

Sem-iv (general)

Topic: DOCUMENTARY FILM

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Documentary texts are supposedly those which aim to document reality, attempting veracity in their depiction of people, places and events. However, it is impossible to re-present reality without constructing a narrative that may be fictional in places. Certainly, any images that are edited cannot claim to be wholly factual, they are the result of choices made by the photographer on the other end of the lens.

In popular myth, the word 'documentary' was coined by Scottish documentarian John Grierson in his review of Robert Flaherty's film *Moana* (1926). Grierson defines documentary as a "creative treatment of actuality". The American film critic Pare Lorentz defines a documentary film as "a factual film which is dramatic." Film makers like Robert Flaherty believed it was acceptable to add fiction to documentaries, as long as the effect on the audience was real. Early film (pre-1900) was dominated by the novelty of showing an event. They were single-shot moments captured on film: a train entering a station, a boat docking, or factory workers leaving work. These short films were called "actuality" films; the term "documentary" was not coined until 1926. Many of the first films, such as those made by Auguste and Louis Lumière, were a minute or less in length, due to technological limitations.

With Robert J. Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* in 1922, documentary film embraced romanticism. Paramount Pictures tried to repeat the success of Flaherty's *Nanook* and *Moana* with two romanticized documentaries, *Grass* (1925) and *Chang* (1927), both directed by Merian Cooper and Ernest Schoedsack. Propagandist tradition consists of films made with the explicit purpose of persuading an audience of a point. One of the most notorious propaganda films is Leni Riefenstahl's film *Triumph of the Will* (1935), which chronicled the 1934 Nazi Party Congress and was commissioned by Adolf Hitler. Leftist filmmakers Joris Ivens and Henri Storck directed *Borinage* (1931) about the Belgian coal mining region. Pare Lorentz's *The Plow that Broke the Plains* (1936) and *The River* (1938) and Willard Van Dyke's *The City* (1939) are notable New Deal productions, each presenting complex combinations of social and ecological awareness, government propaganda, and leftist viewpoints.

In Britain, a number of different filmmakers came together under John Grierson. They became known as the Documentary Film Movement. Grierson, Alberto Cavalcanti, Harry Watt, Basil Wright, and Humphrey Jennings amongst others succeeded in blending propaganda, information, and education with a more poetic aesthetic approach to documentary. Examples of their work include *Drifters* (John Grierson), *Song of Ceylon* (Basil Wright), *Fires Were Started* and *A Diary for Timothy* (Humphrey Jennings).

Cinéma vérité (or the closely related direct cinema) was dependent on some technical advances in order to exist: light, quiet and reliable cameras, and portable sync sound. Cinéma vérité and similar documentary traditions can thus be seen, in a broader perspective, as a reaction against studio-based film production constraints.

In the 1960s and 1970s, documentary film was often conceived as a political weapon against neo-colonialism and capitalism in general, especially in Latin America. *La Hora de los hornos* (*The Hour of the Furnaces*, from 1968), directed by Octavio Getino and Fernando E. Solanas, influenced a whole generation of filmmakers.

Historical documentaries, such as the landmark 14-hour *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years* (1986 – Part 1 and 1989 – Part 2) by Henry Hampton, *Four Little Girls* (1997) by Spike Lee, and *The Civil War* by Ken Burns, UNESCO awarded independent film on slavery *500 Years Later*, expressed not only a distinctive voice but also a perspective and point of views.

Docufiction: Docufiction is a hybrid genre from two basic ones, fiction film and documentary, practiced since the first documentary films were made.

Nanook of the North

Robert Flaherty considered the father of documentary (1920s) His movies were anthropological and focused on nature mostly recorded other civilizations Soviet Documentaries focused of creating strong ideological messages. After the intro of optical sound recording in 1927, documentaries took off in 30s and 40s. 30s and 40s saw a focus on politics and propaganda.

Nanook of the North has been called the first ethnographic film. The focus is on the daily activities of a family of Itivimuit, a group of Quebec Inuit. On the one hand the film offers amazing views, epic characters and a dramatic narrative. On the other hand the film clearly reflects the zeitgeist of the time period of its production.

Nanook of the North (also known as *Nanook of the North: A Story Of Life and Love In the Actual Arctic*) is a 1922 silent documentary film by Robert J. Flaherty. The documentary

follows the lives of an Inuit, Nanook, and his family as they travel, search for food, and trade in northern Quebec, Canada. Nanook, his wife, Nyla, and their baby, Cunayou, are introduced as fearless heroes who endure rigors “no other race” could survive. The film is considered the first feature-length documentary. Some have criticized Flaherty for staging several sequences, but the film is generally viewed as standing “alone in its stark regard for the courage and ingenuity of its heroes.”

□ Eskimos of Itivimuit tribe • 16 months of shooting; • scenes developed on site for possible retakes and multiple angles • Focus on Nanook Suggested walrus hunt as in old days Oversize igloo to accommodate filming Cut igloo in half or more light

□ Nanook – Film style and techniques

- Fiction film techniques employed in editing
- Panorama shots
- Close-ups
- Personalization/Protagonist
- Creation of Suspense
- Judicious use of long takes