INTRODUCTION *to* DOCUMENTARY

FOURTH EDITION

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6
HOW DID DOCUMENTARY FILMMAKING GET STARTED?

The Mythic Origin in Early Cinema

How did documentary come to be a distinct form of filmmaking? How did it find its voice? No one deliberately set out to invent or create this tradition. The effort to construct a history for documentary—an origin story with a beginning, way back then, and an end, in the future—came after the fact. It came with the desire of filmmakers, viewers, and writers to understand how things got to be the way they are. But to those who came before us, back then, how things would become later was a matter of idle speculation. Their goals were more immediate: make a film that answers to their own needs and intuitions about how to represent the subject of their choosing. As they did so in the 1920s and 1930s, a new form of cinema, the documentary, took form.

Some trace the origins of documentary back to the beginning of the cinema because these very early films (1895–1915) had what John Grierson would later call "documentary value." Early films often conveyed a sense of what the world looked like at the turn of the twentieth century, and all of them served as evidence of the visual styles and film techniques that were becoming the backbone of cinematic language. Films, such as August and Louis Lumière's *Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory*, *Arrival of a Train*, *Watering the Gardener*, and *Feeding the Baby* (all 1895) seem but a small step away from the documentary film proper. Such films possess an

uncanny ability to capture the look of things and to illustrate life as it is lived, with movement—an ability that served as a hallmark for early cinema and its immense catalog of people, places, and things gathered from around the world.

People had never seen images that possessed such extraordinary fidelity to their subject. Unlike their closest neighbor, photographic images, these captured movement indexically—the real passage of time was captured in a continuous shot or long take as a perfect reproduction that appeared on screen for exactly the same amount of time as it took the event to occur (at standard shooting and projection speeds). As film theorist Christian Metz noted in the 1960s, to duplicate the impression of movement is to duplicate its reality. Cinema achieved this goal at a level no other medium had ever attained.

But early filmmakers did not produce documentaries. Their films were not called that. For good reason. Rather than cultivate a voice to speak about the historical world and a structured framework to support that voice, they settled for sharing impressions, caught or fabricated, that fascinated simply by reproducing the look of things and the flow of time. These early films resemble many of the short videos we now find on TikTok or Instagram. They are testaments to the filmmaker’s engagement with the historical world without the impulse to speak in a sustained voice about the issues a narrative framework might explore, the perspective a rhetorical framework could support, or the formal grace a poetic framework would provide. The impulse to offer a representation of the historical world is nascent but not yet fully formed.

6.1. The early films of the Lumière brothers clearly document qualities of everyday life without pretense—yet they are not entirely unstaged either. The workers, all well-dressed for the occasion, stream out of the factory in a carefully defined plane perpendicular to the camera so that the focus remains sharp and the overall composition pleasing. None look at the camera. The impression of reality, though, remains quite strong because all the action unfolds in a single take. *Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory* (Louis Lumière, 1895). Courtesy of Photofest.

The ability of the cinema to reproduce the look of life itself, including duration or movement, led in multiple directions, one of which would eventually become the documentary film. These other directions give us a clear sense that the early cinema demonstrated the potential for a documentary film tradition but did not immediately create it. Other media, like the newspaper, appeared to offer a better vehicle for discourses of sobriety than the nickelodeons, which caught the imagination of a lower income and often immigrant population. Two alternative directions can be singled out: science and spectacle. Both directions begin in very early cinema (roughly from 1895 to 1906). Science and spectacle contribute to the sober and delirious poles of documentary but are hardly synonymous with it. The differences are multiple.

First, the capacity of the photographic image (and later of the recorded soundtrack) to generate a precise, indexical replica of aspects of its source material forms the basis for scientific modes of representation more than for documentary film, even if this use also took some time to develop. An

indexical sign bears a physical relation to what it refers to: a photograph precisely captures in two dimensions the proportions and relationships among the three-dimensional objects it frames. Science relies heavily on the indexical quality of the photographic image for everything from x-rays and MRI scans to facial-recognition software.

The value of this indexical quality to scientific image making depends heavily on minimizing the degree to which the image, be it a fingerprint or x-ray, exhibits any sense of a perspective unique to its individual maker. A strict code of objectivity, or institutional perspective, applies. The image serves as a document, as factual evidence. It offers no personal perspective, no distinctive voice or style. Indexical images serve many scientific purposes, and documentary filmmaking was not among its earliest uses.

Documentary flourishes when it gains a voice of its own, when it speaks to us about the world we share. Producing accurate documents or visual evidence does not, on its own, grant it such a voice. In fact, it can detract from it. Science wants images that could be made by different people without bearing the stylistic trace of the individual maker. Further, documentary does not always depend on the indexical quality of the image for its identity (for instance, some documentaries use animation). Documentary is an art, not a science. The art depends on how images are made to serve a narrative, rhetorical, or poetic representation of reality through the use of cinematic language.

Documentary commonly makes use of indexical images as evidence or to create the impression of evidence that serves to advance the filmmaker's perspective. Robert Flaherty, for example, in *Nanook of the North* (1922) created the impression that some scenes took place inside Nanook's igloo when they were in fact shot in the open air with half an oversized igloo as a backdrop. This gave Flaherty enough light to shoot but required his subjects to act as if they were inside an actual igloo. *Night Mail* (1936) created a sense of what it felt like to hurtle across England on the overnight express mail train, bearing mail to Scotland, but the interior scenes of sorting mail were shot on a soundstage, not on the train. For *The Thin Blue Line* (1988), Errol Morris shot a series of reenactments to represent the murder of a Dallas police officer as various figures in the film describe it. Not only are the reenactments discrepant from each other, raising the question of what really happened rather than answering it, but every one of them was shot in

New Jersey, not Dallas. These choices all represent tactics by filmmakers to generate the effects they desire. These tactics may amount to bad science but are part and parcel of documentary representation.

When we believe in something without conclusive proof of the validity of our belief, this becomes an act of faith. Documentary film often invites us to take on faith that "what you see is what there was." This act of faith may derive from the indexical capacity of the photographic image, but it is not fully justified by this quality; filmed reenactments are indexical after all. For the filmmaker, creating trust and getting us to suspend doubt or disbelief by rendering an *impression* of reality and hence truthfulness corresponds to the priorities of rhetoric more than the requirements of science. A documentary not only documents events but also conveys a distinct perspective. (In fact, some early newsreels embraced obviously staged reenactments that could not possibly be authentic records of actual events; however, they were still effective because there was no higher standard to hold newsreels to in this early period.) Storytelling and the three *C*'s (credible, convincing, and compelling discourse) urge us to accept the evidentiary value of images as proof of a perspective's validity; we may do so justifiably or, sometimes, at our own peril.

6.2. A slew of “mondo” films followed in the wake of *Mondo Cane*. The sense of spectacle and sensationalism goes back to early cinema and clearly carries over to contemporary reality TV shows such as *Survivor* and *Duck Dynasty*, which function to present a succession of fantastic images and scenes, as if to say little more than “isn’t that amazing!” *Mondo Cane* (Gualtiero Jacopetti and Franco E. Prosperi, 1962). Courtesy of National Screen Service Corporation.

Then there is spectacle. Spectacle also differs from documentary, but not absolutely. Although early cinema supported the scientific use of images, it also led to what film historian Tom Gunning termed a “cinema of attractions.” The cinema of attractions presented viewers with sensational sketches of exotic settings and unusual depictions of everyday occurrences. The term refers to circus attractions and their open delight in showing us a wide variety of unusual phenomena. That such phenomena were real—not invented solely to be filmed but part of what Grierson called “actuality”—only added to their appeal. Such attractions could both whet the curiosity and satisfy the passion of early cinematographers and audiences alike for images that represented the odder aspects of the world around them. A tone of exhibitionism prevailed that differed radically from looking in on a private, fictitious world, from generating scientific evidence, or from taking up a place among the discourses of sobriety to address the serious issues that confront society. Like scientific images, attractions held a different form of appeal from documentary representation. They took delight in the sensationalism of the strange, unusual, and exotic.

Just as scientific uses of the photographic image remain strong, aspects of the cinema of attractions linger on. It is vividly on display in a variety of films that poke into the underbelly of everyday life. We find it, for example, in “mondo” movies, beginning with *Mondo Cane* (1962), a worldwide tour of customs and practices treated as outrageous and bizarre with its catalog of august pet cemeteries, bare-breasted women chasing after men, and the mass slaughter of pigs, in different corners of the world. An incredulous tone of “can you believe this?” is in the air, often answered “I can’t believe it,” an admission derived from a mix of fascination and ridicule. These images drawn from the world around us sought to amuse, surprise, titillate, and shock rather than deliberate what to do, evaluate what happened, or explore individual lives (as the three divisions of rhetoric seek to do). The legacy of spectacle in the early cinema persists in the vast array of reality

TV shows that have proliferated since the 1990s, from *Queen for a Day* (1945–1964) to *Swamp People* (2010–).

Documentary and the Creation of an Institutional Base

The capacity of photographic images to render such a vivid impression of reality, especially movement as a vital aspect of life, was something that painting and sculpture had been unable to do. Although immensely captivating, this achievement did not herald the emergence of documentary per se. Four elements needed to converge for a distinct documentary voice to emerge, and the extraordinary fidelity of the indexical image to life itself was only one of them. The other three were narrative storytelling, avant-garde experimentation, and compelling rhetorical techniques. That is to say, documentary needed to integrate the basic forms of narrative, poetic, and rhetorical discourse before it could become a distinct type of cinema. We will return to these elements shortly.

These four elements only converged when there was an institutional base to support them. The silent Soviet cinema enjoyed the support of the state. It was the first well-supported base for documentary film production. In Great Britain, the persuasive skills of John Grierson established another governmental base for documentary filmmaking in the late 1920s. These achievements marked a radical shift from the cinema of attractions and the scientific use of indexical images. It put this type of filmmaking at the service of the state. Without an institutional base, there might be occasional films in a documentary spirit but not the outpouring of work that we have experienced since the late 1920s.

Grierson was a great admirer of the state-sponsored Soviet cinema of the 1920s, where newsreels, documentaries, and even most fiction films drew their stories from the pages of contemporary, revolutionary life. Dziga Vertov was the foremost champion of what would be called the documentary film, though, for him, such films were the essence of all true cinema. Like the observational filmmakers of the 1960s, Vertov eschewed all forms of scripting, staging, acting, or reenacting. He saw theater and the novel as outmoded, bourgeois forms. Vertov wanted to catch “life unawares” with his camera and then edit his footage into a vision of a new society as it emerged.

His own term for what cinema produced, *kinopravda* (film truth), insisted on a radical break with all theatrical and literary models for film. He argued that these narrative forms crippled the potential of cinema to construct a new visual reality, and with it a new social one. His weekly newsreels from 1918 to 1921 made on an agit-train that traveled the countryside to bring news about the civil war that followed the 1917 Revolution, his *kinopravda* series of reports on life in the postrevolutionary Soviet Union (1923–25), his first feature-length film, *Kino Glaz* (aka *Kino-Eye*, 1924), and his best-known film, *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929) all attest to his belief that the cinema could bring a new world of communitarian belonging into being as this transformation occurred in the here and now. His films would give affective embodiment to this new world. He was joined by others such as Victor Turin, who made *Turksib* (1929), about the huge effort to link Turkestan and Siberia by rail, and Mikhail Kalatazov, whose deliriously rhapsodic *Salt for Svanetia* (1930) celebrated the first road link between the isolated mountain region of Svanetia, in Georgia, with other parts of the Soviet Union.

Vertov's efforts and those of other Soviet filmmakers were heavily influenced by an earlier, prerevolutionary period of experimentation in the arts known as constructivism. Constructivism continued to flourish in the early years of the new Soviet state. This movement expressed a determination to remake the world anew. It called for extra attention to the material from which art is constructed, a tendency that later led to abstract expressionism. For Vertov, Rodchenko, Eisenstein, and others, it meant reflecting heavily on the cinematically unique power of editing, or montage, and nontraditional camera angles to stir the spectator and generate fresh insights. Unfortunately, by the mid-1930s, the great Soviet silent cinema slid into blatant propaganda once Stalin consolidated his power, resulting in formulaic work called socialist realism, which championed heroic workers and Stalin's leadership.

Inspired by the early, pioneering Soviet films, Grierson built a government-sponsored film unit similar to Sovkino, the government agency that oversaw all Soviet filmmaking, but with a more limited scope: he was no fan of Hollywood or fiction films in general and strove to make documentaries the most prestigious form of cinema. The film unit at Britain's Empire Marketing Board (1928–1933) became Grierson's initial

base before he eventually moved to the GPO film unit, part of the Government Post Office. Just as Soviet films strove to unite the people of the far-flung republics under one new revolutionary government, Grierson sought to produce documentary films that would explain and celebrate government policies to all the people of the British Commonwealth.

Grierson's government sponsorship in Britain was longer lasting and gained far greater support than Dziga Vertov earned or than Pare Lorentz would win in the mid-1930s United States, where political opposition to President Roosevelt's New Deal extended to Lorentz's films, such as *The Plow That Broke the Plains* (1936), which promoted it. Grierson secured the first truly stable niche for documentary film production, something now dispersed among television networks, cable channels, production companies, and various funding organizations. (Grierson later played a key role in establishing documentary traditions in Canada and India.)

The rise of an institutional base for documentary filmmaking fueled the emergence of the four constituents of documentary film discussed in chapter 2: a group of practitioners, an institutional framework, a body of films, and an audience attracted to these distinctive works. More than thirty years separate the discovery of the film image's incredibly accurate rendering of reality in 1895 and Grierson's crucial role in creating an institutional base for documentary. This huge gap suggests that cinema's amazing powers of indexical representation were an insufficient foundation on which to build a documentary tradition. Something more was needed.

The 1920s: Documentary Finds Its Legs

Neither an emphasis on spectacle (a cinema of attractions and its reality TV successors) nor on gathering visual evidence (scientific documentation), even though they rely on the indexical image, provided an adequate basis for documentary film. A direct line does not exist from Louis Lumière's train arriving in a station to Hitler arriving at Nuremberg in *Triumph of the Will* (1935) nor from the fascination with movement itself to fascination with moving audiences to see the world in a distinctive, nonsensational way. We continue to lack a sense of the filmmaker's voice as more than scientist or entertainer in these early tendencies.

As an institutional base arose in the 1920s, most notably in the Soviet Union and Great Britain, documentary film also coalesces as a distinct entity in its use of the following:

1. Indexical documentation (shared with scientific images and the cinema of attractions)
2. Poetic experimentation (shared with the avant-garde)
3. Narrative storytelling (shared with fiction filmmaking)
4. Rhetorical address (distinct to documentary and other persuasive forms)

The recognition of documentary as a distinct film form becomes less a question of the origin or evolution of these different elements than of their remarkable convergence in the 1920s and early 1930s. Having discussed the indexical image and the creation of an institutional base, we can now review how these three additional elements added to the potency of the indexical image.

Poetic Experimentation

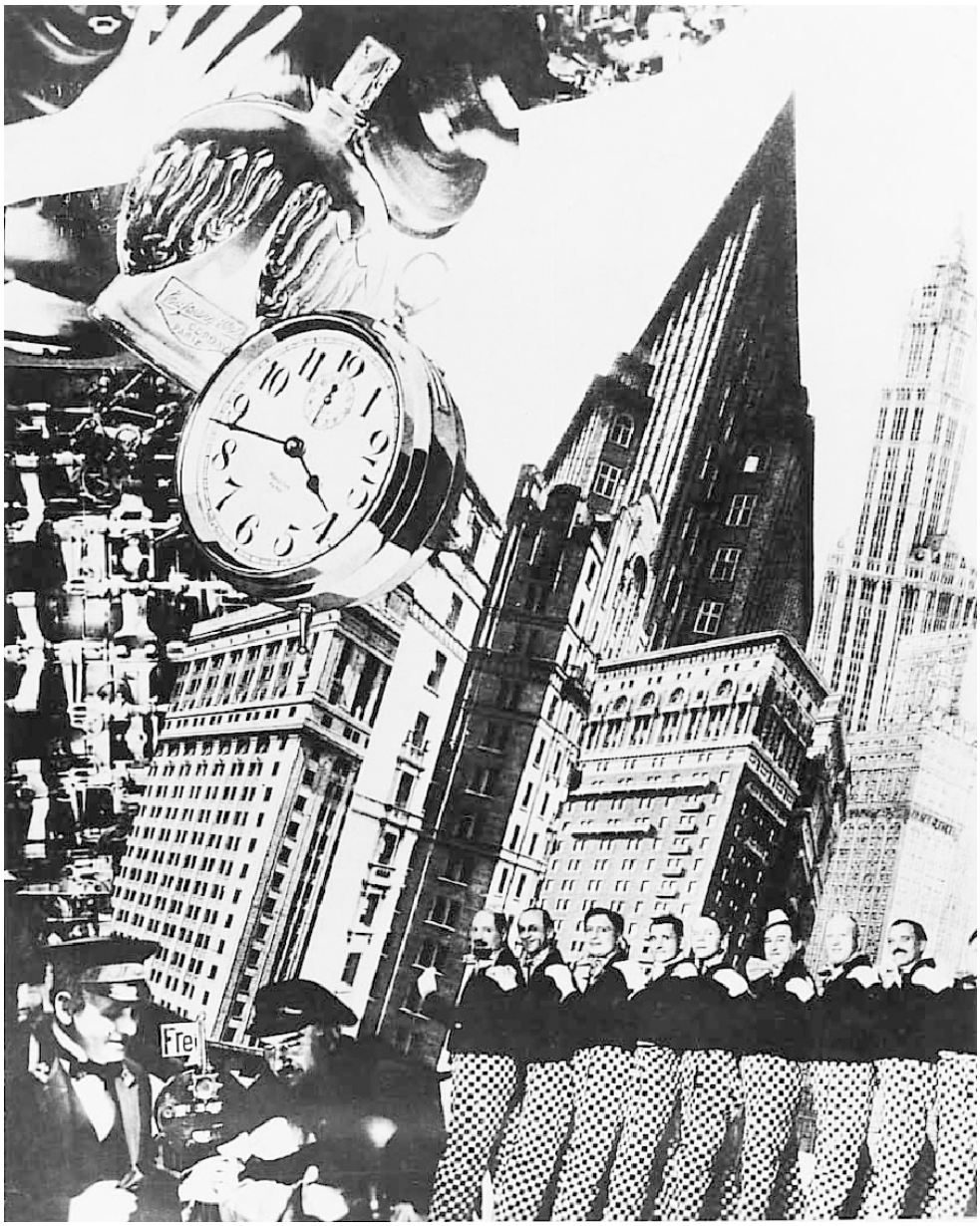
Poetic experimentation in cinema arises largely from the cross-fertilization between cinema and the modernist avant-garde traditions that flourished in the early part of the twentieth century (surrealism, dada, constructivism, expressionism, fauvism, futurism, etc.). The poetic potential of cinema, though, remains largely absent in the cinema of attractions, where displaying impressive if not sensational sights took precedence. Avant-grade practices are clearly absent from scientific imaging as well, where signs of individual expressiveness are anathema. (The science films of Jean Painlevé are an early exception.)

Classic examples of poetic filmmaking include Jean Epstein's *L'affiche* [The Poster] (1924); Abel Gance's *La roue* [The Wheel] (1923), Louis Delluc's *Fièvre* [Fever] (1921); Germaine Dulac's *The Smiling Madame Beudet* (1922); René Clair's *Paris qui dort* (1924); Joris Ivens's *The Bridge* (1928) and *Rain* (1929); Hans Richter's *Rhythmus 23*, (1923) and *Inflation* (1928); Viking Eggeling's *Diagonal Symphony* (1924); Marcel Duchamp's *Anémic Cinéma* (1926); Alexander Dovzhenko's *Zvenigora* (1928); Man

Ray's *Le retour á la raison* (1923); the surrealist collaborators Salvador Dalí and Luis Buñuel's *Un chien Andalou* (1929); and Jean Vigo's (*À propos de Nice*, (1930) and *Natation* (1931).

It was within the avant-garde, along with the fiction film, that a distinct point of view or voice took shape. This voice refused to subordinate personal perspective to spectacle or fact. Avant-garde work, though, frequently used photographic images of everyday reality and then modified them. (A few, such as Man Ray's "rayograms," were made without a lens by exposing undeveloped film to various objects.) Within the avant-garde, indexical images of a recognizable world quickly veered in directions other than fidelity to the object and realism as a style. The filmmaker's way of seeing things took higher priority than demonstrating the camera's ability to record what it saw faithfully and accurately. Realism was too tame a style, too bound up with how the world appeared to everyday perception. Something bolder and more disruptive was desired. Visible evidence of the tangible world became a vehicle for poetic expression.

To see the world anew, to make the familiar strange and the strange familiar. This idea sums up much of the avant-garde endeavor. Early avant-garde work provoked viewers to see the wonder in the every day. Man Ray's short film *Les mystères de château de Dé* (1929), for example, throws together oddly angled images of a car's drive to the mysterious chateau along with a disjointed exploration of the house and its strange inhabitants. Titles have a surreal quality and cause more puzzlement than clarification. But the chateau is real and the images are of what Grierson termed "actuality." The film plays with the idea of the travelogue, much as Buñuel would do in *Land without Bread* (1933). Later, Robert Flaherty, in a spirit not too different from the French impressionists, suggests what a sense of wonder can be like in a more full-fledged documentary when he begins *Louisiana Story* (1948) with a slow enchanting journey as seen by a young boy gliding through a Louisiana bayou in his pirogue. (Flaherty's film contrasts vividly with *Last Call for the Bayou* (Dominic Gill, 2021), where this region now suffers degradation due to human alterations to the natural environment.)



6.3. This publicity still for *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* uses photomontage to celebrate the dynamism and energy of the modern city but does so without the sharp political edge that photo and film montage achieved elsewhere in 1920s Germany and 1920s Soviet cinema and constructivist art. Montage can stress formal relationships or political associations. The editing of *Berlin*, like the photomontage in this still, opts for the poetic over the political. *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* (Walter Ruttmann, 1927).

The empirical ability of film to produce a photographic record of what it documented struck many avant-garde artists as a handicap if fetishized. If a magically perfect copy of reality was all that was desired, what room was left for the artist's desire to see the world anew? A film technician would

do. French impressionist theory in the 1920s celebrated what Jean Epstein termed *photogénie*, whereas Soviet film theory championed the concept of montage. *Photogénie* sought to shift film away from novels and theater, as Vertov also sought, to develop a rich, inclusive exploration of all possible film techniques and cultivate a unique sensitivity to the cinema as an art: "There are no stories, there never have been stories. There are only situations, having neither head not tail; without beginning, middle or end. I want films in which not so much nothing as nothing very much happens" (Jean Epstein, "The Senses," in Richard Abel, ed., *French Film Theory and Criticism*, vol. 1).

Montage and *photogénie* rejected both the mechanical reproduction of reality and literary storytelling in favor of the construction of something new in ways only cinema could accomplish. Both required the filmmaker to forge individual shots into a far greater whole that changed from a set of inert documents to a form of address, or discourse, that engaged the viewer. Such an impulse proved vital to the development of a documentary film tradition, which to this day strives to have us see the world in a fresh light.

The concepts of *photogénie* and montage allowed the filmmaker's voice to take center stage. Louis Delluc's 1921 short film, *Fièvre* (*Fever*), for example, explores the interpersonal dynamics of a motley but intriguing cast of characters in a bar; Walter Ruttmann's *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* (1927) investigates the diversity of daily life in Berlin unrelated to any clear social or political analysis of urban life. Dziga Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera*, by contrast, adopts a poetic but also reflexive voice to examine the transformative power of the urban masses as they, like the machinery of cinema, go about the business of producing a new postrevolutionary Soviet society.

The avant-garde flourished throughout Europe and Russia in the 1920s. Its emphasis on seeing things anew, through the eyes of the artist or filmmaker, had tremendous liberating potential. It freed cinema from replicating what came before the camera to celebrate how this "stuff" could become the raw material not only of science, spectacle, and narrative filmmaking but also of a poetic cinema.

Narrative Storytelling

The period after 1906 not only saw the emergence of a poetic avant-garde but also heralded the development of a dominant narrative cinema. Storytelling also plays a vital role in the rise of documentary film. Historical and commemorative documentaries and written histories and biographies, for example, usually take the form of nonfiction narratives, as in *The River* (1937), about the creation of the TVA, Tennessee Valley Authority, to prevent floods and generate electricity; *We Steal Secrets: The Story of Wikileaks* (Alex Gibney, 2013), about Julian Assange's rise and fall as a whistleblower; or *RBG* (2018), about the exceptional life of Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg. In narrative storytelling, style (from the style of individual filmmakers to group styles such as expressionism, neorealism, and surrealism) couples with plot (the sequence in which events unfold on the screen) to tell a story (assembled retrospectively from the plot), be it factual or fabricated. Nonfiction storytelling is a staple of documentary filmmaking.

What mattered most for the development of documentary was the adoption of uniquely cinematic storytelling techniques, from the parallel editing of D. W. Griffith to build suspense to the use of different camera lenses and camera distances to frame characters and events. Storytelling also elaborated the many ways in which an action or event could be told from different perspectives (from the perspective of an omniscient narrator, the perspective of a first-person observer, or the points of view of different social actors, for example). These perspectival options promoted the search for a voice with which to represent the historical world in ways that were not necessarily spoken but embedded in film form instead (editing, framing, music, lighting, and so forth).

Narrative perfects the sense of an ending by returning to problems posed at the beginning and resolving them. Narratives resolve conflict and achieve order, creating suspense while they do so, as many films vividly illustrate, such as *Touching the Void* (Kevin Macdonald, 2003), which recreates the harrowing struggle of an abandoned climber to save himself from certain death; *Man on Wire* (2008), with its heist-like tale of timing and courage that led to Phillipe Petit walking between the twin towers of the World Trade Center in 1974; and *Free Solo* (2018), with its culminating account of Alex Hannold's attempt to scale the sheer granite face of El Capitan in Yosemite National Park with no assistance of any kind. The

problem/solution and problem/no-solution-yet structure of many documentaries often makes use of narrative techniques to achieve resolution.

Storytelling techniques provide ways of elaborating a sense of character, not only through the performance of actors but through the techniques of lighting, composition, editing, reenactment, and interviews, among others, that can be readily applied to nonactors, as we see in the Maysles brothers' *Grey Gardens* (1975), as they get to know a quirky pair of upper-class, reclusive sisters, or Jaiyan Shi's *Finding Yingying* (2020), a film about the search for a missing woman that uses a rich variety of materials to convey who Yingying was as a person while also taking utterly unexpected turns that generate astonishment as well as suspense.

The technique of continuity editing to give a seamless sense of coherent time and space proved invaluable to documentaries from Fred Wiseman's *High School* (1968) to Peter Jackson's *Get Back* (2021). These films and others such as *Primary* (1960), *Salesman* (1969), or *To Be or to Have* (2002) that looked in on the lives of people as unobtrusively as if the films were fictions, depend heavily on continuity editing to remove the empty moments during which little happens in real-life interactions.

Even when documentaries turn to B-roll or evidentiary editing and the assembly of material from various times and places to support a train of thought, the techniques learned from narrative continuity editing facilitate the smooth flow of one image to another. From *Koyaanisqatsi* (1962) and its portrait of a world out of balance to Herzog's *The Cave of Forgotten Dreams* (2010), in which he explores the amazing trove of prehistoric paintings in the Chauvet cave in France, to *Oliver Sacks: His Own Life* (Ric Burns, 2020) and its multifaceted view of the renowned neurologist and author, seamless cuts between shots from different times and places contribute significantly to each film's impact.

The expansion of documentary film during World War II was enormous, especially for the United States and Great Britain. Many of the techniques of deliberative rhetoric explored by the silent Soviet cinema of the 1920s were brought to new levels and for clearly different purposes, as in Frank Capra's *Why We Fight* series (1942–45), which tried to explain what was at stake to newly inducted soldiers, or Humphrey Jennings and Stewart McAlister's *Listen to Britain* (1942), which gave poetic rendering to

civilian life in London as people coped with Germany's aerial attacks. Such films told stories about basic principles, like democracy, and basic qualities, like perseverance. They had a rhetorical purpose but relied heavily on storytelling techniques to achieve their goals.

6.4. The genius of Vittorio de Sica lay in drawing out stories that felt as if they were intimately tied to a concrete sense of time and place. This type of storytelling skill reverberated throughout the Italian neorealist film movement, with its use of location photography, nonactors, and stories of everyday life and basic survival. (The original Italian title correctly translates as *Bicycle Thieves*, but in keeping with a Hollywood emphasis on the individual, it was initially translated as *The Bicycle Thief*.) *Bicycle Thieves* (Vittorio De Sica, 1948). Courtesy of Kino Video.

The postwar period brought a fresh wave of vitality to documentary, largely through the impact of Italian neorealism. The neorealists made fiction films that eschewed attempts to evoke the quality of *photogénie* through extremes of stylization favored by the French impressionists. They avoided the expressionist techniques favored by German directors such as Robert Wiene (*The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, 1920), F. W. Murnau (*Nosferatu*, 1922), and Fritz Lang (*Metropolis*, 1927) that also modified the look of the image to suggest a distorted, unbalanced world of menacing forces and unstable personalities. The neorealists shunned the montage techniques favored by Soviet directors who juxtaposed shots to jar the spectator and produce new insights from how shots were brought together.

They coupled storytelling to the understated, observational purity of Lumière to achieve a narrative style of enduring significance, both for fiction and documentary filmmaking.

Neorealists such as Roberto Rossellini (*Rome, Open City*, 1945), Vittorio De Sica (*Bicycle Thieves*, 1948), and Luchino Visconti (*La terra trema*, 1948) stressed a casual, unadorned view of everyday life; a meandering, coincidence-laden series of actions and events; natural lighting and location shooting; a reliance on untrained actors; a rejection of costumes and close-ups that doted on the figures and faces of stars; and a stress on the problems confronting ordinary people in the present moment rather than the historical past or an imagined future. Here was an important strand of narrative filmmaking that contributed directly to the development of documentary.

This effort to discover what life had to offer when it is filmed simply and truly did not in fact produce a truth; rather, it evidenced a distinct narrative style. It is a style achieved by using specific but unassuming, definite but self-effacing, means. It corresponds to what amounts to one of three important ways in which the term *realism* applies to documentary film:

- *Photographic* or *indexical realism* authenticates or appears to authenticate what happens in front of a camera. The indexical quality of the image can generate a realism of time and place through location photography, long takes that capture a continuous stretch of time, and continuity editing that minimizes the distorting and subjective uses of editing favored by the avant-garde. Neorealism brought these qualities to a new level and made them available for documentary as well as fiction films.
- *Psychological realism* conveys the inner states of characters or social actors in plausible and convincing ways. A person's feelings of anxiety, happiness, anger, ecstasy, and so on appear accessible to the viewer. This calls for inventiveness on the part of the director, such as eliciting revealing expressions and gestures, holding a shot longer than usual, using close-ups expressively, adding suggestive music, or juxtaposing one image or sequence with another. A documentary

filmmaker with a strong feel for the dramatic qualities of a situation or event can achieve compelling examples of psychological realism. An example is in *Grizzly Man* when Werner Herzog holds a shot of Jewel, a good friend of Timothy Treadwell, the man who chose to live among grizzly bears, after she receives his watch from the coroner. When the action of handing the watch over is complete, nothing happens. For a moment. But Herzog continues to film. Then Jewel breaks down and sobs and we witness the emotional weight of the action that has already concluded.

- *Emotional realism* results from creating an appropriate emotional state in the viewer. A stirring musical number can generate a feeling of exuberance in the audience even though there is little psychological depth provided to the characters and the physical setting is clearly a fabrication. We recognize a realistic dimension to the experience of exuberance or other emotions: the emotion itself is familiar and genuinely felt. Marching music, for example, often produces a sense of emotional realism in both fiction and documentary films dealing with war. Many silent films, including documentaries, gain immeasurably from emotionally resonant music.

In summary, the neorealist style of storytelling, along with the poetic experiments of the avant-garde, enhanced the expressive possibilities of documentary filmmaking enormously. Films like *The Exiles* (Kent Mackenzie, 1961), about Native Americans living marginal lives in Los Angeles, and *Philly D.A.* (Ted Passon, Yoni Brook, Nicola Salazar, 2021), a PBS series that observes a new district attorney in Philadelphia as he tries to introduce major reforms, owe considerable debt to this narrative tradition. So do many ethnographic films that attempt to represent the lived reality of other cultures, like *N!ai: The Story of a !Kung Woman* (John Marshall, 1980), the portrait of a woman the filmmaker had known through several decades of filming; *Wedding Camels* (1980), which observes the negotiation of bridewealth among the Turkana fathers of the bride and groom; and *Honeyland* (2019), with its portrait of a disappearing way of life in North Macedonia.

Rhetorical Address

Rhetoric in all its forms and all its purposes provides the final distinguishing element of documentary. The recorders of fact, promoters of attractions, tellers of stories, and poets of film coalesce into the figure of the documentary filmmaker as an orator, speaking in his or her own voice compellingly about the world we share.

The tools of rhetorical address seek to identify the most effective ways of addressing questions of what to do, what really happened, or what someone or something was really like. It seeks to address an audience and persuade it of the merits of a perspective, to predispose viewers to action, or to have them become immersed in the sensibilities and values promoted by the orator, or filmmaker. Such a voice was clearly heard in Robert Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* as it had been by a smaller audience for the important photographer Edward S. Curtis's 1914 film *In the Land of the Head Hunters* (restored and reissued in 1972 as *In the Land of the War Canoes*). Curtis's film, like Flaherty's, combined elements of a cinema of attractions with a narrative story, the poetic orchestration of scenes and an oratorical voice to affirm his distinct perspective on the vanishing world of traditional, precontact Native American culture. Just as plot, character development, suspense, and style matter in a fiction film, offering a credible, convincing, compelling treatment of reality matters for the documentary.

Along with Flaherty's *Moana* (1926), about Polynesian culture, other early works such as Merian C. Cooper and Ernest B. Schoedsack's *Grass: A Nation's Battle for Life* (1925), about the nomadic peoples of Turkey and Persia; Victor A. Turin's *Turksib* (1929), on the construction of an important new rail link between far-flung parts of the Soviet Union; and Jean Vigo's *À propos de Nice* (1930), a sardonic look at class differences at this famous beach resort, affirmed the vitality of the documentary voice that spoke about the historical world engagingly. These films addressed viewers as members of a shared reality and sought to compel belief in their distinct perspectives.

These elements first came together in the Soviet Union as the challenge of constructing a new society took precedence over detached, primarily aesthetic accomplishment. A similar impetus to use the cinema to speak

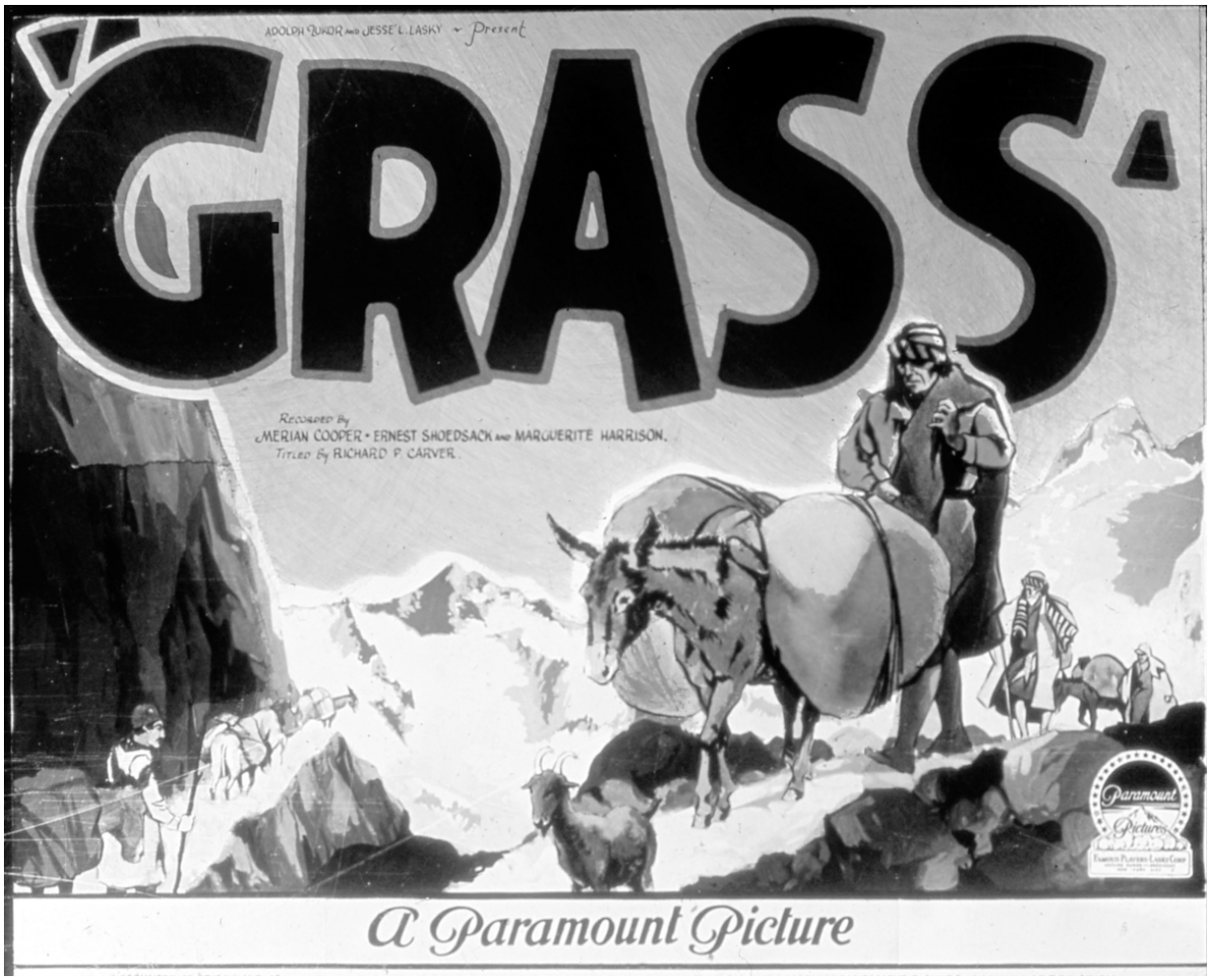
about a shared reality soon arose in other countries in the late 1920s and early 1930s as governments saw the value of using film to promote a sense of participatory citizenship and to support the role of a ruling party's policies in confronting the most difficult issues of the day, such as inflation, poverty, and the Great Depression. Answers to these problems varied widely from democratic Britain to fascist Germany and from the bootstrap support for the hard-pressed American people embodied in the American New Deal to the collectivized farming and massive industrialization imposed in Russia. In each case, however, the voice of the documentarian contributed significantly to framing a national agenda and a common course of action.

6.5. The two men who made this film later produced *King Kong* and other films. The woman, Marguerite Harrison, shown sitting between the two men, was a pioneering journalist who had spied for the United States in Europe after World War I and published several books. She plays a reporter in the film as the trio sets out to depict the life of the nomadic Bakhtyari, mainly in modern-day Iran. *Grass: A Nation's Battle for Life* (Merian C. Cooper and Ernest B. Schoedsack, 1925). Courtesy of Milestone Film and Video.

As we have seen, Dziga Vertov championed an attitude of bold poetic reconfiguration toward the world around him, one in the process of

revolutionary change. Editing and the interval (the effect of the transitions between shots) formed the core of his form of nonfiction cinema, called *kino-eye*:

- Editing during observation—orienting the unaided eye at any place, any time
- Editing after observation—mentally organizing what has been seen according to characteristic features
- Editing during filming—orienting the aided eye of the movie camera in the place inspected in the first step
- Editing after filming—roughly organizing the footage according to characteristic features; looking for the montage fragments that are lacking
- Gauging by sight (hunting for montage fragments)—instantaneous orienting in any visual environment so as to capture the essential link shots; exceptional attentiveness; a military rule: gauging by sight, speed, attack
- The final editing—revealing minor, concealed themes together with the major ones; reorganizing all the footage into the best sequence; bringing out the core of the film-object; coordinating similar elements, and finally, numerically calculating the montage groupings. (Dziga Vertov, “Kino-Eye,” in *Kino-Eye: The Writings of Dziga-Vertov*, ed. Annette Michelson [1985], 72)



6.6. This original poster for the film demonstrates how graphic design can evoke a spirit of adventure in an exotic, distant land, perhaps better than a photographic image from the film itself. *Grass: A Nation's Battle for Life* (Merian C. Cooper and Ernest B. Schoedsack, 1925). Courtesy of Milestone Film and Video.

Vertov's writings address issues of film form, specifically editing, the assembly of shots into a pattern that both unveils less visible aspects of the world and generates fresh insight into the relationships among people, social practices, and the uses of power, including the power of the cinema. These efforts affirm the voice of the filmmaker as one that addresses us about our historical reality. The call for montage often assumes indexical documentation but moves beyond finding attractions or making scientific observations. Soviet theories of constructivist art and cinematic montage harnessed the power of formal expression to a collective desire to remake the world in the image of a radical new philosophy (communism).

Music, titles, and editing contributed to the compelling quality of early Soviet fiction and documentary films. *Man with a Movie Camera* shown without music feels vastly different from when it is shown with music, such as the captivating score by the Alloy Orchestra. As with other silent films, a great score can bring the film alive emotionally as its rhythms impart a vibrant heartbeat to the images. Vertov's works were mainly composed of evidentiary images drawn from various parts of the Soviet empire to further his point of view. It meant that scenes can feel less coherent when there is no music and strikingly more coherent when there is.

6.7. The family: this group portrait of the Meschersky family from 1912, in prerevolutionary Russia, affirms both their kinship and good standing within the Russian aristocracy. The prince: in the 1990s, Prince Meschersky decides to reclaim his family estate from the government and restore it. *The Prince Is Back* (Marina Goldovskaya, 1999). Courtesy of Marina Goldovskaya.

6.8. The estate: this model suggests how the prince's palace looked before the 1917 Russian Revolution. The problem: it's now eighty-plus years after the revolution. Can one man and his family restore what's left of the family home? Can a country move forward if its citizens want to go backward? Marina Goldovskaya raises larger issues only implicitly in her intimate portrait of the prince's pursuit of a dream. *The Prince Is Back* (Marina Goldovskaya, 1999). Courtesy of Marina Goldovskaya.

Titles played a similar role, cementing the film's message and also rendering it in a form that was as much a display of graphic design as of literal content. The concluding moments of *Turksib*, for example, have titles to tell us the one-thousand-mile railroad bringing Turkmenistan's grain to Siberia was completed in 1930, but rather than state a fact, the film dramatizes it by placing titles, all in bold caps, between shots of whirling railroad wheels something like this—where each line of print here represents one of the titles juxtaposed between shots of the train steaming to its destination:

BECAUSE
IN 1930
IN THE YEAR
THIRTY
TURKSIB
TURK
SIB
BECAUSE
TURKSIB
WAS
COMPLETED

The entire silent Soviet cinema was a vividly rhetorical cinema. It sought to remake the cinema in keeping with the spirit of the Russian revolution when it was in its exciting infancy and full of promises of a life vastly different from what the czar had imposed. In the work of many of its practitioners, from the famous films of Sergei Eisenstein, such as *Strike* (1925), *Battleship Potemkin* (1925), *October: Ten Days That Shook the World* (1927), *The Old and the New* (1929), to the lesser-known but pioneering compilation documentaries of Esther Shub, such as *The Great Road* (1927) and *The Russia of Nicholas II and Leo Tolstoy* (1928), to the poetic celebration of the struggles of a collective farm in Alexander Dovzhenko's *Earth* (1930) or his later *Ukraine in Flames* (1943), a powerful lament conveyed by a lyrical voice-over for the utter destruction

of his homeland at the hands of the Nazi invaders, rhetorical techniques contributed significantly to the rise of this new distinctive form.

By the late 1920s, as the indexical power of sound and images joined with poetic tactics that saw the world anew, narrative strategies that engaged the viewer in the outcome of a story, and rhetorical methods that spoke about the world credibly, convincingly, and compellingly, documentary film assumed its place among the established forms of cinema.