 1970s onward.

21. Peter Wollen speaks of two avant-gardes in the twenties—one, artist-filmmakers from Europe who suppress the signified to explore the signifier in abstract or transcendental ways, and, two, filmmakers from the Soviet Union, who insist on the primacy of the signified—in his “The Two Avant-Gardes,” *Readings and Writings: Semiotic Counter-Strategies* (London, 1982), pp. 92–104. He cites as an early point of direct contact Eisenstein's meeting with Richter at the avant-garde gathering at Le Sarraz in 1929, but this, for Wollen, marks “the end rather than the beginning of an epoch” (p. 94). Wollen's characterization of a European, formalist avant-garde and a Soviet, political avant-garde neglects the high degree of interplay between Soviet and European artists and filmmakers through the 1920s, overlooks the elements of photographic realism in European work, and fails to trace the

impulse such as László Moholy-Nagy's unrealized plan for a "city symphony film," *Dynamics of a Great City* (1921–22),²² *Fièvre* (Delluc, 1921), *Retour à la raison* (Man Ray, 1923), *Le Ballet mécanique* (Fernand Léger, 1924), *Mechanics of the Brain* (Vsevolod Pudovkin, 1926), *Rien que les heures* (Cavalcanti, 1926), *A Sixth of the World* (Dziga Vertov, 1926), *The Bridge* (Ivens, 1927), *Emak Bakia* (Ray, 1927), *Vormittagspuk* or *Ghosts before Breakfast* (Richter, 1927), *Berlin: Symphony of a City* (Walter Ruttmann, 1927), *Un Chien andalou* (Buñuel and Salvador Dalí, 1928), *Inflation* (Richter, 1928), *The Man with a Movie Camera* (Dziga Vertov, 1929), *Rain* (Ivens, 1929), *À Propos de Nice* (Vigo, 1929), *L'Âge d'or* (Buñuel, 1930), *Salt for Svanetia* (Mikhail Kalatozov, 1930), and *Land without Bread* (Buñuel, 1932) affirmed the close proximity of modernist exploration and documentary address.

Such a fusion of interests was particularly evident in Soviet Russia throughout the 1920s and into the early 1930s before socialist realism gained dominance. Figures such as Aleksandr Rodchenko, Vladimir Tatlin, Vera Stepanova, Kazimir Malevich (in his late paintings), El Lissitzky, Alexei Gan, Liubov Popova, Alexander Vesnin, the Stenberg brothers, and Vladimir Mayakovsky were among the many artists who contributed to a constructivist movement that combined formal innovation with social application.

Without the capacity to disrupt and make new, documentary filmmaking would not have been possible as a discrete rhetorical practice. It is the modernist avant-garde that fulfills Grierson's own call for the "creative treatment of actuality" most relentlessly (*DF*, p. 70). The explosive power of avant-garde practices subverts and shatters the coherence, stability, and naturalness of the dominant world of realist representation. Documentaries from the period between the wars cobble images together with remarkable abandon, fully in accord with the pioneering spirit of the avant-garde. (Voice-over commentary, poetic or expository, lends them a purposefulness the avant-garde typically eschewed.) Raúl Ruiz reminds us of the fabulous heterogeneity of documentary images in *Des Grands Événements et de gens ordinaires* (1979) when his voice-over commentary describes this peculiar feature of the world presented by documentary as we witness a collage of isolated objects from everyday life cascade before us.

The "creative treatment of actuality" is authored, not recorded or registered. Creative treatment turns fact to fiction in the root sense of

development of individual careers across these tenuous boundaries. Wollen omits reference to all forms of documentary expression in the 1920s and 1930s entirely and sees categories and camps where I see strategic moves to construct such categories on top of far more permeable qualities.

22. A reproduction of his graphic design and storyboard for the film exists in the catalog compiled by IVAM (Institut Valencia d'Art Moderne), *László Moholy-Nagy* (Valencia, 1991), pp. 167–82.

fingere, to shape or fashion. The concept of making, or authorship, moves us away from indexical documents of preexisting fact to the semiotics of constructed meaning and the address of the authorial I. As Ivens asserted, "it is the personality of the artist alone which distinguishes him from both reality and simple recording."²³ Or as Dziga Vertov, a figure claimed by documentary historians but himself rooted deeply in the theory and practice of the constructivist avant-garde, proclaimed in 1923, "My road is toward the creation of a fresh perception of the world. Thus, I decipher in a new way the world unknown to you."²⁴

In a similar spirit Rodchenko attacked the tradition of the painted portrait as a romantic mystification compared to the documentary power of the photograph or, preferably, a series of photographs:

Art has no place in modern life. . . . With the appearance of photographs, there can be no question of a single, immutable portrait. . . . The photograph presents a precise moment documentarily. . . . Crystallize man not by a single "synthetic" portrait, but by a whole lot of snapshots taken at different times and in different conditions.²⁵

Modernist elements of fragmentation, defamiliarization (*ostranenie*, *Verfremdungseffekt*), collage, abstraction, relativity, anti-illusionism, and a general rejection of the transparency of realist representation all find their way into acts of documentary filmmaking. As Dziga Vertov wrote, "I am eye. I have created a man more perfect than Adam. . . . I take the most agile hands of one, the fastest and most graceful legs of another . . . and, by editing, I create an entirely new, perfect man."²⁶ Such techniques and aspirations speak less to a flight from the social world into aesthetic reverie than to a critique of "an ideology of realism" designed to "perpetuate a preconceived notion of some external reality to be imitated, and indeed, to foster a belief in the existence of some such commonsense everyday shared secular reality in the first place."²⁷ The 1920s avant-

23. Joris Ivens, "Reflections on the Avant-garde Documentary," in *French Film Theory and Criticism: A History/Anthology*, ed. Richard Abel, 2 vols. (Princeton, N.J., 1988), 2:80.

24. Dziga Vertov, "Resolution of the Council of Three" (1923), in *Film Culture Reader*, ed. P. Adams Sitney (New York, 1970), p. 359.

25. Aleksandr Rodchenko, "Against the Synthetic Portrait, for the Snapshot" (1928), in *Russian Art of the Avant-garde: Theory and Criticism, 1902-1934*, trans. and ed. John Bowlit (New York, 1976), pp. 253, 251, 254.

26. Dziga Vertov, "Resolution of the Council of Three," p. 358.

27. Fredric Jameson, "Beyond the Cave: Demystifying the Ideology of Modernism," *The Ideologies of Theory*, 2 vols. (Minnesota, 1988), 2:121. An interestingly divergent but also Marxist assessment of modernism occurs in Arnold Hauser, *Naturalism, Impressionism, the Film Age*, vol. 4 of *The Social History of Art* (New York, 1951). Hauser sees modernism or "post-impressionism" as an escape from reality. In the rejection of the qualities described

garde set out to revise the terms and conditions by which to construct representations of a shared secular reality.

The films mentioned above, from *Dynamics of a Great City* to *Land without Bread*, combine an avant-garde impulse with a documentary orientation. They disabuse their viewers of any commonsense reality. Such work constructs a new order of understanding. In the midst of upheaval, when, as the Russian Revolution seemed to confirm, “the bourgeoisie begins to decay as a class, in a world of social anomie and fragmentation, then that active and conquering mode of the representation of reality which is realism is no longer appropriate.”²⁸ For whom is it no longer appropriate? At the very least, for these filmmakers and other artists and activists who now saw things in a radically new way.

In France, Delluc introduced the concept of *photogénie* to describe how, in Richard Abel’s words, “cinema acted as a transformative, revelatory medium of absorption and de-familiarization.”²⁹ Meanwhile, anthropologists such as Michel Leiris and Marcel Griaule, modernists such as Robert Desnos and Georges Bataille, and scholars such as Carl Einstein and André Schaeffner joined together at the journal *Documents* to demonstrate, in layout and text, that “to write ethnographies on the model of collage would be to avoid the portrayal of cultures as organic wholes or as unified, realistic worlds subject to a continuous explanatory discourse.”³⁰ Hannah Höch, John Heartfield, Moholy-Nagy, and Rodchenko drew on the technique of photomontage to subvert, reorder, and transform the face of photographic reality.

Instead of the resolution-oriented structure of classic narrative, or the comparable problem-solution pattern of much documentary, modernist experimentation favored an open-ended, ambiguous play with time and space that did less to resolve real issues than to challenge the definition and priority of an issue per se. Modernist strategies remind us of the intractable kernel of potentially traumatic disturbance that makes the experience of history itself so different from its narrative representation. In what could be a justification for the radical transformations of an avant-garde, Slavoj Žižek asserts, “What emerges via distortions of the

by Jameson, Hauser sees the loss of hope in mutual understanding based on commonplaces and convention. He therefore labels, after Jean Paulhan, most modernists as “terrorists,” who fight “against all externalization and institutionalization . . . against all ‘culture,’” in contrast to the “‘rhetoricians,’ the oratorical artists . . . who know perfectly well that commonplaces and clichés are the price of mutual understanding” (p. 232). Documentary clearly takes up this second possibility, but whether it does so in opposition to modernism or in alliance with it is what I seek to examine.

28. Jameson, “Beyond the Cave,” 2:122.

29. Abel, preface to *French Film Theory and Criticism*, 2:xvi.

30. James Clifford, “On Ethnographic Surrealism,” *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge, Mass., 1988), p. 146.



FIG. 4.—Man Ray, *L'Étoile de mer* (1928). Everyday reality—the city, the street—becomes the ground for strange discoveries.

accurate representation of reality is the real—that is, the trauma around which social reality is structured.”³¹

It was precisely the power of the *combination* of the indexical representations of the documentary image and the radical juxtapositions of time and space allowed by montage that drew the attention of many avant-garde artists to film. Most turned away from conventional narrative structure, but many still chose to “relocate [a film’s] subject in ‘*the image of the object*,’ in the plastic and rhythmic conjunction or juxtaposition of representational ‘documentary’ images,”³² a goal not unlike that of Bertolt Brecht, who challenged the theater director to adopt the new style and perspective of a “great epic and *documentary theater*” (fig. 4).³³

31. Slavoj Žižek, “Introduction: The Spectre of Ideology,” *Mapping Ideology*, ed. Žižek (New York, 1994), p. 26.

32. Abel, “The Great Debates,” in *French Film Theory and Criticism*, 1:331. Abel quotes Fernand Léger, “Peinture et cinéma,” *Cahiers du mois*, nos. 16–17 (1925): 107–8.

33. Brecht concludes his essay, “Er [der Regisseur] hat die Verpflichtung, die Versuche ständig zu erneuern, die zur Schaffung des großen epischen und dokumentarischen Theaters führen müssen, das unserer Zeit gemäß ist” [“The director has the duty to renew, through a series of steady attempts, that which will lead to the production of a great epic and documentary theater appropriate to our times”] (Bertolt Brecht, “Theatersituation

The modernist avant-garde contributed something quite vital to the appearance of documentary film; it imaginatively reconstructed the look of the world with images, or shots, taken of this world. As in the photographs of Atget, street scenes—from the back streets of Paris in Ray's *L'Étoile de mer* (1928) to the puddles and umbrellas of Amsterdam in Ivens's *Rain* (1929)—became a staple of modernist work (figs. 5 and 6). The street, in fact, becomes a site of strange delights and bizarre discoveries: the mysterious box dropped by the woman in *Un Chien andalou* and the "barbaric ritual" of tearing heads from chickens that Buñuel finds on the village streets of Los Hurdes in *Land without Bread*. These sights followed even earlier efforts to document life in the street such as the extraordinary footage generated for Albert Kahn's *Archives de la Planete*. One example is an extended long take of men entering and leaving a public urinal on a Paris street (*Les Grands Boulevards, Paris*, October 1913). The exchange of gazes between the camera and the urinal's visitors attests to the surreal and complexly charged nature of this "archival" encounter.³⁴

Such images lent historical potential to images of everyday life, even as these images altered our ordinary perception of the world. They only require yoking to the oratorical voice of the filmmaker to make them fit for documentary representation. The street, along with the car, the machine, and the city—with their position half way between the animate and the inanimate—provide a ready-made subject for the avant-garde as well the documentarian. From Dullac's harsh parody of male prerogative in *The Smiling Madame Beudet* (1923) to Vigo's satiric view of the urban bourgeoisie at leisure in *À Propos de Nice* (1930), the avant-garde gave voice to the subversion of social convention. Although some avant-garde films such as those of Viking Eggeling (*Symphonie diagonale*, 1921–24) or the early work of Richter (*Rhythmus 23*, 1923, *Rhythmus 25*, 1925) moved strongly toward abstraction, or "pure cinema," a great many works began with images of a recognizable reality in order to transform it. On this point, constructivist art, Soviet montage theory, and the European avant-garde stood in accord: the world as it offers itself to us provides the starting point for both political and aesthetic acts of transformation (figs. 7 and 8).

Rhetorical Strategies

Discussed further below, documentary took identifiable shape when photographic realism, narrative structure, and modernist fragmentation served the goal of social persuasion. Oration added another element of

1917–1927," *Schriften zum Theater*, ed. Werner Hecht, 7 vols. [Frankfurt am Main, 1963–64], 1:95; my italics; my trans.).

34. I am indebted to Paula Amad for her screening of this and other material from the Kahn archive at Visible Evidence VIII (Utrecht, August 2000).



FIG. 5.—Man Ray, *Emak Bakia* (1927). On the road. The avant-garde took to the road, and railroad, in their explorations of machines, movement, and human geography.



FIG. 6.—Buñuel and Dalí, *Un Chien Andalou* (1928). The street scene from a surrealist perspective. The woman, struck by a car, carried a box of unknown significance.

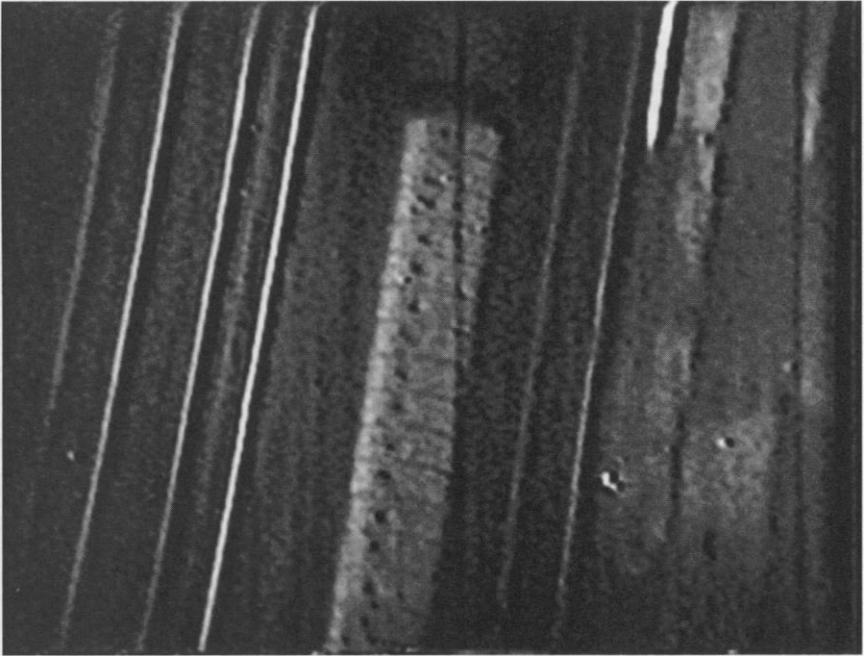


FIG. 7.—Harry Watt and Basil Wright, *Night Mail* (1936). A mail train moves through a field of tracks. It is the commentary, written by W. H. Auden, that dispels abstraction to anchor image in physical reality.

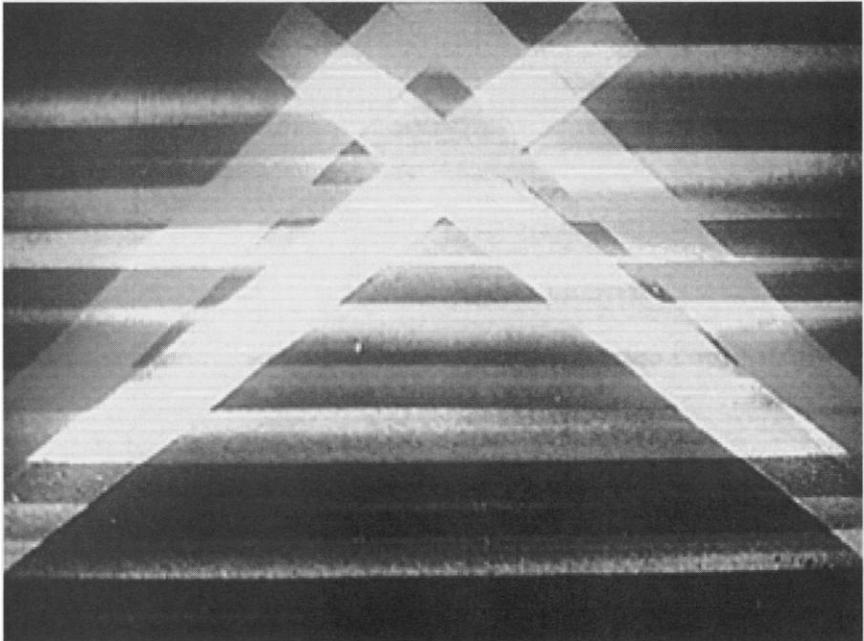


FIG. 8.—Ruttman, *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* (1927). Railroad crossing gates descend as a train rushes toward Berlin. With music and no spoken commentary, the abstract quality of the images escapes the pull of geographic specificity.

social consciousness to cinematic representation. It called on the audience to put itself at one with the social perspective of the film and to prepare itself to act accordingly. Rhetorical speech, in the form of editing patterns, intertitles, and voice-over commentary, channels techniques of defamiliarization toward preferred forms of social change. Like the other three elements, rhetoric does not necessarily lead to documentary film. As a persuasive strategy it also supports overt propaganda, all advertising, and some forms of journalism. But from the ecstatic celebration of the completion of the Turkestan-Siberian railroad with titles that shoot toward the viewer with increasing intensity over rapidly cut images of onrushing trains at the conclusion of Victor Turin's *Turksib* to the carefully choreographed images of masses and leaders, followers and their one Führer in Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* (1934), rhetorical strategies allowed documentary expression to achieve a distinctive voice of its own.

Documentary's Historical Moment

Over the course of the 1920s a wave of documentary filmmaking took shape that allowed differentiation between the modernist artist and the social orator. This new movement first took shape, however, not in the as yet unfounded British documentary, where the promotion of documentary film required the derogation of the modernist avant-garde, but in constructivist art and Soviet cinema, where avant-garde and documentary tendencies engaged in a lively interaction.

Grierson, like others, was well aware of the Soviet achievement and of its parallels with his own plans for a new film form. In fact, Grierson contributed the English titles to *Turksib*; he also played a key role in the American distribution of Eisenstein's first film, *Strike* (1925)—a work, like Flaherty's *Moana*, rich in documentary value.³⁵ The Soviet example, however, like the modernist avant-garde generally, represented a form of excess for Grierson. Its rhetorical exuberance and political radicalism spilled far beyond the bounds of what his government sponsors expected. Grierson's vision of the role of the artist differed from that of the Soviet filmmakers and constructivist artists in the 1920s. In each case, two strands of modernist discourse become braided together, but in radical versus conservative forms. Margaret Olin describes these two discourses as "one, 'documentary,' exhorting the reader to participate in, so as to ameliorate, the conditions it describes [which I have also termed oratori-

35. See my "Strike and the Genealogy of Documentary," *Blurred Boundaries*, pp. 107–16 for a detailed consideration of these qualities as well as reflections on the consequences of treating Eisenstein's work as contributory to the development of narrative cinema rather as part of the remarkable fusion of narrative and nonnarrative, fact and fiction, document and rhetoric that characterizes this period of Soviet cinema, and art, so dramatically.

cal], and the other 'artistic,' concerning itself with the problematics of selfhood and otherness."³⁶ Documentary film in the 1920s and 1930s achieves this braiding by assigning amelioration—and all the other modalities of social intervention—to those categories of selfhood and otherness that revolve around issues of citizenship and the nation-state.

The principle of citizenship as self-realization, frequently invoked by constructivists and filmmakers in the Soviet Union in relation to the creation of a "new man," became the singular *raison d'être* for Grierson's conception of the documentary, not to foment revolution but to preserve the status quo. Grierson's commitment to government and corporate sponsorship as the only viable means of institutional support required an act of separation from the more radical potentialities of the modernist avant-garde and the particular example of the Soviet cinema. Grierson championed long and hard for a documentary film practice that persuaded more than informed, guided more than observed. The social orator undertook the task of offering moral and political guidance to the confused masses by means of emotionally (rhetorically) compelling argument. Fulfillment lay in carrying out one's responsibilities to the common goals embodied in the nation-state. Grierson's discussions of meanings and values, virtues and models, never occurred in a realm of timeless contemplation. They played a crucial role in developing what Foucault would call "strategies of domination" in relation to the alternatives posed by the European avant-garde and the Soviet model.³⁷ How did he accomplish this?

Among other things, Grierson shifted the focus of his search for a model from the rhetorical and organizational example of Soviet cinema to the lone, romantic figure of Robert Flaherty, a semicommercial maverick specializing in heroic tales drawn from exotic locations.³⁸ Flaherty had

36. Margaret Olin, "'It Is Not Going to Be Easy to Look into Their Eyes': Privilege of Perception in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*," *Art History* 14 (Mar. 1991): 92.

37. Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, 2d ed. (Chicago, 1983), p. 109.

38. The account given here diminishes Flaherty's importance. To the extent that his work stimulated others who would later adopt the name of documentary, it clearly bears significance. On the other hand, Flaherty was not part of a larger movement but someone who sought to find a distinct niche within the commercial feature film market. Indebted to the 1915 film by Edward Curtis, *In the Land of the Headhunters*, Flaherty, in his first feature, *Nanook of the North* (1922), likewise combined an ethnographic eye for the details of everyday life and social ritual with a marked propensity for the dramatic, if not melodramatic. What Flaherty lacked was the orator's sense of social persuasiveness. He stressed story over effect, observation over amelioration. His insistence on location filmmaking, common-man heroes, and the construction of narratives that grew from a local situation bears close affinity with the neorealist impulse that took shape in postwar Japanese, American, Polish, British, and, especially, Italian cinema. His documentary affinity lies closer to the observational strategies adopted by Robert Drew, David and Albert Maysles, Richard Leacock, Donald Pennebaker,

the right sense of drama and conflict but the wrong sense of modernity. In a series of written commentaries, Grierson lamented that Flaherty—maker of, under Grierson's sponsorship, *Industrial Britain* (1933), a film more on potters and glassblowers than the assembly line—harnessed his storytelling genius to an outmoded vision of “man against the sky” rather than to the needs of the modern-day citizen. Flaherty's work possessed “documentary value” but not the documentarian's voice of social consciousness. Flaherty gave no guidance to the man on the street; his was an escape to earlier times and distant pleasures. With this critique, Grierson fabricated an ostensible issue: how to make Flaherty's romanticism—one step removed from Hollywood escapism—topical and propagandistic. This allowed him to sidestep the actual issue: How to make the Soviet cinema's radicalism palatable to nonradical, bourgeois-democratic ends?

To the extent that Grierson did address the model of Soviet cinema, he invoked the same convenient scapegoat he had already fashioned from Flaherty; he found Soviet films escapist and inadequately pragmatic, just like Flaherty. Grierson wrote that “the great Russian directors . . . were begun in propaganda and were made by it. . . . One cannot do less when recording a world revolution than develop a tempo to take it. . . . But the whole effect was hectic and, in the last resort, romantic. . . . After the first flush of exciting cinema, the Russian talent faded.”³⁹

Russian directors are too bound up—too aesthetically vain—in what they call their “play films” to contribute to Russia's instructional cinema. They have, indeed, suffered greatly from the freedom given to artists in a first uncritical moment of revolutionary enthusiasm, for they have tended to isolate themselves more and more in private impression and private performance. . . . One's impression is that when some of the art and all of the bohemian self-indulgence have been knocked out of them, the Russian cinema will fulfill its high promise of the late twenties. [“SS,” p. 183]

Grierson aligns himself with the advocates of socialist realism, who, by 1932, had the political power to label the politically radical and formally experimental directions in Soviet cinema unproductive trickery. The clear and decisive harnessing of creative energies to a specific form of social purpose took top priority for Grierson. Artistic license must be

and Fredrick Wiseman in the 1960s than to the modernist mixture of oratorical and poetic practices of the 1920s and 1930s or their performative variants in the 1970s and later. Claims for Flaherty as a key paternal figure in the genealogy of documentary follow more from a desire for ancestors and lines of noble descent than from close attention to the historical circumstances that occasion the emergence of documentary film production.

39. Grierson, “Summary and Survey: 1935,” *Grierson on Documentary*, pp. 181–82; hereafter abbreviated “SS.”

consistently subordinated to the propagandistic goal of giving citizens their proper orientation to the state.

And what did Grierson have to say of the European avant-garde? Its private, rather than public, sponsorship proved dilettantish, if not decadent. Or in Grierson's own words:

Documentary was from the beginning—when we first separated our public purpose theories from those of Flaherty [read: Soviet cinema]—an 'anti-aesthetic' movement."⁴⁰

There has grown up another more independent cinema. I do not mean here the *avant garde* cinema which for a while flourished in France and has raised its head wherever family fortune and youthful enthusiasm have allowed it. The French *avant garde* with René Clair . . . Cavalcanti, Epstein and Jean Renoir, made its dash for liberty by exploiting its friends. . . . All the requisites of an independent cinema were there except principle, and the loyalty which goes with principle. . . . Something more solidly founded than the *avant garde* there has been, and that is the propagandist cinema. ["SS," p. 179]⁴¹

By 1930–1932, a documentary film movement existed but with its radical potential harnessed by figures like Grierson to the specific needs of the nation-state. As Grierson himself put it,

The State is the machinery by which the best interests of the people are secured. Since the needs of the State come first, understanding of these needs comes first in education. . . . The needs of the State in this great period of revolutionary change are urgent; and the citizen has neither the leisure nor the equipment for the promiscuous exercise of his mental and emotional interests.⁴²

I suggest, in fact, that the problems of education and art, and their inevitable interest today, lie in the realm of the imaginative training for modern citizenship and not anywhere else.⁴³

There it is . . . from the dramatization of modern organization and the new corporate elements in society to the dramatization of social problems: each a step in the attempt to understand the stubborn raw

40. Grierson, "The Documentary Idea: 1942," *Grierson on Documentary*, p. 249.

41. Rotha, Grierson's compatriot, followed the same line. He described the French avant-garde as "hypnotized by the facile tricks of the movie camera." Their films, "seldom profound, but often witty . . . were inspired by nothing more serious than kindergarten theory" (*DF*, p. 85).

42. Grierson, "Education and Total Effort," *Grierson on Documentary*, pp. 278, 279.

43. Grierson, "The Challenge of Peace," *Grierson on Documentary*, p. 327.

material of our modern citizenship and wake the heart and the will to their mastery.⁴⁴

These remarks expose the tip of Grierson's larger social and aesthetic orientation. Although documentary filmmaking in the 1920s generally shares in the progressive politics of that period and represents one of the prime examples of a turn toward what William Stott called "documentary expression," Grierson's own position more closely resembles neoconservative political theory and the elitist aesthetics of the Bloomsbury group. Grierson's neoconservatism draws from (1) Benedetto Croce's and Graham Wallas's prewar emphasis on intuition and the irrational as vital forces that discredit liberal trust in reason—Grierson himself concluded that the state had to move and persuade rather than inform and explain; (2) an Hegelian idealist view of the state that privileged the technocratic vision of a governing elite over the strategic maneuvering of political parties; and (3) a corporatist model of state organization in which a civil service mandarin arbitrated conflict and dispensed wisdom rather than awaited the outcome of tedious parliamentary debates. Grierson placed himself among the elite and drew few distinctions between his views and more virulent forms of totalitarianism. In 1942, for example, Grierson opined to a friend that Britain had two choices; make alliance with either Russia or Germany: England "could do a deal with Germany that would save more of England's world privileges than can be saved any other way."⁴⁵

Grierson's affinity with the aesthetics of the Bloomsbury group involved, first, a rejection of realism as a transparent style. To give the impression of observing lived reality mattered less than utilizing more innovative techniques, including those of the avant-garde, to urge preferred solutions to social problems. Second, it evidenced a distrust of the rise of a mass or popular audience since they could not be counted on for reasoned, political judgment. Grierson coupled his neoconservative view of public "service," or propaganda, to an aesthetic of art as a "hammer" to hit nerves and guide actions. Clive Bells' comment, "Society must be permeated, and, what is more, continually nourished by the unconscious influence of this civilizing elite. . . . The majority must be told that the world of thought and feeling exists. . . . To point the road is the task of the few," could easily be Grierson's own ("RG," p. 41). To warrant sponsorship, art must be useful to the needs of an idealist model of the state. Guiding the masses toward the fulfillment of their civic responsibility and

44. Grierson, "The Documentary Idea," p. 113.

45. Quoted in Peter Morris, "Re-thinking Grierson: The Ideology of John Grierson," in *Dialogue: Canadian and Québec Cinema*, ed. Pierre Véronneau, Michael Dorland, and Seth Feldman (Montreal, 1987), p. 46; hereafter abbreviated "RG." This essay presents a superb account of Grierson's ideological orientation; I am indebted to it for much of the information provided in this summary statement.

national patrimony stands paramount. This aesthetic's mechanisms may seem totalitarian, but idealist principles and distrust of the masses justifies it. Grierson's famous definition of documentary as "the creative treatment of actuality" must be coupled with his less well-known definition of propaganda as "the constructive management of public affairs" if we are to locate his attacks on the modernist avant-garde effectively ("RG," p. 45).

Documentary gains a definition and institutional base as it fulfills its potential to be what Lenin once called it, "the most important art."⁴⁶ It is the art most fully equipped to engage a mass audience via the mediations of the new technologies of photographic fidelity and mechanical reproduction. As Peter Galassi notes in his essay for Museum of Modern Art's Rodchenko catalog, "the adaptation of the modernist aesthetic to hortatory functions was an international phenomenon of the 1930s, blind to ideological distinctions. . . . [What Stalin, Hitler, and Henry Luce shared] was a talent for persuading a massive audience that life was as good as their picture of it. To achieve this, their artists did not overthrow modernism; they adapted it."⁴⁷

Like newspapers and radio before it, cinema contributed a powerful rhetorical voice to the needs of the modern state. The modern state had to find ways to enact popular, compelling representations of the state's policies and programs. Such enactments engage its members in ritual, participatory acts of citizenship. Documentary film practice became one such form of ritual participation.

Although shadowed by elitism and hence vulnerable to critique, the modernist avant-garde's greatest threat was not a failure to pay off but the risk of paying off too well. The very techniques of fragmentation, defamiliarization, suspended belief and activated disbelief, radical heterogeneity and arbitrary closure that characterize avant-garde film de-realized the institutional solidity and civic respectability with which Grierson sought to endow the documentary. The modernist avant-garde provided a way to represent traumatic events in a manner less fetishistic "than any traditional representation of them could ever be."⁴⁸ Solutions, not traumas, however, were what Grierson and others like him sought.

46. Quoted in Jay Leda, *Kino: The History of the Russian and Soviet Film* (London, 1973), p. 161. Although Grierson named this new film form "documentary," Vertov had been making work that would later be labeled documentary for nearly a decade before Grierson. Vertov never gave his films a name denoting a genre or category of film. For him they were the only real cinema, plain and simple. All other forms of filmmaking were derivatives of literary, theatrical, or painterly traditions and, therefore, incapable of cinematic distinction.

47. Peter Galassi, "Rodchenko and Photography's Revolution," *Aleksandr Rodchenko*, ed. Magdalena Dabrowski, Leah Dickerman, and Galassi (exhibition catalog, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 25 June–6 Oct. 1998), p. 130.

48. White, "The Modernist Event," in *The Persistence of History: Cinema, Television, and the Modern Event*, ed. Vivian Sobchack (New York, 1996), p. 32.

Richter's *Inflation*, for example, pans across scores of bewildered faces as money loses value and disaster looms. His abstracted, lateral shots of real faces in an unreal space unfurl like a scroll of indefinite length; the traumas of technological modernity defy the fiscal policies of the nation-state. *Inflation* fetishizes no heroes, no managerial elite, no solution, no story of good cheer.

Griersonian documentary promises the mastery of events through participatory rituals suited to the citizen-subject. Modernism exposes such participatory rituals as just that: *rituals*. The modernist avant-garde thwarted the illusion of mastery that comes with realism and narrative. Modernism refused to render events such as the Depression, war, political revolution, or, later, the Holocaust, "clearly and unambiguously identified as to their meaning," or to liberate us from the shadow they cast over our desire to "envision a future free from their debilitating effects."⁴⁹

From this perspective, Grierson's strategy for documentary film production asked of audiences what John F. Kennedy so famously asked of his fellow citizens: "Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country." The orator not only reaches citizens but also contributes to the construction of the sense of identity necessary for citizenship in the first place. Films of ritual participation mark the dominant tradition, be they investitures of monumental fascism in Nazi Germany (*Triumph of the Will*), the "people's" communism of Soviet Russia (*Old and New*, Eisenstein, 1929; *Salt for Svanetia*, Kalatozov; *Three Songs of Lenin*, Dziga Vertov, 1934), the Labor-Conservative coalitions of thirties Britain (*Housing Problems*, Arthur Elton and Edgar Anstey, 1935; *Coalface*, Cavalcanti, 1936; *Smoke Menace*, John Taylor, 1937), or the New Deal interventionism of Rooseveltian America (*The Plow That Broke the Plains*, Pare Lorentz, 1936; *The River*, Lorentz, 1937).

Not all documentary was state or corporate sponsored. Some filmmakers chose to contest the power of the state, often in alliance with various social-democratic or national Communist parties outside the U.S.S.R. The film and photo leagues that appeared in numerous countries, with their photo documentation and film newsreels of hunger marches, strikes, and social protests were a prime example of an oppositional effort.⁵⁰ But rather than return to the radical potentiality of modernist technique, oppositional documentary endorsed the more realist tone of dominant documentary production and the issues of self and other that fell within the circumscribed limits of the citizen in relation to the state. The New York Film and Photo League, for example, allowed a contingent of artistically ambitious members to split off to make more full blown documentaries on larger issues, such as the background to the Spanish

49. *Ibid.*, p. 20.

50. See William Alexander, *Film on the Left: American Documentary Film from 1931-1942* (Princeton, N.J., 1981).

Civil War, while the majority insisted on the primacy of news-oriented, topical reports or newsreels. Neither group seriously entertained the stratagems of the avant-garde.

Ivens exemplifies the avant-garde filmmaker turned leftist documentarian who offered relentless opposition to the bourgeois-democratic state.⁵¹ Ivens made films in eight countries between 1927 and 1946 (The Netherlands, Belgium, U.S.S.R., Spain, China, the United States, Canada, and Australia). His alliance with the Soviet Union and the Comintern's shifting policies of militancy and popular front unity make him a vivid representative of the radical left's combination of attacks on capitalism, on the one hand, and a defense of the Soviet Union, on the other, even when the latter defense called for a suppression of the former attacks.

Ivens also went further than his American counterparts in keeping modernist techniques alive. The gradual shift from the modernist aesthetic of *The Bridge* and *Rain* to the social activism of *The Spanish Earth* (1937), in support of the Republican cause, and *Song of the Rivers* (1953), a tribute to dock workers and longshoremen around the world, also takes condensed form in Ivens's remake of *Zuiderzee* (1930). *Zuiderzee* is a loving chronicle of the state's reclamation of fertile land from an inland sea. It stresses the remarkable feats of engineering skill and physical labor, however, rather than the role of government. But in *New Earth* (1934), Ivens uses a shortened version of the same footage with a new conclusion: He adds a virulent denunciation of an unregulated, international stock market and the social indifference of rich investors who allow the fruit of the land to go to waste when no profit can be made from its sale. Ivens films the wholesale dumping of grain into the sea. In *New Earth* a voice-over commentary of moral denunciation replaces the tone of poetic observation in *Zuiderzee*. The state has failed to live up to its responsibilities to regulate markets; ordinary people must pay the price. Ivens employs reenactment and defamiliarizing juxtapositions to make his point. He vividly adopts the modernist strategies Grierson disparaged and undermines the sense of sacrifice Grierson prized. It is, however, precisely the adaptation of modernist technique to a hortatory function still revolving around the nation-state that makes Ivens into Grierson's opponent. They face each other on common ground but from opposite sides of the battle lines.

In the period after 1930, when he took his first trip to the Soviet Union, Ivens clearly adopts the perspective of the left with a focus that

51. There are several books on Ivens but the most rigorous and comprehensive by far is Thomas Waugh's dissertation, "Joris Ivens and the Evolution of the Radical Documentary, 1926-1946" (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 1981). For a more recent assessment of Ivens, see *Joris Ivens and the Documentary Context*. For biographic detail on his political leanings, see Hans Schoots, *Living Dangerously: A Biography of Joris Ivens* (Amsterdam, 2000).

remains centered on the role of the state. This perspective leads Ivens to produce work that addresses the failure of the state to insure decent living conditions and a fair wage (*Misère au Borinage*, 1934, with Henri Storck); the ability of the Soviet state to develop resources crucial to the well-being of the people (*Komsomol*, 1932); the failure of the world's governments to respond to the cries for aid by the Spanish government in its battle against a military coup (*The Spanish Earth*); or a failure by his own, Dutch government to heed the demands of a colonized people for their independence (*Indonesia Calling*, 1946). Like other members of the great tradition of the oppositional documentary, Joris Ivens remains centrally preoccupied with the power of the state and the rights of its citizens. Rather than join the harassed left-wing opposition to Western governments in the postwar years, however, Ivens moved behind the Iron Curtain where he remained an active filmmaker until his death in 1989. His later career, however, as a propagandist for the "wrong" side essentially disappears from all Western film history books.⁵²

Conclusion

Not until the 1970s does an opposition of a different kind displace the state from its central position in documentary rhetoric. Since then these have been the central issues and debates: (1) in the ethical, political, and ideological implications of the different modes of documentary production; (2) the quality and value of individual filmmaking oeuvres; (3) the usefulness of documentary film as a disciplinary (anthropological, sociological) or personal (autobiographical, poetic) form of knowledge and power; (4) the social efficacy of specific films and different modes; and (5) the challenges of historical representation and contemporary observation.

Reacting against the small-scale, observational quality of documentaries in the 1960s that began to shift attention from the state to facets of everyday life and lived experience—be they those of candidates (*Primary*, Drew Associates, 1960) or high school students (*High School*, Frederic

52. See Barsam, *Nonfiction Film*, which discusses nothing after *400,000,000* (1939) and mentions that film only in passing, and Ellis, *The Documentary Idea*, which discusses no films of Ivens's after *The Power and the Land* (1941). Only Barnouw's more internationally attentive *Documentary* covers Ivens's later work but even here there is minimal sense of Ivens's overall development as a filmmaker. Barnouw provides the dates of several postwar films, for example, but fails to give their titles; see p. 206. Ivens only appears in Barnouw's narrative when his films serve as one of the examples of larger tendencies Barnouw finds at work rather than as a decisive figure in his own right. Similarly, the best general film history, Thompson and Bordwell, *Film History*, mentions Ivens as one of the few thirties documentary filmmakers to remain active after World War II but offers no discussion of his later films.

Wiseman, 1968)—work in the 1970s returned to the modernist techniques that observational cinema rejected. *The Life and Times of Rosie the Riveter* (Connie Field, 1980) reinvents the intertextual compilation techniques of Esther Shub. *Union Maids* (Julia Reichert and James Klein, 1976) and *With Babies and Banners* (Lyn Goldfarb, Lorraine Gray, and Ann Bohlen, 1979) revive the use of the interview to recount historical events and personal experience. Staged reenactments return in *David Holtzman's Diary* (Jim McBride, 1968) and *Daughter Rite* (Michelle Citron, 1979). Collage techniques gain new currency in Emile de Antonio's *In the Year of the Pig* (1969) and Santiago Alvarez's *79 Springtimes of Ho Chi Minh* (1969). Together with works such as *The Woman's Film* (San Francisco Newsreel, 1971), *Word Is Out* (Mariposa Film Group, 1977), *Who Killed Vincent Chin?* (Christine Choy and Renee Tajima, 1988), *I'm British But . . .* (Gurinder Chadha, 1989), *Tongues Untied* (Marlon Riggs, 1989), *Sink or Swim* (Su Friedrich, 1990), *Paris Is Burning* (Jennie Livingston, 1991), *Isle of Flowers* (Jorge Furtado, 1990), *History and Memory* (Rea Tajiri, 1991), *Bontoc Eulogy* (Marlon Fuentes, 1997), and *Free Fall* (Peter Forgacs, 1997), these films take up alternative subjectivities and identities involving issues of sex and gender, ethnicity and race, personal memory and public history.

The approach to documentary representation adopted by these works no longer requires a strategic separation from modernist techniques. The power of the state, along with its achievements and failures, is secondary to the development of a heightened sense of solidarity among specific subcultures and minority groups. The perspectives, histories, and initiatives of such previously unheeded groups command attention. Collaboration between filmmakers and their subjects replaces collaboration between filmmakers and government agencies. With this shift the form and style of documentary representations expand to encompass a breadth of perspectives and voices, attitudes and subjectivities, positions and values that exceed the universal subject of an idealized nation-state.

The emergence of a documentary film practice in the 1920s and 1930s drew together various elements of photographic realism, narrative, modernism, and rhetoric at a historical moment when the technology of cinema and the techniques of persuasion could serve the needs of the modern nation-state. In Grierson's hands this involved an act of separation between the self-indulgent avant-garde of modernist expression and a down-to-earth documentary movement of realist persuasion. This separation proved, in fact, partial, if not mythic, however much film histories have perpetuated it.

Vestiges of avant-garde radicalism persisted in some forms of documentary expression throughout the period between the wars as we can see in Brecht's theater and in films such as Richter's *Inflation*, Turin's *Turksib*, and Ivens's *New Earth*. And as the work of the later 1960s and the 1970s attests, these elements of formal innovation coupled to social purpose lend distinction to documentary as an art form capable of envi-

sioning a transformed world. But the myth of separation persists. This myth demands an origin story for documentary film that legitimates its persuasive powers in the objectivity of the photographic image rather than in the aims of the orator. Documentary film histories have perpetuated this origin myth.⁵³ They continue to circumscribe documentary film within the framework of a sobering ritual of civic participation.

This frame demands enlargement to include a revised sense of ritual that no longer circles around the citizen-subject and nation-state. This revised concept of ritual and performance does away with the traditional center of political power. It dissolves the fixed, central place of the state in favor of a more fluid, affinity-based collectivity of variable needs, shifting alliances, and mutable powers. The newer, post-1970s "wave" of documentary film, like the modernist avant-garde before it, revises our understanding of the subject; it displaces the individual from the stable position of correspondent with the state as suppressed subjectivities claim a voice and image of their own.

Maya Deren, the key figure in the emergence of a postwar American avant-garde, envisioned radical possibilities of these kinds for film form. She championed a vigorous program of ethical engagement and a revised sense of ritual enactment.⁵⁴ In her extraordinary publication of 1947, *An Anagram of Ideas of Film, Form, and Art*, Deren tries to clear a socially engaged, ethically informed space for a new avant-garde. Deren restores ethics and the prospect of ritual redemption to the project of the avant-garde, but it comes at the price of stealing back from documentary what all "creative treatments of actuality" share despite the names and limits placed on them. (Deren scorns documentary literalism as much as Grierson mocked avant-garde elitism.) Deren's call for a renewal of the avant-garde, in fact, is of a piece with the post-1970s wave of documentary described here. A rigid sense of separation no longer obtains, and Deren's notion of ritual as a socially transformative act achieves considerable co-gency:

The ritualistic form treats the human being not as the source of the dramatic action, but as a somewhat depersonalized element in a dramatic whole. The intent of such depersonalization is not the destruction of the individual; on the contrary, it enlarges him beyond the personal dimension and frees him from the specializations and confines of the personality. He becomes part of a dynamic whole

53. Some historians, like Georges Sadoul, clearly saw the impetus Soviet film provided to the constitution of a documentary form: "La révélation soviétique précipita l'évolution de l'avant-garde vers le documentaire" (Georges Sadoul, *Histoire du cinéma mondial*, 8th ed. [Paris, 1949], p. 203); but later writers like Barsam, Barnouw, and Ellis choose a myth of origins to the reality of Soviet invention.

54. See *Maya Deren and the American Avant-Garde* for a variety of investigations into the multifaceted career of Maya Deren.

which, like all such creative relationships, in turn, endows its parts with a measure of its larger meaning.⁵⁵

I began with historical revisionism, and I conclude with a utopian invocation. I return to the past to change our understanding of it and to make that understanding available to the cinema we have yet to achieve.

55. Maya Deren, *An Anagram of Ideas of Film, Form, and Art*, in Vèvè A. Clark, Millicent Hodson, and Catrina Neiman, *The Legend of Maya Deren: A Documentary Biography and Collected Works*, 1 vol. in 2 (New York, 1988), 1:2:570.