Documentary

A HISTORY OF THE NON-FICTION FILM

Revised Edition

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Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory, 1895. Filmed by Louis Lumière.
Museum of Modern Art

Prophet

The inventors of cinema, who were legion, included diverse showmen, and others with interests far from showmanship. Some of these were scientists 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.

Thus the French astronomer Pierre Jules César Janssen wanted a record of Venus passing across the sun, an event of 1874. He developed what he called a *revolver photographique*—a cylinder-shaped camera in which a photographic plate revolved. The camera automatically took pictures at short intervals, each on a different segment of the plate. The result—photographed by Janssen in Japan—was not yet a motion picture, but it was a step in that direction, and it gave ideas to others. For Janssen the important thing was: it documented the event.[1]

About the same time the English-born Eadweard Muybridge was doing experiments sponsored by Leland Stanford, former Governor of California. Stanford, a horse-breeder, sensed that the devices used by his trainers to improve gait and speed were based on imprecise knowledge of how a horse runs. Muybridge, already a celebrated photographer, undertook to provide data. He placed a series of cameras—at first twelve, later several times that many—side by side along a track. From these cameras, parallel threads ran across the track. A horse galloping through them clicked the cameras in swift succession. The photos gave information on each stage of the gallop.

The study of animal motion became an obsession for Muybridge. By 1880 he had learned to project sequences of his photos with an adaptation of the magic lantern, and thus to present a galloping horse on a screen—at various possible speeds. The results were eye-opening to many who saw them. Muybridge had foreshadowed a crucial aspect of the documentary film: its ability to open our eyes to worlds available to us but, for one reason or another, not perceived. Muybridge applied the technique to numerous animals and later to men and women—athletes, dancers, and others, sometimes photographed in lovely nude sequences. These often evoked the poetry of ordinary, familiar actions: a woman stooping to pick up a jug. Such painters as

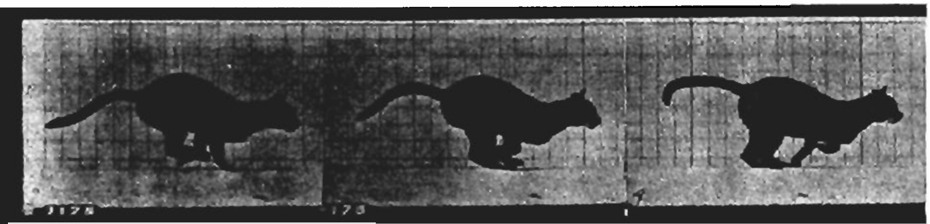
Muybridge sequences—from *Animal Locomotion,* published 1888.

Thomas Eakins and Jean Louis Ernest Meissonier began to use Muybridge's work as a guide in depicting figures in motion.[2]

The celebrated French physiologist Étienne Jules Marey followed the work of Janssen and Muybridge with intense interest. Having seen a Muybridge galloping-horse projection, Marey wanted to do similar work with bird-flight, but birds could hardly be made to trip a series of threads on a pre-selected route. So Marey followed Janssen's lead, devising a *fusil photographique,* a photographic gun, with which he could follow a bird in flight while "shooting" at split-second intervals. At first, as in Janssen's camera, the photos were successive images on the same glass plate; but in 1887 he switched to strips of photographic paper and the following year to celluloid strips, putting forty images on one strip. Besides birds in flight, he "shot" such phenomena as a cat falling backwards from a height and landing on its feet. He too learned to project the results on a screen. He was approaching motion picture technology, but his embryo documentaries were scarcely three or four seconds long.

Georges Demeny, who began as assistant to Marey, was especially interested in problems of the deaf. He felt deaf people could be taught to lip-read, perhaps to speak, if they could see over and over the characteristic mouth movements connected with sounds. So in 1892, with his own adaptation of Marey's equipment, he began to shoot and project close-ups of mouths articulating short phrases—"Vive la France" or "Je vous aime." Again an experimenter with special interests provided intimations of things a documentary film might be and do.[3]

The achievements of these and other experimenters were widely



heralded. It remained for protean professional inventors like Thomas Alva Edison and Louis Lumière—racing against scores of other inventors throughout the world—to develop the experiments into a commercial reality and an industry. Edison began the process; Lumière and others carried it forward.

To some extent, Edison shared the documentary ardor of the early experimenters. Before he created his peep-show *kinetoscope*—launched with explosive but short-lived success in 1894—he had met Muybridge and Marey and discussed their work with them. He himself often spoke of the archival and instructional value of motion pictures and sound recordings—in education and business. But in practice his film work quickly took a "show business" direction. In the end it was Louis Lumière who made the *documentary* film a reality—on a worldwide basis, and with sensational suddenness.

The reason why Lumière and not Edison played this key role is rooted in sharp contrasts between their technical inventions. The camera with which Edison began film production was an unwieldy monster; several men were needed to move it. Also, Edison was intent on integrating the invention with another Edison specialty, electricity, to ensure an even speed of operation. For both these reasons, the Edison camera was at first anchored in the tarpaper-covered studio called "the Black Maria," built at West Orange, N.J. This camera did not go out to examine the world; instead, items of the world were brought before it—to perform. Thus Edison began with a vaudeville parade: dancers, jugglers, contortionists, magicians, strong men, boxers, cowboy rope-twirlers. They appeared at a fixed distance from the camera, usually against a black background, deprived of any context or environment.

Library of Congress

Serpentine Dance—performed by Annabelle. Filmed in the Black Maria for Edison's peep-show kinetoscope, 1894.
Library of Congress

The Louis Lumière camera, on the other hand—the *cinématographe,* launched in 1895—was totally different. It weighed only five kilograms; according to film historian Georges Sadoul, this was about a hundredth of the weight of the Edison camera. The *cinématographe* could be carried as easily as a small suitcase. Handcranked, it was not dependent on electricity. The world outdoors—which offered no lighting problems, at least during the day—became its habitat. It was an ideal instrument for catching life on the run—"sur le vif," as Lumière put it.

A remarkable fact about this small box—a trim hardwood item of much elegance—was that it could with easy adjustments be changed into a projector, and also into a printing machine. This meant that an *opérateur* with this equipment was a complete working unit: he could be sent to a foreign capital, give showings, shoot new films by day, develop them in a hotel room, and show them the same night. In a sudden global eruption, Lumière operators were soon doing precisely that throughout the world.[4]

Louis Lumière, first magnate and major prophet of documentary film, was the son of Antoine Lumière, a painter who had turned to portrait photography, photographing well-to-do clients against backdrops he had painted. Louis and his brother Auguste received a technical education, but Louis left school at an early age because of severe headaches, and took up laboratory work for his father. While still a teenager he invented a new procedure for preparing photographic plates, which gave such startingly fine results that the Lumières began to manufacture plates for others, using the new formula. Soon the family sold the photo studio and on the outskirts of Lyon organized a factory to manufacture plates. Louis designed the equipment and supervised every detail of the installation. By 1895 the factory had 300 workers, sold fifteen million dry plates a year, and was the leading European manufacturer of photographic products—surpassed internationally only by the Eastman plant in Rochester, N.Y. The elder Lumière now lived in semi-retirement, painting landscapes. Louis and Auguste produced further inventions, always patented in both their names, although in the case of the *cinématographe* Louis was the sole inventor, having worked out all the problems during one night of insomnia near the end of 1894.

In March 1895, at a meeting in Paris to promote French industries, Louis Lumière demonstrated his invention with the short film *Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory* (*La Sortie des Usines*).* In June he gave a demonstration at a photographic meeting in Lyon. This time he photographed convention members—they included the astronomer Janssen—as they arrived by river steamer; next day, at the meeting, he let them see themselves disembarking. The familiar, seen anew in this way, brought astonishment. Other closed showings were held for scientists in Paris and a photography assemblage in Brussels.

A public unveiling was planned, but Louis Lumière held this off until late in December 1895. Early in the year he had placed an order with the engineer Jules Carpentier for twenty-five *cinématographes.* Throughout the year Carpentier was at work, in constant consultation with Louis Lumière. Every secret of the apparatus was meanwhile guarded: the only existing *cinématographe* was the one used at the demonstrations. All films shown and shot during 1895 were made with this equipment by the Lumière brothers themselves—almost all by Louis.

The films made during this year numbered several dozen, all about a minute long—at the moment, this was the maximum length of a reel. They included several films that were soon to be world famous. One of the most successful was Louis Lumière's *Arrival of a Train*

* In this volume titles will be translated into English where advisable for clarity, with the original title supplied in parentheses when the film is first mentioned. Many Lumière films were shown under a number of different titles; the French titles here used are as they appeared in Lumière catalogues.

Lumière's *Arrival of the Conventioners,* 1895. Leading the way, astronomer Janssen.

Cinémathèque Française

(*L'Arrivée d'un Train en Gare*), filmed at La Ciotat in southern France—the first of many such "arrival" films. In this we see a train approach, from long-shot to close-up. The camera is placed on the platform near the edge of the track. The arrival of the train—virtually "on camera"—made spectators scream and dodge. As we see passengers leave the train, some pass close to the camera, seemingly unaware of it. The use of movement from a distance toward the viewer, and the surprising depth of field in the sequence, offered audiences an experience quite foreign to the theater, and different from anything in the Black Maria performances.

While a few of these early films involved deliberate performances for the camera, such as *Feeding the Baby* (*Le Repas de Bébé*) and *Watering the Gardener* (*L'Arroseur Arrosée*),* most were "actuality" items. None used actors; Louis Lumière rejected the theater as a model for motion pictures. He presented instead a panorama of

* In this renowned little film, a boy steps on a garden hose being used by a gardener. When the gardener examines the nozzle to see what is wrong, the boy withdraws his foot and the gardener is drenched. Some regard it as the first fiction film.

French life that grows more fascinating as the years recede: fishermen and their nets; a boatride; swimmers; firemen at work; men sawing and selling firewood in a city street; a bicycle lesson; the demolition of a wall; children at the seaside; a blacksmith at work; a potato-sack race at a Lumière employees' picnic. The events are small but vivid.

In mid-December of 1895 Carpentier began delivering to Lumière the *cinématographes* ordered early in the year. Manufacturing methods had been developed, and Lumière now ordered 200 more. A world-wide offensive was in the making.

The training of *opérateurs* was meanwhile beginning. In the film *Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory* a youth with a cap is seen leaving on a bicycle. He was Francis Doublier, and he was chosen to be one of the first of the Lumière world travelers; soon he would film the Tsar of Russia. Another was Alexandre Promio, to be sent to Spain, Italy, and elsewhere. Another was Félix Mesguich, an Algerian youth just completing military service with the Zouaves. He visited the Lumière factory looking for a job, was interviewed by Louis Lumière himself, and was hired. He knew nothing of photography, but this did not seem to trouble Lumière, who apparently felt Mesguich had the proper personality and precision of mind. His training, and that of several dozen others, began promptly at Lyon.

With equipment and personnel for world exploitation assured, Louis Lumière was finally ready for the première run in Paris. It began on December 28, 1895, in the Salon Indien—a room in the basement of the Grand Café on the Boulevard des Capucines, with its own entrance from the street. Louis and Auguste did not attend. They had delegated arrangements for this première to their father, Antoine, who was glad to emerge from semi-retirement for the ceremonial occasion. The brothers were busy with preparations for larger events.

The run began quietly, with little advance notice, but soon queues waited at every performance. The Salon Indien, which seated 120 people, was soon giving twenty shows a day, at half-hour intervals. At one franc a ticket, receipts ran to 2500 francs a day. To meet the overflowing demand the Lumières began showings at additional locations. By the end of April, four concurrent Lumière programs were running in Paris. One developed into a permanent cinema.

Fishermen . . .

Embarkation . . .

Swimmers . . .

Photos from Library of Congress

Among those at the first performance was the magician Georges Méliès. He at once expressed ardent interest in buying a *cinématographe* but was put off with various excuses by the elder Lumière. Within two months the Lumières had more than 100 purchase offers, including many from abroad. They were answered with a form letter, stating that a date for the sale of equipment had not been set. For the immediate future other plans were afoot.

Starting in February in London, an avalanche of foreign *cinématographe* premières began. Within six months after the Paris opening the *cinématographe* was launched by the Lumière organization in England, Belgium, Holland, Germany, Austria, Hungary, Switzerland, Spain, Italy, Serbia, Russia, Sweden, the United States—and soon thereafter in Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt, Turkey, India, Australia, Indochina, Japan, Mexico. Within two years Lumière operators were roaming on every continent except Antarctica.[5]

A triumphant opening in a foreign metropolis followed by a run of weeks or months became a normal sequence. Foreign concessionaires shared in the revenue, but only Lumière operators handled the equipment. Their instructions warned them to reveal its secrets to no one, not even kings and beautiful women. Invited to a banquet, a Lumière operator took his *cinématographe* with him and kept it between his feet. Showings generally began at a small theater or a hotel, earning quick revenue. In a number of cities, success prompted a move to a larger location or additional screenings elsewhere.

Meanwhile—a spectacular feature—operators filmed new items and soon announced a "change of program" with local events. The filming of these was done as publicly as possible; the idea was to lure people to the shows in hope of seeing themselves—which they sometimes did. In any event, the local items were often the high spot of the run: in Spain, *Arrival of the Toreadors* (*Arrivée des Toréadors*); in Russia, *Coronation of Nicholas II* (*Couronnement du Tzar*); in Australia, *Melbourne Races* (*Les Courses*)—all 1896 products. To local audiences they seemed ultimate proof that the *cinématographe* was no "trick."

At Lumière headquarters in Lyon the arrival of such material from abroad rapidly enriched the catalogue, so that operators went forth with increasingly international assortments. The Lumière program

Lumière poster, Krakow, 1896.

shown by operator Félix Mesguich at Proctor's Pleasure Palace in New York in March 1897 included:[6]

The Baby's First Lesson in Walking
The Electrical Carriage Race from Paris to Bordeaux
A Gondola Scene in Venice
The Charge of the Austrian Lancers
Fifty-ninth Street, Opposite Central Park
A Scene near South Kensington, London
The Fish Market at Marseilles, France
German Dragoons Leaping the Hurdles
(also a reverse view of this picture)
A Snow Battle at Lyon, France
Negro Minstrels Dancing in the London Streets
A Sack Race Between Employees of Lumière & Sons' Factory, Lyon
The Bath of Minerva, at Milan, Italy
(also a droll effect obtained by reversing the film)

In 1897 the *cinématographe* was already giving its audiences an unprecedented sense of seeing the world.

By the end of that year some hundred Lumière operators at work throughout the world had swelled the Lumière collection to more than 750 films. In advertisements and press releases "Lumière" and "*cinématographe*" were always featured; the name of the operator seldom appeared in print. Thus the creators of many Lumière films are not known. A fire destroyed pertinent company records. Louis Lumière in later years recalled the names of some of the operators; others are mentioned in memoirs—their own or those of others. Thus we know that Maurice Sestier went to India, then on to Australia. Félix Mesguich handled screenings in various French cities, then was sent to the United States, and later did service in Russia. Alexandre Promio ranged widely, with early activity in Spain, Italy, Switzerland, Turkey. Latin America was opened by operators Porta and Tax. Francis Doublier, accompanied by Charles Moisson, launched the program in Russia, and later traveled widely in Asia, ultimately settling in the United States.

The Russian tour of duty involved extraordinary and tragic events.

NEW ADVERTISEMENTS.

THE MARVEL OF THE CENTURY.
THE WONDER OF THE WORLD.
LIVING PHOTOGRAPHIC PICTURES
IN
LIFE-SIZED REPRODUCTIONS
BY
MESSRS. LUMIERE BROTHERS.
CINEMATOGRAPHE.
A FEW EXHIBITIONS WILL BE GIVEN
AT
WATSON'S HOTEL
TO-NIGHT (7TH instant).
PROGRAMME will be as under:
1. Entry of Cinematographe.
2. Arrival of a Train.
3. The Sea Bath.
4. A Demolition.
5. Leaving the Factory.
6. Ladies and Soldiers on Wheels.
The Entertainment will take place at 6, 7, 9, and 10 p.m.
ADMISSION ONE RUPEE.

SPECIAL SHORT ADVERTISEMENTS.

Lumière advertisement, *Times of India,* July 7, 1896.
Asiatic Society of Bombay

Two days after filming the coronation of Nicholas II, Doublier prepared to shoot another occasion: presentation of the new Tsar to his people, who would receive souvenirs. Hundreds of thousands gathered for this purpose. A murderous crush developed as they pressed forward in impatience, and were thrust back by battalions of police. Then the boards over two huge cisterns gave way, and large numbers of people fell to their deaths. In the resulting panic, countless others were trampled to death. From a near-by roof Doublier watched in horror. He later described the experience.

When we came to our senses we began to film the horrible scene. We had brought only five or six of the 60-foot rolls, and we used up three of these on the shrieking, milling, dying mass around the Tsar's canopy where we had expected to film a very different scene. I saw the police charging the crowd in an effort to stop the tidal wave of human beings. We were completely surrounded and it was only two hours later that we were able to

think about leaving the place strewn with mangled bodies. Before we could get away the police spotted us, and added us to the bands of arrested correspondents and witnesses. All our equipment was confiscated and we never saw our precious camera again.[7]

Presumably, the film was destroyed. Some observers estimated the death-toll at 5000. No word of the disaster appeared in the Russian press.

For the wandering operators, improvisation became a habit. Because they handcranked, in shooting and projection, they quickly learned the uses—comic, dramatic, symbolic—of slowed or speeded motion. During projection a sequence could also be reversed, for amusing or meaningful effect. This device was used early in the Salon Indien: a wall was razed, then put itself together again. This became a standard feature in *cinématographe* showings. Promio, in Venice, photographed famous edifices from a moving gondola, creating highly acclaimed traveling shots. These became a model for scores of shots by Lumière operators from moving trains, carriages, trams, and other vehicles. In the Lumière catalogue they were called "panoramas." There was even a sequence from a rising elevator.

A Lumière operator could expect triumphs and tribulations. At the Taj Mahal Hotel in Bombay, in mid-1896, an Australian portrait photographer, Walter Barnett, came upon the disconsolate Maurice Sestier, the Lumière representative. Sestier had launched the *cinématographe* with enormous success in Bombay at Watson's Hotel and the Novelty Theater—featuring "Reserved Boxes for Purdah Ladies and Their Families"—but he had a blistering letter from the home office in Lyon: the items Sestier had shot in Bombay were regarded as incompetent and unusable. None were placed in the Lumière catalogue. Later in Australia—where Barnett became associated with him—Sestier was notably more successful with his *Melbourne Races.*[8]

The moments of triumph could be sweet. Mesguich, finishing his first American projection in June 1896 at the B. F. Keith Music Hall in New York, was at first terrified to find crowds hammering on his improvised booth. Opening the door, he found himself seized bodily and carried to the stage amid deafening shouts and applause as the orchestra played "The Marseillaise." Mesguich recounted in his memoirs: *"Ovation grandiose! Inoubliable! Inoubliable!"*[9]

At the end of 1897, with the same suddenness with which the world-wide exploitation had begun, the Lumière company announced

Francis Doublier. Photographed in 1945, with an 1896 *cinématographe*.

Sadoul collection

Félix Mesguich.

a change in policy. The company would discontinue its world demonstration tours, and would proceed to sell its equipment to any one who wished to buy. The Lumières would thenceforth concentrate on manufacture and sale—of *cinématographes,* raw film, and films in the Lumière catalogue. Thus a strange and dizzying chapter ended.

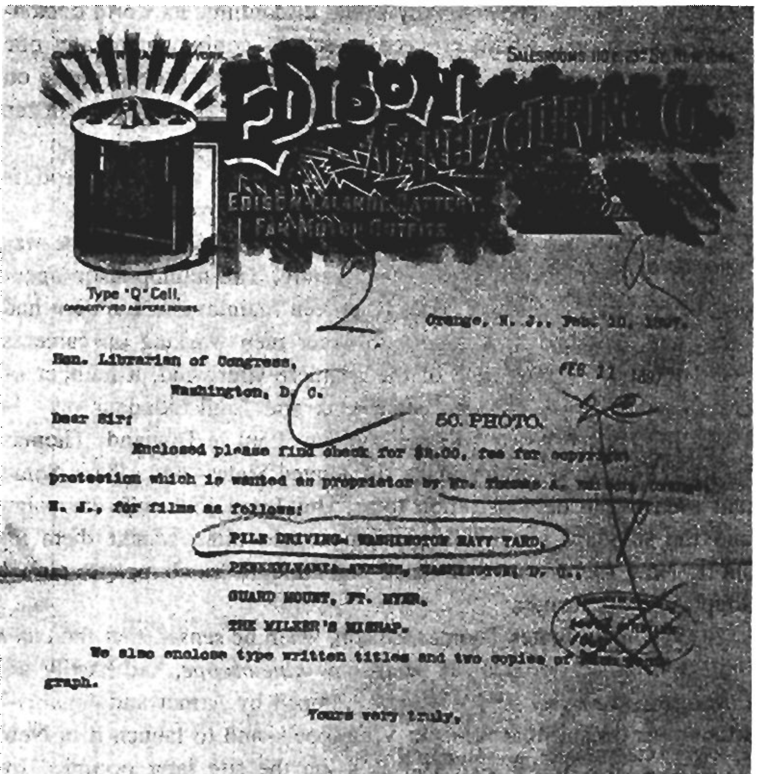
It meant the early withdrawal of the Lumières from film production. Within a few years their catalogue was taken over by others.

All this may have been as Louis Lumière had planned it: he was most at home in research and manufacture. The monopolistic opening drive could not in any case have been maintained. Lumière had been in a neck-and-neck race with other men working on cameras and projectors. At the time of the Lumière whirlwind, a number of these had achieved some success: Max and Emil Skladanowsky in Germany; Birt Acres and Robert William Paul in England; Thomas Armat and C. Francis Jenkins in the United States—and others. Some had even begun demonstration tours. But Lumière's swift campaign and the standard set by his equipment and films caught them all short. Now there was a frenzied scramble to catch up—to pirate, adapt, imitate, surpass.

In the United States Thomas Edison, when he sensed that the *cinématographe* had doomed his peep-show *kinetoscope,* had hastily arranged to take over the projector developed by Armat and Jenkins—which thus became the "Edison Vitascope"—and to launch it in New York at Koster & Bial's Music Hall—on the site later occupied by Macy's department store—two months before the *cinématographe* reached the United States. The Vitascope was also, almost instantly, dispatched on foreign promotion tours, vying with the *cinématographe* and with others. World struggles now became fierce and often violent. Lumière had made clear the possibilities of profit.

Throughout the world new enterprises sprang up. In the United States, Edison was confronted by Biograph, Vitagraph, Essanay, Selig, Lubin, Kalem; in France it was Méliès, Pathé, Gaumont; in England, Urban, Hepworth, Williamson; in Italy, Ambrosio, Cines, Itala; in Germany, Messter; in Denmark, Nordisk; in Russia, Drankov; in India, Madan; Japan had its own M. Pathe—inspired by, but unrelated to, the French Pathé brothers.

Some of these companies were founded by former peep-show operators; others, by alumni of traveling shows. Most entrepreneurs, including Edison, sought or built portable equipment for field work.



Type "Q" Cell.

Orange, N. J., Feb. 10, 1897.

FEB 11 1897

Hon. Librarian of Congress,

Washington, D. C.

Dear Sir:

50. PHOTO.

Enclosed please find check for $[illegible], fee for copyright protection which is wanted as proprietor by Mr. Thomas A. [illegible], Orange, N. J., for films as follows:

PILE DRIVING– WASHINGTON NAVY YARD,

PENNSYLVANIA AVENUE, WASHINGTON, D. C.,

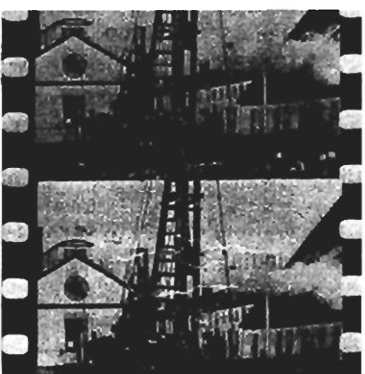
GUARD MOUNT, FT. MYER,

THE MILKER'S MISHAP.

We also enclose type written titles and two copies of [illegible]graph.

Yours very truly,

Copyright application, 1897. The Edison company began the practice of submitting a *paper* print of an entire film—as a "photograph"—for copyright protection. The paper strips survived the nitrate films; much of our knowledge of early films is based on new negatives made in recent years from these paper strips. This copyright procedure lasted until 1912, when an amendment to the copyright law made special provisions for films. See Niver, *Motion Pictures from the Library of Congress Paper Print Collection 1894–1912.*



Pile Driving—Washington Navy Yard, 1897. From the Edison paper strip submitted with the above application.

Library of Congress

Alexanderplatz in Berlin, by Skladanowsky, 1896.

Staatliches Filmarchiv der DDR

Many started with nonfiction items—calling them *documentaires, actualités, topicals, interest films, educationals, expedition films, travel films*—or, after 1907, *travelogues.*

The Lumière company, withdrawing from this chaotic arena, had in three years achieved extraordinary things. It had reaped, financially speaking, the main harvest from the novelty value of film. It had set a new industry in motion on five continents. It had enshrined the word *cinema,* an early shortening of *cinématographe,* in innumerable languages—rivaled only by derivatives of the Skladanowsky term *bioskop*. It had put France in the lead as film producer and exporter, a position it would hold for more than a decade. It had also set an entertainment pattern—a program of short filmed items, predominantly of a documentary sort—that would likewise persist for many years.

In scores of countries, the visit of a Lumière operator marked the beginning of film history. New entrepreneurs took up where the Lumière emissaries had left off. Many did so with Lumière equipment or imitations of it; some with the help of former Lumière operators. The Lumière pattern thus continued under other auspices.

In Sweden, where the Lumière opening run had lasted more than a year, Alexandre Promio taught cinematography in 1897 to Ernest

Peter Elfelt, court cinematographer, Copenhagen.
Danske Filmmuseum

Florman, son of the court photographer, who thus became Sweden's first cameraman. The Danish royal photographer Peter Elfelt had visited Paris in 1896 and had tried to buy Lumière equipment, but had been refused. However, he managed to have similar equipment built by a Copenhagen master mechanic, and began film production and public showings; early projects dealt with Greenland dogs, street scenes, and royal ceremonies. In England, former Lumière operator Félix Mesguich went to work for Charles Urban, who had come to London as Edison representative; his company soon became one of England's most vigorous enterprises, specializing in documentary films. In Spain, Fructuoso Gelabert of Barcelona, crediting Lumière as his inspiration, began in 1897 to manufacture film equipment; the next year he filmed the visit of Queen Maria Cristina and her son Don Alfonso XIII to Barcelona, marking the start of Spanish film production. Another Spaniard, Antonio Ramos, on finishing military service in the Philippines, became one of the first to buy a Lumière *cinématographe;* also buying twenty Lumière films, he inaugurated the motion picture era in the Philippines. Later, after Spain lost the Philippines to the United States, he moved to Shanghai and in 1903

became its first film entrepreneur. His Ramos Amusement Corporation long dominated the Shanghai scene. In India the portrait photographer Harischandra Sakharam Bhatvadekar had been an enthralled spectator at one of the first Lumière showings and then became an early—probably the first—Indian purchaser of a *cinématographe.* In 1897 he photographed a wrestling match at Bombay's Hanging Gardens, marking the start of Indian film activity.

Although the establishment of permanent cinemas accelerated, Lumière-style tours continued, shifting from cities to towns and villages. With programs in the Lumière pattern, they carried the film to rural fairgrounds throughout Europe, and also to distant colonial areas. From 1901 to 1907 the tent showman Abdullaly Esoofally moved throughout southeast Asia with showings in Singapore, Sumatra, Java, Burma, Ceylon. He then traveled in India, eventually settling there. His tent, 100 feet long and propped by four posts, could hold 1000 people. He later recalled:

> When I started my bioscope shows in Singapore in 1901, little documentary films I got from London helped me a lot in attracting people. A short documentary about Queen Victoria's funeral and another about the Boer War showing the British Commander-in-Chief Lord Roberts' triumphant entry into Pretoria against the forces of Paul Kruger, the President of the Transvaal republic, proved wonderful draws. People who had merely heard or read some vague reports about the war were thrilled beyond description when they saw the famous figures of the Boer War in action.[10]

Throughout the world, such showings had common characteristics, but there were also variations. Speakers who stood beside the screen, explaining things, were especially popular in Asian countries. In Japan, where they were known as *benshi,* they acquired great prestige.

For many years the one-reel film remained the staple, but there were changes. Improvement in equipment brought longer reels. At the turn of the century a one-reel film was one to two minutes long; five years later it was five to ten minutes long. And while documentary items in most countries outnumbered fiction films as late as 1907, the mix was changing. Fiction films were increasing in number and beginning to dominate audience interest. The documentary was declining—in quantity and in vigor.

Several factors were involved. The documentary was to some extent a victim of its quick successes. Many producers continued to follow the formulas that had won such instant acclaim. Meanwhile the

fiction film was in a period of innovation—by Méliès, Porter, and soon many others. It was in fiction, not documentary, that the art of editing was beginning to evolve—and to change the whole nature of film communication.

Still other factors stifled the growth of documentary. The films of Louis Lumière himself, shot in 1895–96, had often been fascinating reflections of French middle-class life. But in the *cinématographe* tours his emissaries, as a matter of promotional practice, had sought royal sponsorship—with triumphant success. King, Tsar, Kaiser, Emperor, Maharajah had readily played their part in launching the wonder of the century—and had meanwhile tended to become infatuated with it, not only permitting but expecting film coverage. All this facilitated access to official functions and clinched other permissions, but the film men paid a price. They became purveyors of royal performances, agents of imperial public relations.

In the Swedish film archives—typical, in this respect, of most such collections—one finds the following 1907 items:

Oscar II and Sofia's Golden Wedding Anniversary
The Kaiser at Swinemünde
Wilhelm II and Nicholas II Coming Aboard the Deutschland
Kaiser Wilhelm Visit to London
Kaiser Visit to Portsmouth
Pictures From the Life of Oscar II
Funeral of Oscar II

The 1908 items include:

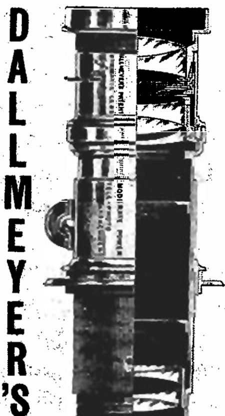
British King Inaugurates Olympics
King Carl I of Portugal and Crown Prince Ludwig Philip Assassinated
English Royal Couple Visits Stockholm
Gustaf V and Queen Victoria in Berlin
Crown Princess Margaret Visits Lund
King Gustaf Visits Ystad
Prince Wilhelm and Princess Maria Arrive in Stockholm

In the United States the situation was no different. Theodore Roosevelt, even before he became President, was an especially eager performer. In 1898 during the Spanish-American War he showed—according to Albert E. Smith, Vitagraph co-founder and cameraman—"a willingness to halt his march up San Juan Hill and strike a pose."[11] During speeches he noted any cameraman and gave him the full benefit of vigorous grins and gestures, sometimes walking to the side of the platform to do so. He inevitably became a favorite subject; Library of Congress film files include innumerable Theodore Roosevelt items, many collected by Roosevelt himself.

Along with world-wide ties to rulers there came, perhaps inevitably, growing involvement with military leaders. Spanish-American war coverage was such a bonanza for Vitagraph that Biograph the following year sent its co-founder and chief cameraman, W. K. L. Dickson—Edison's aide during *kinetoscope* days—to photograph the Boer War. During his work there he acquired a primitive telephoto lens. Albert E. Smith, for Vitagraph, also headed for Africa, with assurance of a lucrative contract with Koster & Bial's Music Hall. Film men were on hand for the Boxer Rebellion, and provided footage of the Russo-Japanese War from both sides. The military, after initial suspicions and hostility, became as cooperative as royalty. In the Boer War, when Smith felt he needed close shots of Boers in action, British soldiers were put in Boer uniforms to provide a few skirmishes. When Dickson, for Biograph, wanted to film Lord Roberts, British Commander in Chief, at work with his staff, Lord Roberts had his table taken out in the sun "for the convenience of Mr. Dickson." He was, according to Dickson, delighted to be "biographed."[12]

The leading film-producing countries of this period were nations with colonial empires. Not surprisingly, their work reflected the attitudes that made up the colonial rationale. Coverage of "natives" generally showed them to be charming, quaint, sometimes mysterious; generally loyal, grateful for the protection and guidance of Europeans. Europeans were benevolently interested in colorful native rituals, costumes, dances, processions. The native was encouraged to exhibit these quaint matters for the camera.

Most "native" shots probably gave western audiences a reassuring feeling about the colonial system, but there were exceptions. The 1903 film *Native Women Coaling a Ship and Scrambling for Money*, made in the West Indies by an Edison cameraman, must have left some disturbing feelings. It presented a picture of degradation such as seldom reached the screen.



Advertisement for telephoto lens, 1901. From the end pages of *The Biograph in Battle,* by Dickson.

Along with colonialist tendencies, documentary film was infected with increasing fakery. This started early. When Albert E. Smith returned to New York from Cuba with his San Juan Hill footage, he was worried: in spite of the Roosevelt posturing, it looked like a dull uphill walk, in no way fitting the "charge up San Juan Hill" trumpeted by newspapers. Meanwhile theaters clamored for the Cuban material, already publicized. So Vitagraph held off its distribution until Smith and his partner J. Stuart Blackton had shot a table-top "battle of Santiago Bay" complete with profuse cigarette and cigar smoke, explosions, and cardboard ships going down in inch-deep water. Combined with the shots brought from Cuba, it became the hit of the war coverage. The public apparently did not suspect its true nature.

In the feverish competition of the time, such activity was not so much "deceit" as "enterprise." Deceit was sometimes avoided by special promotional phrases. A 1902 film shot by Méliès in Paris, depicting the coronation of Edward VII in Westminster Abbey, was announced as an authentic "reconstitution." This material, as in the case of the Cuban film, was intercut with genuine footage—shot outside Westminster Abbey.

In a period when news weeklies had long been illustrated with wood engravings "from photographs taken in the field," there was not likely to be concern about the precise meaning of a "reconstitution." The public was accustomed to news pictures having an uncertain and remote link to events. The relationship was scarcely thought about.

Reconstitutions and fakes had an impressive record of "success." Memorable genuine footage came back from the 1906 San Francisco earthquake, but other footage of the event, contrived in table-top miniature, was equally applauded. Several volcanic eruptions were triumphantly faked, as in Biograph's 1905 *Eruption of Mount Vesuvius.* Film companies did not want to ignore catastrophes or other headline events merely because their cameramen could not get there; enterprise filled the gap. In this spirit the British producer James Williamson shot his 1898 *Attack on a Chinese Mission Station* in his back yard, and some of his Boer War scenes on a golf course. The snows of Long Island and New Jersey provided settings for such action as Biograph's 1904 *Battle of the Yalu* and a competing Edison film, *Skirmish Between Russian and Japanese Advance Guards.* In the latter we see soldiers surge back and forth before the unmoving camera, while many fall in their tracks. To help audiences identify the players, Russians were dressed in white, the Japanese in dark colors. The acceptance of such items probably discouraged more genuine enterprise—at least among some competitors.

A different kind of fakery was exemplified by a project of Doublier, who in 1898–99 continued his travels in Russia—no longer for Lumière, but under the auspices of producer Ivan Grunwald. Visiting predominantly Jewish districts in the south of Russia, Doublier found an intense curiosity about the Dreyfus affair. The court-martial of Dreyfus had taken place in 1894, before the debut of the *cinématographe,* but agitation by Émile Zola, along with confessions of forgery by a colonel in the French War Office and the colonel's subsequent suicide, brought interest in the scandal to a new pitch in 1898. Doublier proceeded to satisfy it with footage that originally had no connection with Dreyfus. A few words to the audience, and their

own imagination supplied connections. Footage of a young French captain at the head of an army parade was promptly accepted as "Dreyfus." A large Parisian building became "scene of the court-martial." A tug going out to meet a barge became "Dreyfus taken to a battleship." A long shot of the Nile Delta became "Devil's Island," scene of the imprisonment.

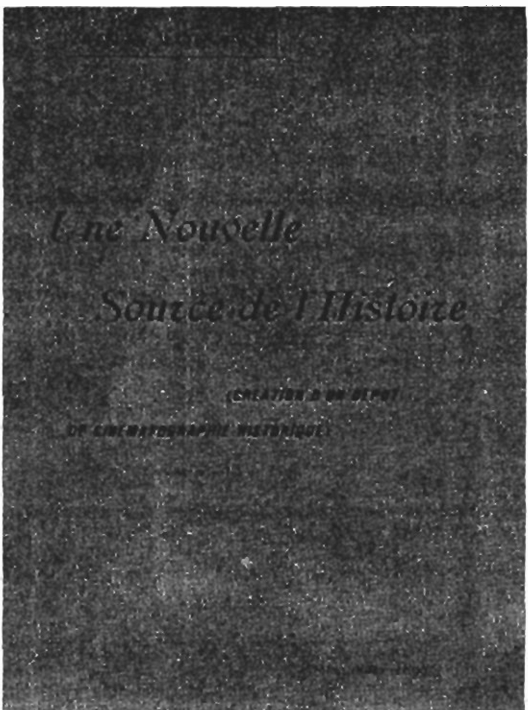
Audience imagination was often relied on for such services. A curious instance involved a much-publicized 1907 African hunting trip by Theodore Roosevelt. William Selig, working in Chicago, found a Roosevelt look-alike and photographed him stalking through a studio jungle, followed by black "native" porters, also from the Chicago area. He encountered an aged lion, who was then shot on camera. The film was a great financial success. The name "Roosevelt" was never mentioned. The item was merely titled *Hunting Big Game in Africa.*[13]

In Denmark that same year Ole Olsen, founder of Nordisk—and previously a peep-show operator—had a similar smashing success. He bought two aged lions from the Copenhagen zoo and put them on a small wooded island; there a group went "on safari" and the lion was shot on camera. The "jungle" footage was intercut with close shots of a hippopotamus, a zebra, and other animals photographed in the Copenhagen zoo—downward from above to avoid backgrounds and fences. The film ended with a group posing with a lion skin; a black man was included for authenticity.

Amid such projects, the documentary tended to become a dubious and perfunctory part of film programs. The rise of multi-reel fiction films—and then of film stars—downgraded it further. In 1910 the newsreel, with weekly or semiweekly issues, made its debut. The Pathé and Gaumont newsreels were followed by numerous others throughout the world. They tended to turn the customary documentary items into a ritual composite: a royal visit, a military maneuver, a sports event, a funny item, a disaster, and a native festival in costume. The newsreel institutionalized the decline of the documentary. Little now remained of its first vitality; the Lumière period was over.

It had been an era of beginnings, and an astonishingly prophetic one.

As early as 1898 a *cinématographe* operator in Warsaw, Bolesław Matuszewski, had written *A New Source of History* (*Une Nouvelle*

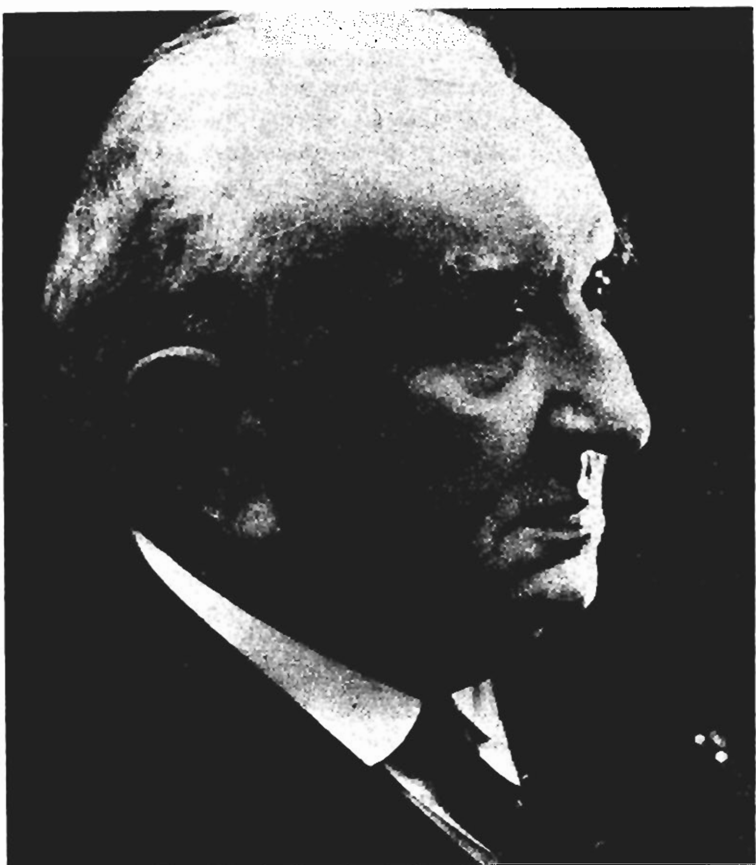


Title page of Matuszewski manifesto.

Source de l'Histoire), a short book published in Paris.* Asserting that the work of the camera deserved a place beside stamps, medals, ornamental pottery, sculpture, etc., he proposed a "cinematographic museum or depository" for material "of a documentary interest . . . slices of public and national life." Its contents would be far more meaningful for the young, he suggested, than the words in books. Once established, material would flow in abundance into such an institution. He offered footage of his own. The depository should contain, he argued, not only meetings of rulers and departures of troops and squadrons, but "the changing face of the cities."

He recognized that history does not always happen where one

* Polish title: *Nowe Źródlo Historii.* It was reprinted in Warsaw in 1955 for a meeting of FIAF—Fédération Internationale des Archives du Film. Another Matuszewski volume, *La Photographie Animée,* was also published in 1898.



Louis Lumière.

Museum of Modern Art

waits for it, and that effects are easier to find and photograph than causes. He also realized that the film camera would often want to penetrate where not wanted. Yet in so doing, he felt, it might shed a valuable ray of light.

Film evidence, he suggested, would be able to shut the mouth of the liar.

The high cost of film would fall, he predicted, and come within reach of the many.

He urged the use of film in the arts, industry, medicine, military affairs, science, education.

He himself, in 1898 in Warsaw, showed to a group of doctors a film of an operation, exemplifying the versatility he foresaw for the medium.

The aura of prophecy surrounds much of the work of this first documentary period. It foreshadowed the many potential roles of a documentary film maker. Louis Lumière, in his first film, *Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory,* was making what would later be called an industrial film, and was acting as a promoter. In *The Arrival of the Conventioners* (*Arrivée des Congressistes,* 1895) he was a reporter. The maker of *Wood Cutters in the Street in Paris* (*Scieurs de Bois,* 1897) was more a genre painter. In the works of many Lumière operators, such as the "panoramas" of Venice and other cities and the later *Coolies at Saigon* (*Coolies à Saïgon,* 1897) and *Elephant Processions at Phnom Penh* (*Promenades des Éléphants à Phnom-Penh,* 1901), we see the documentarist as travel lecturer. The Pueblo *Eagle Dance* and *Wand Dance* filmed by an Edison cameraman in 1898 are considered early examples of ethnographic film. That same year zoologist Alfred Cord Haddon took a Lumière camera with him on a Cambridge Expedition to the South Pacific Torres Straits, to record and report research findings. In films of the Charles Urban Bioscope Expeditions, a series launched in 1903 to depict remote areas such as Borneo, we see the documentarist as popular educator. Urban assumed a similar function in science with his "micro-bioscope" series *Unseen World,* launched in 1903 and including such items as *Circulation of the Blood in the Frog's Foot.* He also made advertising films for Dewar's Whiskey and Swan's Soap. W. K. L. Dickson, in his Biograph coverage of the Boer War, performed as war reporter. But in Biograph's *Changing the Flag at Puerto Rico,* which brought United States audiences to their feet with the sight of a Spanish flag

being ripped down and replaced by an American flag, the film maker was serving more as war propagandist. Edison's *Rout of the Filipinos* had a similar bugle-call purpose, fanning the imperialistic emotions of the hour.

None of these functions can be neatly separated. They never occur separately. The documentarist is always more than one of these. Yet different occasions, different moments in history, tend to bring different functions to the fore. This was true in the first decade of documentary history, and it remained true in later decades.

As the documentary entered a period of decline and seemed headed for oblivion, the documentarist-as-explorer showed the clearest signs of continuing vitality. Interest in distant places was effectively stimulated by the Urban Bioscope Expeditions. It was fanned for several years, starting in 1904, by the ingenious *Hale's Tours,* in which a small auditorium, shaped like a train, was entered from the back by paying a "conductor." Once seated, audiences found the car vibrating and shaking as wondrous scenes rushed by. *Hale's Tours* units were operated in many cities of America and Europe. More substantial were films shot on a 1909 Carnegie Museum Expedition to Alaska and Siberia, and the extraordinary footage filmed in 1911 by Herbert G. Ponting during the disastrous expedition of Captain R. F. Scott to the Antarctic. Sponsored by Gaumont, the material began to reach theater screens with enormous success in 1912.[14]

It is perhaps not surprising that in the exploration field, the documentary had its first rebirth.

2

IMAGES AT WORK

allegro con brio

Nyla, the smiling one—*Nanook of the North.*

Museum of Modern Art

Explorer

Robert J. Flaherty, in his early years, had no thought but to follow in the footsteps of his father, a mining engineer. The boy grew up around mining camps of northern Michigan and Canada, with miners and Indians as companions. Later the father became a prospector searching the Canadian wilderness for mineral resources—for United States Steel and other corporations. Sometimes he took young Bob with him on these explorations, traveling many weeks by canoe in summer and on snowshoes in winter, meeting Eskimos, mapping the country, learning arts of frontier survival.

In 1910, at the age of twenty-six, young Robert Flaherty embarked on his own career as explorer and prospector. He was hired by Sir William Mackenzie, builder of Canadian railroads. Canada had decided on a railroad to carry wheat from its western lands to Hudson Bay, for shipment to Europe. Wheat-carrying trains and ships could also carry iron and other ores. What deposits were there in the Hudson Bay area? Young Flaherty was sent to prospect. Within a few short years, in four expeditions for Sir William Mackenzie, he won fame as an explorer, showed astounding resourcefulness and stamina, mapped unknown country, and brought back reports on mineral and pulpwood resources, as well as deposits of gypsum and lignite.

In 1913 as he prepared for his third expedition, Sir William Mackenzie said to him: "You're going into interesting country—strange people—animals—and all that—why don't you include in your outfit a camera for making film?"[1]

Flaherty liked the idea. He bought a Bell & Howell camera, a portable developing and printing machine, and some lighting equipment. Since he knew nothing about film, he also took a three-week cinematography course in Rochester, N.Y. During his next two Mackenzie expeditions, in 1914 and 1915, he shot many hours of film on Eskimo life. The film activity, begun casually, soon became an obsession that almost obliterated the search for minerals.

Between the third and fourth expeditions he was married. Shortly afterwards in Toronto the young bride, Frances Hubbard Flaherty, recorded in her diary—February 1, 1915:

Robert Flaherty—prospector.

Museum of Modern Art

Moving pictures still the undercurrent of life. Printing almost finished and editing begun. R. refuses to let me see them until the first edition is in shape. . . . R. is full of the idea of the use of moving pictures in education, in the teaching of geography and history. Someone might well make it a life work. Why not we?[2]

A few weeks later Flaherty began test showings. Reactions gave cause for jubilation. The director of the Ontario Museum of Archaeology, C. T. Currelly, wrote him:

I cannot too strongly congratulate you on the moving pictures you exhibited in Convocation Hall. They are much the best I have ever seen. . . . I have never known anything received with greater enthusiasm.

Another spectator wrote to a New York acquaintance:

This will introduce Mr. Robert J. Flaherty of Toronto, who has a most interesting series of ethnological moving pictures of Esquimo life, which show the primitive existence of a people in the way they lived before being brought in contact with explorers. He is looking to bring them out in the best way. I know you are thoroughly in touch with the moving picture game from the inside and can at least give him some pointers. Do what you can. . . .[3]

Flaherty was not ready to launch his film. Heading north for his fourth Mackenzie expedition, he obtained more footage, came back to Toronto, and continued editing. In 1916, while he was preparing to ship the film to New York, his cigarette fell from the table onto scraps of film on the floor. Within moments his entire negative—30,000 feet of film—was exploding into flames before his eyes. In trying to beat out the flames he was badly burned, and landed in a hospital. He was lucky to escape with his life.

What remained was his work print. It was not considered feasible, at that time, to make a new negative from it.

Flaherty persuaded himself the disaster had been for the best. In spite of enthusiasm he had aroused, he was not satisfied with the film. It was, he felt, too much a travelogue—"a scene of this and that, no relation, no thread." Talking it over long hours with Frances, he decided he must return to the north and make a different kind of film. It would center on one Eskimo and his family, and reveal characteristic events of their lives.

He began showing the surviving print to raise funds. It soon seemed an impossible task. The World War of 1914–18 occupied

the attention of the world and brought other priorities. Prospecting trips to Hudson Bay were, for the duration, out of the question. And film people seemed indifferent. Flaherty himself, when he showed his film, found it more and more inept. He became all the more determined to make it as he knew he must. From 1916 to 1920—while three daughters were born to the Flahertys—he kept at the fund-raising efforts. He earned modest funds with articles and talks about northern exploration. His in-laws talked about getting him a Ford agency; in his mid-thirties, he seemed to them at dead end. Then, as the war ended, the fur company Revillon Frères began to take interest in his proposals, and in 1920 Robert Flaherty finally headed north again. He was to get $500 a month for an unstipulated period, $13,000 for equipment and technical costs, and a $3000 credit at Port Harrison for "remuneration of natives." It took him two months to reach this subarctic post on the northeast coast of Hudson Bay. He stayed sixteen months.

He knew now how he must proceed. The full collaboration of Eskimos had already become the key to his method. This seemed a philosophical necessity but also, in working alone, a practical necessity. Some of the Eskimos soon knew his camera better than he did: they could take it apart and put it together—and did so, when the camera fell into the sea and had to be cleaned piece by piece. They scoured the coast for driftwood to help him build a drying reel for his film.

As his main character Flaherty chose a celebrated hunter of the Itivimuit tribe of Eskimos—Nanook. Nanook became chief fountainhead of film sequences. His zeal for the "aggie"—the film—came to know no bounds. One of his first suggestions was a walrus hunt, done as in former days, before the explorers came.

"Suppose we go," Flaherty said to him, "do you know that you and your men may have to give up making a kill, if it interferes with my film? Will you remember that it is the picture of you hunting the ivuik that I want, and not their meat?"

"Yes, yes," Nanook assured him. "The aggie will come first."[4]

In a diary scrawled in pencil with frequent abbreviations, Flaherty recorded his activities. On September 26, 1920, six weeks after arrival, he wrote:

It has been the day of days. Morning came clear and warm. Some twenty walrus lay sleeping on the rocks. Approached to within 100 ft & filmed

Eskimo drawing of walrus hunt—from *Flaherty Papers.* Columbia University

with telephoto lens. Nan stalking quarry with harpoon—within 20 ft they rose in alarm and tumbled toward the sea. Nan's harpoon landed but the quarry succeeded in reaching the water. Then commenced a battle royal—& Esk straining for their lives on the harpoon line at water's edge—this quarry like a huge fish floundering—churning in the sea—The remainder of the herd hovered around—their "Ok ok!" resounding—one great bull even came in to quarry & locked horns in attempt to rescue—I filmed and filmed and filmed—The men—calling me to end the struggle by rifle—so fearful were they about being pulled into the sea.

Flaherty later wrote that he pretended not to understand their appeal and just kept cranking. The sequence became one of the most famous in *Nanook of the North.* The scene gives no hint of the presence of a rifle. Flaherty's focus was on traditional ways.

The work went on at relentless pace. Diary jottings noted ideas for sequences:

Pos scenes
unloading
the port
winter

tracking
the gramophone
Xmas
sledging
medicine—castor oil

The gramophone and castor oil were the only civilized intrusions permitted in the final film—perhaps because of the Eskimo warmth and humor they elicited.

Notes on Eskimo words and their meanings punctuate the diaries. An early entry was: "Again—*poonuk.*" Flaherty must have said "*poonuk!*" many times to his co-workers. He showed them every sequence immediately. If it seemed unsatisfactory, or if he wanted an additional shot from another angle or distance, the action was repeated.

Problems mounted. Sometimes it was so cold that film shivered into bits like "so much thin wafer glass." Some sequences involved long journeys with overnight stops in igloos built en route. A trip of many weeks to film a "polar bear aggie"—a dangerous project urged by Nanook—almost ended in disaster. They found no bear and, for weeks, no food for men or dogs. Halted many days by blizzards, they huddled in an igloo as its dome grew black with smoke and dripped black drops. They barely survived the trip. On the way back they used film to kindle a fire.

The building of an igloo became one of the most celebrated sequences in the film. But interior photography presented a problem: the igloo was too small. So Nanook and others undertook to build an outsized "aggie igloo." During the first attempts the domes collapsed—as the builders roared with laughter. Finally they succeeded, but the interior was found too dark for photography. So half the igloo was sheared away. For the camera Nanook and his family went to sleep and awoke "with all the cold of out-of-doors pouring in."[5] Daylight lit the scene. Flaherty was intent on authenticity of result. That this might call for ingenious means did not disturb him. Film itself, and all its technology, were products of ingenuity.

Printing his footage called for considerable ingenuity. Flaherty found that the light from his portable generator fluctuated too much. In his hut he therefore cut an aperture the size of one 35mm frame—and blocked out all windows. With the printing machine screwed to the wall, he used the sun for light, regulating the intensity with bits of muslin.

Quantities of negative shot during midwinter were developed in a rush in March and April of 1921. All available hands were recruited. The vast amounts of water needed were hauled up through a hole chiseled in six feet of ice and were then pulled by a ten-dog team and a fourteen-foot sledge to Flaherty's quarters, to be poured into wash tanks and later hauled away again. On some days tons of water were hauled. Keeping it free of fur hairs was a problem.

Late that summer Flaherty headed back to civilization. Pointing to the countless pebbles on the beach, he told Nanook that people in such numbers, far southward, would see the Inuit—"we the people," as they called themselves—in actions they had filmed together.

That winter *Nanook of the North* reached final form at the editing table. Flaherty had help from an assistant editor, Charles Gelb, but he himself dominated every moment. The editing process was undoubtedly helped by Flaherty's experience and dissatisfactions with the earlier film. This time he had been able to anticipate editing problems, providing crucial close-ups, reverse angles, and a few panoramic movements and tilts to yield moments of revelation. Flaherty had apparently mastered—unlike previous documentarists—the "grammar" of film as it had evolved in the fiction film. This evolution had not merely changed techniques; it had transformed the sensibilities of audiences. The ability to witness an episode from many angles and distances, seen in quick succession—a totally surrealistic privilege, unmatched in human experience—had become so much a part of film-viewing that it was unconsciously accepted as "natural." Flaherty had by now absorbed this machinery of the fiction film, but he was applying it to material not invented by a writer or director, nor performed by actors. Thus drama, with its potential for emotional impact, was wedded to something more real—people being themselves.

A few moments in the film reflected earlier documentary styles. Characters occasionally glanced at the camera as though at a film maker. Nanook, grinning over the gramophone, testing a gramophone disc with his teeth, looks at the camera as though for agreement and approval; his child, tasting castor oil, shares his pleasure with a smile to the camera. These seem holdovers from travelogue—characters posing for the camera, demonstrating their quaintness. Such shots soon vanished from Flaherty's documentary language.

Museum of Modern Art

Nanook the hunter. *Nanook of the North,* 1922.

In his subtitles Flaherty was especially felicitous. They showed a rare gift for word-choice—"the rasp and hiss of driving snow"—and for conciseness. They never overexplained. "Now only one thing more is needed," a subtitle tells us as Nanook, having apparently completed an igloo, starts to cut a block of ice. Audiences do not know, for the moment, the purpose of the "one thing more." They soon discover: a square of snow is cut from the igloo, and the ice becomes a window. It is even equipped with a snow reflector, to catch the low sun. The sequence has often brought applause. Part of the satisfaction lies in the fact that the audience has been permitted to be, like Flaherty himself, explorer and discoverer.

Similarly, when Nanook has harpooned an unseen creature through a hole in the ice, and we see him in a grotesquely acrobatic rope-tug, sometimes winning but sometimes skidding head over heels toward the hole as the antagonist gains momentum, Flaherty does not immediately identify the unseen creature as a seal. Again he allows us the joy of discovery.

Especially valuable to the film are glimpses of children and their

Museum of Modern Art

Nanook and son—from *Nanook of the North,* 1922.

relations with others. During the igloo-building we see a child determinedly shooting arrows at a small snow-animal. A subtitle says: "To be a great hunter like his father." Finishing the igloo, Nanook turns to give him a brief bow-and-arrow lesson, then warms the child's hands in a moment of affection and intimacy, remote from travelogue.

Early in 1922 *Nanook of the North,* a product of two decades of exploring and almost a decade of film activity, was ready for distributors. First to see it was a group from Paramount.

Paramount was then emerging as a leading force in an American film industry that had seized world leadership. The 1914–18 World War had choked off production in France—the prewar leader—and had almost halted it in England and Italy. The American industry, expanding fantastically while establishing itself in Hollywood, had filled the vacuum. By the end of the war huge American production-distribution-exhibition combinations were supplying the screens of the world. Each felt it understood what audiences wanted: its worldwide distribution records held the answers.

At the Paramount screening of *Nanook of the North,* as Flaherty

later described it, the projection room was blue with smoke before the film was over. Then most of the men simply left the room.

> The manager came up and very kindly put his arm around my shoulders and told me he was terribly sorry, but it was a film that just couldn't be shown to the public. He said that he had tried to do such things before and they had always ended in failure. He was very sorry indeed that I had gone through all that hardship in the North, only to come to such an end, but he felt he had to tell me and that was that.[6]

Four other major distribution companies reacted similarly. One executive explained that the public was not interested in Eskimos; it preferred people in dress suits. But finally the Pathé organization—like Revillon, of French origin—accepted the film for distribution and was able to open it at the important Capitol theater in New York on June 11, 1922—with immediate success. Most critics found it a revelation. "Beside this film," said the New York *Times*, "the usual photoplay, the so-called 'dramatic' work of the screen, becomes as thin and blank as the celluloid on which it is printed." The critic found it "far more interesting, far more compelling purely as entertainment, than any except the rare exceptions among photoplays."[7] Reviewing the films of the entire year, Robert E. Sherwood said of *Nanook of the North:*

> It stands alone, literally in a class by itself. Indeed, no list of all the best pictures of the year or of all the years in the brief history of the movies, could be considered complete without it.[8]

Hailed by almost all critics, the film was also a box-office success in the United States and a very substantial one abroad. Its fame spread rapidly throughout the world. European critics vied with each other in superlatives. A French critic compared the film to Greek classic drama.

Flaherty had spent on *Nanook of the North* approximately twice the amount anticipated in the original arrangements. The total production cost came to $53,000. Such excess expenditures became a Flaherty habit. Revillon loaned the additional funds, to be repaid from distribution income; it recouped this investment and made a substantial profit, as did Flaherty. Documentary suddenly acquired a financial legitimacy it had not had for years. Paramount, first company to reject *Nanook of the North,* also became first to reconsider

its stance. Jesse Lasky of Paramount proposed sending Flaherty anywhere he wanted to go to bring back "another *Nanook.*" Contract talks began, soon centering on the South Seas.

The ultimate in commercial accolade came from the Broadway music world with the appearance of the song *Nanook:*

> Polar bears are prowling,
> Wintry winds are howling,
> Where the snow is falling,
> There my heart is calling:
> Nanook! Nanook!

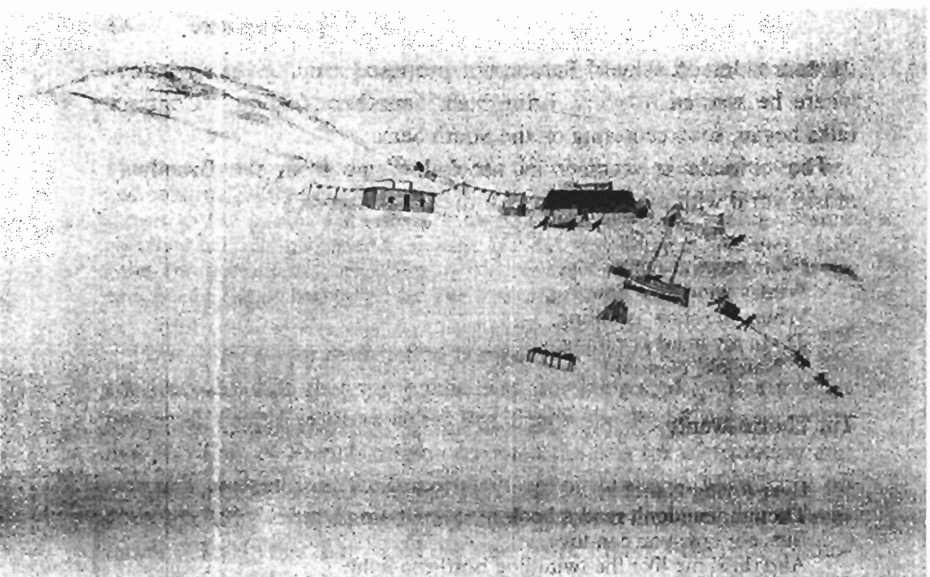
The chorus went:

> Ever-loving Nanook,
> Though you don't read a book,
> But, oh, how you can love,
> And thrill me like the twinkling northern lights
> above. . . .*

Much later the Flahertys, in Berlin, found the smiling face of Nanook on the wrapper of an ice-cream sandwich—a "Nanuk." When Nanook died on a hunting trip two years after the appearance of *Nanook of the North,* the event was noted by newspapers throughout the world. When documentary film makers from many lands were asked thirty years later, on the occasion of the 1964 Mannheim film festival, to select the greatest documentaries of all time, *Nanook of the North* led the list.

While establishing a new genre, which has become firmly fixed in documentary tradition, *Nanook* and its creator have been criticized on various grounds. In this film as in later films, Flaherty exposed his characters to extreme dangers. To be sure, they welcomed and even sought these dangers, and this suggests the kind of dedication they came to share with Flaherty. Nanook, who urged the most perilous sequences, may well have sensed in the aggie a kind of immortality for the Inuit and himself. In spite of his prowess in the film, he was apparently already ill. A Flaherty diary entry notes that one night he coughed splotches of blood on the wall of their igloo.

* *Nanook.* Words by John Milton Hagen and Herb Crooker, music by Victor Nurnberg, copyright 1922 Cameo Music Publishing Company. Quoted by courtesy of Harmony House (ASCAP), Mill Valley, California.



". . . small figures in a vast expanse . . ." Eskimo drawing, from *Flaherty Papers.*

Columbia University

Flaherty was a man of immense charm; his blue eyes riveted attention. Of imposing physique, he was a prodigious worker, ebullient companion, yarn-spinner, hard drinker, chain-smoker, and spared neither himself nor others. He loved music, and took his violin and phonograph records with him to the subarctic to entertain the Eskimos. He was an admirer and collector of Eskimo carvings and drawings; his photographic compositions in *Nanook* often suggest Eskimo drawings: small figures in a vast expanse of white.

But his total absorption in the Eskimo, and the nature of *Nanook of the North* and subsequent Flaherty films, seem also linked to his own conflicts. His first contacts with primitive people came early, and were dismaying. Indian hangers-on at the mining camps, who sometimes came to his mother's kitchen for food and warmth, were a pitiful lot, bearing the marks of civilized diseases, including alcoholism. Many had hacking coughs. He later described his mother as in tears over them. "It is too awful," she would say, "what the white man has done to them." When Flaherty first met Eskimos, he saw the same deterioration at work. But as he went further north, where contacts

with explorers, prospectors, and entrepreneurs had been less extensive, he had glimpses of what seemed an earlier nobility. On this he riveted his attention.

He had reasons for doing so. One was a growing sense that he himself represented the cultural destruction that troubled him. He had originally plunged with all his heart into the role of explorer and prospector; before Nanook, his own father was his hero. Yet as he entered the Eskimo world, he knew he did so as the advance guard of industrial civilization, the world of United States Steel and Sir William Mackenzie and railroad and mining empires. The mixed feeling this gave him left its mark on all his films.

Flaherty did not come to grips with this inner conflict; he relentlessly avoided it, in *Nanook* as in most other films, by banishing the intruder from the world he portrayed. Flaherty wrote:

I am not going to make films about what the white man has made of primitive peoples. . . .

What I want to show is the former majesty and character of these people, while it is still possible—before the white man has destroyed not only their character, but the people as well.

The urge that I had to make *Nanook* came from the way I felt about these people, my admiration for them; I wanted to tell others about them.[9]

The urge to capture on film the nature of rapidly vanishing cultures has been pursued also by anthropologists, who have given it the name "salvage ethnography."[10] Flaherty was doing such work for deeply personal rather than scholarly reasons, but the outcome was similar. It has been called "romantic" in that Flaherty was not recording a current way of life but one filtered through memories of Nanook and his people. Unquestionably the film reflected *their image* of their traditional life. Yet a people's self-image may be a crucial ingredient in its culture, and worth recording. Anthropologists, while aware of the distorting lens, study it with care. In effect, so did Flaherty.

John Grierson, a Flaherty apostle, was also a frequent critic of the "romanticism" of Flaherty. "Consider," Grierson wrote later, "the problem of the Eskimo. . . . His clothes and blankets most often come from Manchester, supplied by a department store in Winnepeg. . . . They listen to fur prices over the radio, and are subjected to fast operations of commercial opportunists flying in from New York. . . ."

Moana, 1926.

Museum of Modern Art

But Flaherty knew all this; he was aware of the "fast operations." In a sense he had been part of them. His concern now was not to produce an exposé, but to celebrate what he valued. To this, generations have responded.

During the following half-century the fiction films of the early 1920's became museum curios—dress suits and all—but *Nanook of the North* retained astonishing validity, an aliveness scarcely affected by time.

By 1923 Robert Flaherty, with a Paramount contract and a roomy budget—"Write your own ticket," Jesse Lasky had said—was organizing an expedition to Samoa in the Pacific, this time with Frances Flaherty, their three daughters, an Irish nursemaid, and his brother David Flaherty. Robert Flaherty was world-famous, creator of a new kind of film, and from the South Seas he was to bring back "another *Nanook.*"

The genre, the tradition he had launched, was now in deep trouble. Behind *Nanook of the North* had been twenty years of exploring and living with Eskimos. The same process was now to be compressed into a year or two—which to Hollywood seemed a long time.

The Flaherty group headed for the village of Safune on the island of Savai'i. There they had been told they might find—before it was too late—the old Polynesian culture as it had been before the traders and missionaries came. This gave the new project a thrust similar to that of *Nanook of the North.*

The start was encouraging. When the people of Safune realized that Flaherty did not want to film them in the clothes the missionaries and traders had brought them, they were surprised and then deeply moved. "It seemed a new idea to them," wrote Flaherty later, "that neither Christ nor we, the papalangi, really wished to see them in white man's clothes. Through the influence of the missionary it had come about that the Samoan who had only a siapo was looked down upon." Urged by Flaherty, the chief asked all to wear siapos. It seemed to precipitate a reliving of old days, a remembering of things almost forgotten.

But all this could not make "another *Nanook.*" The struggle for survival that had been a central element in *Nanook* hardly existed in Samoa. Flaherty had read about sea monsters but there were none. Nature was benign. Food fell from the trees. To find a climax for his film, Flaherty finally revived the painful ordeal of tattooing, a Poly-

nesian manhood-initiation rite that had almost become extinct through missionary influence.

Moana, released in 1926, was hailed by some as a worthy successor to *Nanook of the North.* A film of great pictorial beauty, it was called an "idyll" by some critics—the sort of praise-word that has often kept audiences away. Paramount tried to promote the film as "the love life of a South Sea siren," but audiences lured by this were bound to be disappointed. *Moana* failed at the box office. The failure virtually ended Flaherty's association with big-studio Hollywood. An American Indian film project was started under William Fox auspices, but was soon afterward halted.

Flaherty was still a world figure. Proposals and invitations poured in. Would he like to make a film in Iceland? Australia expressed interest in a Flaherty visit. Such proposals generally came without budgets. The German director Fred Murnau, sick of Hollywood, wanted Flaherty to work with him on a film on Bali; after long negotiations, the project was abandoned.[11] Flaherty worked briefly with Murnau on *Tabu*—a fiction film more Murnau than Flaherty.

Flaherty wanted to make a film in the Soviet Union about one or another primitive tribe in Siberia, but he received no encouragement from Soviet officials. Stress on the virtues of primitive cultures was not likely to have high priority among the Soviets. After *Moana,* eight years passed before another Flaherty-style documentary appeared.

But primitive-people films by others meanwhile followed the *Nanook* success. The 1925 feature-length documentary *Grass,* by Merian C. Cooper and Ernest B. Schoedsack—the latter had been a combat photographer in the 1914–18 World War—was distributed by Paramount with much success. It portrayed a staggering migration of 50,000 people over the Zardeh Kuh mountains in Turkey and Persia in search of grass for their herds. The crossing of the torrential Karun river with loss of life among men, women, children, goats, sheep, donkeys, horses, provided one of the most spectacular sequences ever put on film. The photography, sometimes from near positions and sometimes from mountain tops, was often breathtaking. But the migrants remain a mass of strangers to the audience; no individual portrait emerges from them. And the final emphasis was not on what they had endured but—in a brash display of egotism—on the heroic accomplishment of the film makers. The same team followed in 1927 with *Chang,* commissioned by Paramount and filmed in Siam, and

Ernest B. Schoedsack, at work on *Chang*—released 1927.
Museum of Modern Art

ostensibly following a *Nanook* pattern: a family struggling for survival, in this case against jungle animals. But the impressive animal sequences were set in a story framework that must have been part of Hollywood pre-planning, along with pretentious subtitled dialogue. Kru, a Lao tribesman, tells his child:

"The very last grain of rice is husked, O very small daughter!"

At a moment of crisis, a Lao call to battle:

"Out, swords! Out spears! Out, O Brave Men! Help us, O Lord Buddha!"

From their documentary beginnings the Cooper-Schoedsack team was clearly veering in other directions, more in line with studio ideas. They had their ultimate success a few years later with *King Kong*.

A more authentic project was the French film *The Black Cruise* (*La Croisière Noire*, 1926) by Léon Poirier—like Murnau, a temporary fugitive from fiction. Sponsored by Citroën, it recorded an unprecedented automobile journey from the northern to the southern reaches of Africa, and on to the French island colony of Madagascar. The feature-length project provided occasion for countless vignettes of tribal and village life. Again, no individual portraits emerge, and the expedition's interest remains superficial, with stress on the bizarre. Yet the record of such a journey inevitably offered documentary values, and preparations for a similar Citroën-sponsored Asian journey, from Lebanon to Indochina, were begun in 1929. Titled *The Yellow Cruise* (*La Croisière Jaune*) the film did not reach completion until many years later.

The explorer-as-documentarist tradition received some of its most tawdry contributions in the work of Mr. and Mrs. Martin Johnson, who had completed their first travelogue in 1912 and were still successfully at it two decades later. Self-glorification was the keynote. Unabashed condescension and amusement marked their attitude toward natives. They started *Congorilla*—about "big apes and little people"—in 1929 as the transition to sound was under way, so they included brief sound sequences and a narration to make it "the first sound film from darkest Africa." Both Johnsons were constantly on camera in sequences demonstrating their courage or wit, or both. In a forest clearing we see them recruiting forty "black boys" as carriers. When one gives his name, it sounds like "coffee pot" to Mrs. Osa

Martin Johnson, at work on *Congorilla*, 1929.

Morro Pictures

Johnson, so his name is written down as Coffee Pot. Johnson's narration speaks of "funny little savages," "happiest little savages on earth." His idea of humor was to give a pygmy a cigar and wait for him to get sick; to give another a balloon to blow up and watch his reaction when it bursts; to give a monkey beer and watch the result. During a shot of a crocodile opening its mouth, Johnson's narration comments: "Gee, what a place to throw old razor-blades." To catch two baby gorillas, seven huge trees are chopped down, isolating the gorillas in a tree in the middle; then it is chopped down.

A decade after *Nanook of the North* the explorer-as-documentarist was clearly in decline. The creator of the genre and of its greatest triumph seemed himself to be edging into obscurity. But meanwhile other documentary genres were moving to the fore—one of these, under the impact of huge social change.

Reporter

Denis Arkadievich Kaufman (1896–1954), known in film history as Dziga Vertov, was one of three sons of a librarian in Bialystok, in the

Polish part of the Russian empire. Early in the 1914–18 World War the family moved from war dangers to what seemed the comparative safety of Russia itself. In Petrograd—which had recently been renamed to shed the Germanic "St. Petersburg"—young Denis studied medicine and psychology and wrote poetry, falling under the spell of Russia's "futurist" poets, among whom Vladimir Mayakovsky was the leader.[1]

Futurism, a movement sweeping through Europe from its 1909 beginnings in Italy and France and invading all the arts, gloried in the clamor and rhythm of machines, and the dynamism of a world in change. Its poets tended to reject syntax in favor of word-montages; they were intoxicated with long catalogues of words in the manner of Walt Whitman, to whom they owed much. Its composers called for inclusion of sounds, as symbols of modern life, in orchestral instrumentation. The futurists were given to rhetorical manifestos, which often used unconventional typographical arrangements as means of expression and emphasis.

In 1916–17 Denis Kaufman, medical student and young futurist poet, organized an "audio-laboratory" of his own in which he built montages of sounds—sound poems on discs. They provided a foundation for things to come. He adopted the pseudonym Dziga Vertov—both names connoting *turning, revolving*. The names suggested a spinning top and perhaps perpetual motion—the keynote of the following years and of his role in them.

The bolshevik seizure of power in October 1917 found Vertov eagerly volunteering to the Cinema Committee in Moscow; he became editor of its newsreel *Film Weekly* (*Kino-Nedelia*), which began appearing in June 1918. This put him at the age of twenty-two at the heart of a swirling operation. To his modest editing table came footage from all fronts. In addition to German armies, invading forces of allied troops—American, British, French, Japanese, and others—landed north, east, and south, trying to suppress the revolution and, at first, keep Russia in the war against Germany. For the three years 1917–20 the combination of civil war and foreign intervention continued; blockade, hunger, chaos tore the land. Vertov's task was to assemble incoming bits of film—fragments of struggle, crisis, disaster, victory—and send them forth again, subtitled and in meaningful organization. The newsreel issues went in all directions—by "agit-train" back to the various fronts to be seen by revolutionary fighters themselves, and by similar trains and steamboats to villages and towns. The agit-trains distributed newspapers and books; some had printing presses operating en route. When a train was not in motion, film shows were held—at night in near-by streets or fields. One "agit-steamboat" plied large rivers towing a barge-cinema that seated 800 people —while carrying its own cameraman, who sent back footage to Vertov. The mission was to get out the news—unite people by keeping them informed of the ups and downs of agonizing struggle.[2]

In the midst of the newsreel work Vertov compiled longer releases including *Anniversary of the Revolution* (*Godovshtchina Revolutsii*, 1919), reusing footage in broader context. But in 1919 the blockade became so tight, and the black market so rampant, that stocks of raw film gave out and the newsreel schedules faltered. Old film was sometimes scraped and recoated by homemade methods to maintain schedules—at the cost of archive material. Astonishingly, in the midst of such crises the new government went ahead with its plans for a state film school—at first operating without film. It was a measure of the importance attached to film activity.

Late in 1920 the last intervention troops were finally ousted, and a kind of peace arrived. But the land faced other and more unprecedented struggles. Not surprisingly young Vertov, now a seasoned film man who had processed hundreds of thousands of feet of film, saw newsreels playing a role in these struggles. In the building of a new kind of society there would be other crises and victories which, like earlier battle news, must surely be made known at once throughout the Soviet Union.

With the end of fighting Vertov compiled a feature-length *History of the Civil War* (*Istoriya Grazhdanskoi Voini*, 1921) from footage he knew so well, and awaited new tasks.

But the following months brought famine and epidemics. A prostrate economy forced Lenin—barely recovered from an assassination attempt—to retreat from socialist theory and proclaim a New Economic Policy—"NEP," a temporary return to forms of private enterprise.

In the war-scarred film theaters fiction films began reappearing. There were not yet new Russian features—countless projects waited, begging for raw stock. Out of hiding, or newly imported by NEP

entrepreneurs, came mostly foreign films—American, German, French, Italian—items such as *Drama on the Equator, The City's Temptation, The Devil's Admirers, A Night of Horror in the Menagerie, Daughter of Tarzan, Evil Shadows, The Adventuress,* and *Secret of the Egyptian Night.*[3]

Until this time Vertov had functioned as editor—of footage supplied by others. The events of 1920–22 propelled him into a wider range of roles: writer of polemic manifestos, theorist, producer. A typical Vertov manifesto addressed film artists in the name of a mysterious Council of Three:

> Five years crowded with world-shaking events have entered your lives and left—leaving no trace. "Art" works of pre-revolutionary days surround you like icons and still command your prayerful emotions. Foreign lands abet you in your confusion, sending into new Russia the living corpses of movie dramas garbed in splendid technological dressing.
>
> Spring is coming. At the studios new activity is awaited. The Council of Three notes with frank horror how producers leaf through works of literature looking for scenario material. Names of theater dramas and epics selected for studio enactment float through the air. In the Ukraine, and here in Moscow, several photoplays have already been made displaying every symptom of impotence.
>
> The body of cinema is numbed by the terrible poison of habit. We demand an opportunity to experiment with this dying organism, to find an antidote. . . .

Vertov was sure what the antidote must be. He saw the traditional fiction film, descendant of theater artifice, as something in the same class as religion—"opium for the people." The task of Soviet films, as Vertov saw it, was to document socialist reality.

To build cinema on theatrical tradition seemed to him outrageous foolishness. Theater offered a "scabby substitute" for life; the same was true of theatrical film with its synthetic struggles and heroics—a dangerous weapon controlled by capitalists and NEPmen. He scorned producers and distributors who "snapped up the scraps from the German table . . . the American table." "Come to life," he urged film makers. He asked them to stop running from "the prose of life." They must become "craftsmen of seeing—organizers of visible life," armed with a "maturing eye."

His attacks—on almost everything being done—inevitably won for Vertov many enemies in the film world. But his views also had support—some of it in high places. Early in 1922 Lenin held a discussion about film with the Commissar of Education, Anatoli Lunacharsky. "Of all the arts," Lenin told him, "for us film is the most important," and he spoke especially of films "reflecting Soviet actuality." Such films, thought Lenin, "must begin with newsreels." Later he called for what came to be known as the "Leninist film-proportion," a doctrine that every film program must have a balance between fiction and actuality material.

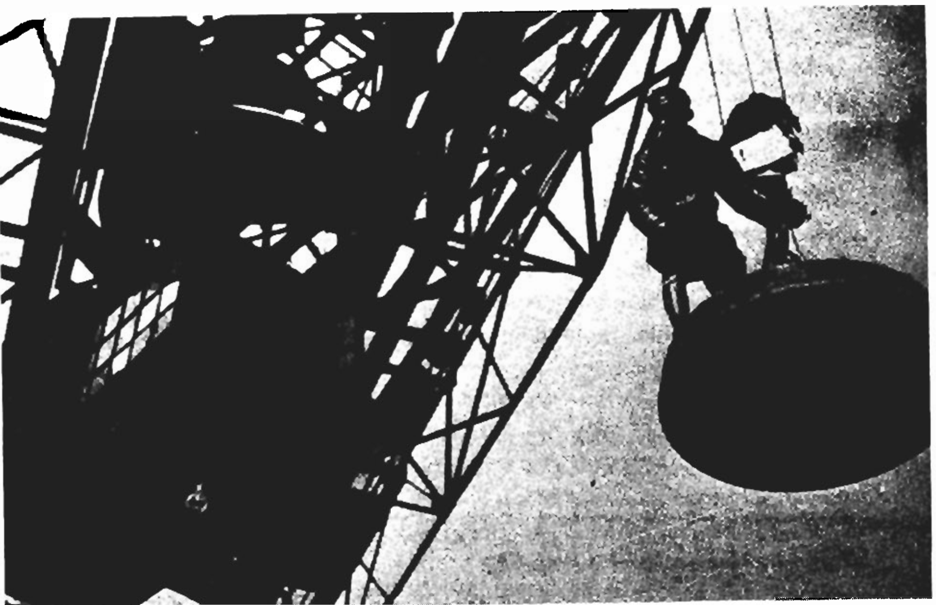
In this context Vertov and his Council of Three were able to plunge into a new kind of film journalism—while continuing to pour out manifestos. In May 1922 *Film-Truth* (*Kino-Pravda*) began to appear, usually at monthly intervals, under the banner of Kultkino. It continued until 1925 and, like the civil war newsreel, had feature-length documentaries as by-products.

The mysterious *troika* or "Council of Three" behind this venture consisted simply of Dziga Vertov himself; his wife Yelizaveta Svilova, who became film editor; and Dziga's brother Mikhail Kaufman, one year his junior, a photography enthusiast since childhood who joined Dziga after being demobilized. He became chief cameraman, soon backed by scores of other cameramen throughout the Soviet Union. Occasionally he made films independently.

The title *Kino-Pravda* was itself a kind of manifesto. The newspaper *Pravda,* founded by Lenin in 1912, had become the official government organ. The film project, in calling itself *Kino-Pravda,* seemed to assert a central role for itself. And the title epitomized Vertov doctrine—that proletarian cinema must be based on truth—"fragments of actuality"—assembled for meaningful impact.

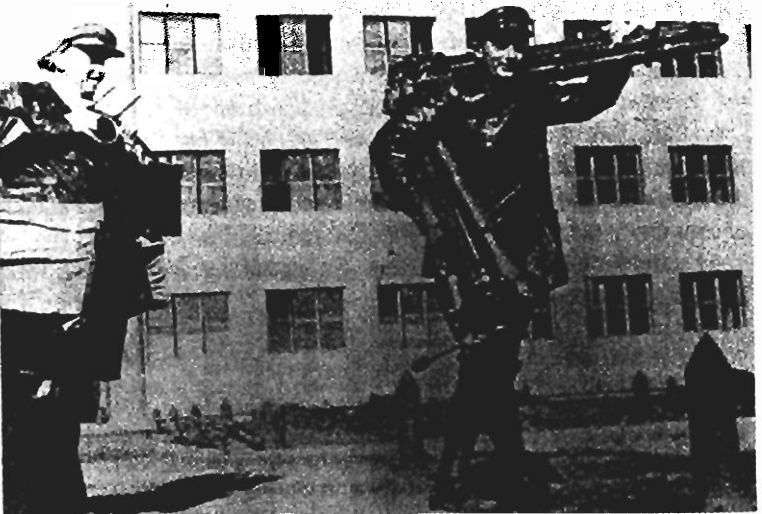
The ambitious project began in a squalid setting. Vertov described its first quarters:

> We had a basement in the center of the city. It was dark and damp, with an earthen floor and holes that you stumbled into at every turn. Large hungry rats scuttled over our feet. Somewhere above was a single window below the surface of the street; underfoot, a stream of water from dripping pipes. You had to take care that your film never touched anything but the table, or it would get wet. This dampness prevented our reels of lovingly edited film from sticking together properly, rusted our scissors and our splicers. Don't lean back on that chair, film is hanging there—as



Mikhail Kaufman and camera.

Mikhail Kaufman collection



Dziga Vertov (at right), and assistant.

Staatliches Filmarchiv der DDR

it was all over the room. Before dawn—damp—cold—teeth chattering. I wrap comrade Svilova in a *third* jacket. The last night of work so that the next two issues of *Kino-Pravda* will be ready on time.[4]

Mikhail Kaufman, later recalling these days, said they never really thought of it as hard work. It was all done as a life-necessity, "like breathing or eating." On big stories Dziga mapped strategy, assigning topics but leaving wide latitude to the cameramen. Much of the time Mikhail followed his own interests, moving about from morning till night, shooting whatever seemed important. The epoch provided the themes. His camera was constantly with him; he felt lost without it. Once he went south for a rest—without his camera. "But when I could not see it with the help of my camera, it was not beauty for me."[5]

The emphasis—harking back to Lumière—was on action caught on the run, from any revealing vantage. Permissions were never asked. Staged action was abhorred. Concealed camera positions were used to catch moments in marketplaces, factories, schools, taverns, streets.

An issue of *Film-Truth* generally took up several topics. Subject matter was seldom spectacular. This was part of its essential quality: drama was revealed in "the prose of life." It caught the moment when a Moscow trolley line, long out of operation in torn-up streets, was finally put in repair and began running again. Army tanks, used as tractors, were leveling an area for an airport. A children's hospital was trying to salvage war-starved children; a flashback to scenes of the famine period emphasized the magnitude of the task. A traveling film team was shown arriving in a town, unpacking its gear, and preparing an open-air showing; a subtitle gave information on how to arrange a visit by such a film show—write to *Kino-Pravda*. Audiences clearly valued all this. It was often the one program item touching the historical moment. But the Vertov stress on unusual, revealing camera vistas and on meaningful juxtapositions must also have contributed to the impact. The subject matter might be "prose" but the treatment was lively, vigorous, sometimes witty.

In his continuing manifestos—no longer emanating from a Council of Three but from a wider group calling itself the Cinema-Eyes, or *Kinoki*—Vertov emphasized two points. One was the superhuman versatility of the film camera. He described this with the typographical zest of futurist poetry:

Basic and essential:

FILM-PERCEPTION
OF THE WORLD

The most fundamental point: *use of the camera as a cinema-eye more perfect than the human eye for exploring the chaos of visual phenomena filling the universe.*

MAKE WAY
FOR THE
MACHINE!

The cinema-eye works and moves in time and in space, seeing and recording impressions in a way quite different from the human eye. Limitations imposed by the position of the body, or by how much we can see of any phenomenon in a second of seeing—such restrictions do not exist for the cinema-eye, which has much wider capabilities.

DOWN WITH
16 FRAMES
PER SECOND

We cannot improve our eyes, but we can always improve the camera.

Elsewhere he wrote:

. . . I am cinema-eye—I am a mechanical eye. I, a machine, show you a world such as only I can see.

From now on and for always I cast off human immobility, I move constantly, I approach and pull away from objects, I creep under them, I leap onto them, I move alongside the mouth of a galloping horse, I cut into a crowd, I run before charging troops, I turn on my back, I take off with an airplane, I fall and rise with falling and rising bodies.

Freed from the tyranny of 16–17 images per second, freed from the framework of space and time, I coordinate any and all points of the universe, wherever I may record them.

My mission is the creation of a new perception of the world. Thus I decipher in a new way a world unknown to you.

Along with the surreal capabilities of the camera, Vertov stressed the editor's role:

But it is not enough to show bits of truth on the screen, separate frames of truth. These frames must be thematically organized so that the whole is also a truth.[6]

Kinoki team. At extreme right, Mikhail Kaufman. At left, Svilova. Beside her, Ilya Kopalin, later prominent as a director.

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In synthesizing his bits, Vertov was ingenious, resourceful, even tricky. His love of technical tricks brought frequent criticism; he often appeared to use them for their own sake. But they also yielded telling symbolic moments. In *Film-Truth* issue No. 24 (1925), on the first anniversary of the death of Lenin, we see streams of people filing past the dead leader in his coffin. In the midst of this, the living Lenin appears in the corner of the screen as though still speaking to them. It was a highly emotional moment for its audiences.

The ideas and methods of the *Film-Truth* series were carried forward in several long documentaries, including *Cinema-Eye* (*Kino-Glaz,* 1924), *Forward, Soviet!* (*Shagai, Soviet!,* 1926), *One Sixth of the World* (*Shestaya Chast Mira,* 1926), and *The Eleventh Year* (*Odinnadtsati,* 1928). Among these, *One Sixth of the World* was by far the most successful in the Soviet Union, and it also had considerable vogue abroad.[7] It was marked by a use of subtitles that seemed to anticipate spoken commentary. In most earlier documentaries, each subtitle explained the following shot, or a limited group of shots. In *One Sixth of the World* a long series of short, intermittent subtitles form a continuing apostrophe, in a style reminiscent of Walt

One Sixth of the World, 1926.

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Whitman, a poet much admired by Vertov. The film presents an astonishing diversity of vivid footage from all parts of the Soviet Union, fused by the intermittent commentary addressed to all its people. "You in the small villages" . . . "You in the tundra" . . . "You on the ocean. . . ." Having established a vast geographical dispersion, the catalogue turns to nationalities: "You Uzbeks" . . . "You Kalmiks." . . . Then it addresses occupations—scores of them. Each catalogue item brings one or more shots, never long enough to halt the momentum of the invocation. The invocation and footage include young, old; men, women, children; those at work, those at play. One enormously long sentence, presented in these short bursts, appears to continue for several minutes and finally concludes with ". . . you are the owners of one sixth of the globe."

The incantation-style of commentary continues, fusing other long sequences. One of these hails elements of change, each shown in a revealing vignette or two, again involving wide geographical range and diversity: a Muslim woman emerging from her hidden status; a worker at night school, learning to read; a clinic in action.

The enthusiastic reception won by this film is not surprising. To men and women with only a dim awareness of the scope and resources of their land, and with a deep desire to believe in its destiny, *One Sixth of the World* was a prideful pageant.

"The history of Cinema-Eye," said Vertov in a 1929 lecture during a visit to Paris, "has been a relentless struggle to modify the course of world cinema, to achieve in cinema a new emphasis on the unplayed film over the played film, to substitute the document for the *mis en scène,* to break out of the proscenium of the theater and to enter the arena of life itself."[8]

But when he spoke these words, it was already clear that he had failed in this mission. In the chaos of the first post-revolution years, the reporter-documentarist had briefly won dominance. But much of what Vertov had reported was now being transmuted into legend. The means of transmutation was not documentary, but fiction. Vertov had been part of a sequence of brilliant explosions that had made Soviet cinema, in the mid-1920's, a sudden world wonder. But the focus of interest had rapidly shifted from documentary to the works of Eisenstein, Pudovkin, Dovzhenko, and others. Some of their works had a documentary look; Eisenstein himself said of *The Battleship Potemkin* (*Bronenosets Potyomkin,* 1925) that while it functioned as drama, it "looks like a newsreel of an event." This quality led some to associate it with documentary. But what Eisenstein assembled with his montage was not "fragments of actuality" but fragments of his own intense vision.

While Vertov's *One Sixth of the World* was winning acclaim, his position in the Soviet film world was slipping. His views, so fanatically argued, made him troublesome. Besides, they represented an ultimate challenge to authority. Stalin was as interested as Lenin in cinema, but was more intent on control. During the first Five Year Plan, begun in 1928, determined efforts were made to coordinate film content with political goals. Project approvals and budgets were based on detailed scenarios. Vertov's documentary ideas collided with this procedure: how could a documentarist predict—or guarantee—what truths he would find and record in the arena of life? He at first said he could not write scenarios. That attitude marked him as a man with dangerous "anti-planning" views. To continue his work, he eventually compromised, submitting documents which he preferred to call *analyses*—analyzing his intentions without specifying shots and sequences.

Thus he eventually won the chance to make a film he had long considered—on the documentary cameraman and his role in society. In this he set out to dramatize all the theories he had poured into manifestos and polemics. It would be his testament.

It was a reckless notion. At a time when technical experimentation was increasingly damned as "formalism," and the Stalinist view of "Soviet realism" increasingly favored explicit social doctrine, the new Vertov film with its intellectual pyrotechnics must have seemed a defiant gesture. Yet it became the film by which he was to be known throughout much of the world and even in the Soviet Union—in spite of mixed initial reactions.

The Man With the Movie Camera (*Chelovek s Kinoapparatom,*

The Man with the Movie Camera, 1929.

Mikhail Kaufman collection

1929) presents, on one level, a kaleidoscope of daily life in the Soviet Union: sleeping, waking, going to work, playing. At the same time it presents constant glimpses of a film cameraman—Mikhail Kaufman—in action, recording Soviet life for all to see. We see him climbing bridge spans, smokestacks, towers, roofs; riding on cars, trains, motorcycles; lying on the ground for underneath views of trains, traffic, marching men. We see the making of a film and at the same time the film that is being made. The interweaving of the two is constant and, in its playfulness, disarming, stimulating, often baffling. We get a through-the-camera view of a passerby; see him reacting to the camera; then we see the camera as seen by him, with his own reflection in the lens. The film incessantly reminds us that it is a film. The shadow of the camera is allowed to invade the shot.

In a startling sequence, action suddenly ends in a frozen frame. The frozen frame becomes a series of stills. We then see these as frames on a strip of 35mm film being examined, image by image, by a film editor—presumably Svilova. For a while, we cut back and forth between images as seen individually at the editing table, and related motion sequences in the finished film. Occasionally we also see an audience seeing the finished film. The film digresses to note parallels. A woman washing at her washbowl is linked with a window-washing shot; paper rolling through a printing press is associated with water flowing over a dam. Shots of a wedding, a death, a childbirth, a divorce, are joltingly intercut. Superimposures and trick shots become frequent as the film progresses. At one point we see a camera putting itself together, and the tripod walking off with it. Is Vertov telling us again about the superhuman abilities of the camera—or is this just playfulness? In a superimposure we see a camera on its tripod, seemingly the size of an Eiffel Tower, standing with the cameraman in the midst of a vast crowd of tiny people: a highly expressive image. Elsewhere we see a cameraman, with camera and tripod, climbing out of a glass of beer: what is Vertov telling us here? At the end of the film, camera and tripod take a bow by themselves.

Since much of the film shows Mikhail Kaufman in action, as photographed by assistants, *The Man With the Movie Camera* involves staging and contrivance to an extent previously rejected by Vertov. But the artificiality is deliberate: an avant-garde determination to suppress illusion in favor of a heightened awareness. The film is an essay on film truth, crammed with tantalizing ironies. But what did it fi-

Enthusiasm: Symphony of the Donbas, 1931.
Staatliches Filmarchiv der DDR

Three Songs of Lenin, 1934.
Staatliches Filmarchiv der DDR

nally mean for audiences? Had Vertov demonstrated the importance of the reporter as documentarist? Or had his barrage of film tricks suggested—intentionally? unintentionally?—that no documentary could be trusted? Of the brilliance of *The Man With the Movie Camera* there was never a doubt. It was dazzling in its ambiguity. Eisenstein, usually a Vertov supporter, felt he was slipping into "unmotivated camera mischief" and even "formalism."[9]

During the years following *The Man With the Movie Camera,* Vertov visited various western European countries and found audiences of *cinéastes* wildly enthusiastic. But his position continued to slip at home. The coming of sound found Vertov and Kaufman working in the studios of the Ukraine—a reflection of disfavor in Moscow. But in the Ukraine Vertov created one of the most inventive of early sound films, *Enthusiasm: Symphony of the Donbas* (*Entuziazm: Simphonya Donbassa,* 1931). Its effective use of non-synchronous sound undoubtedly reflected his early "audio-laboratory" experiments. Subsequently he completed a film he had long planned, built to some extent on cherished Lenin footage—*Three Songs of Lenin* (*Tri Pesni o Leninye,* 1934). Each of its three segments uses music as its cohesive force: the first is a celebration of achievement; the second, a dirge;

the third, a marching song. Unassuming, deeply felt, it has gradually won the status of a Vertov classic.

Vertov continued to work and produce, but he finally settled into the anonymity of a newsreel editing desk. He ended where he had begun, but no longer writing manifestos or polemics.

He had given the reporter-as-documentarist a moment at the center of cinema, and had influenced others. The importance he had given the newsreel set the stage for several careers. Notable was that of Esfir Shub (1894–1959), who during the NEP period had worked in Moscow as subtitler and editor of foreign films—preparing such items as Pearl White serials and Fritz Lang's *Doctor Mabuse* for Russian audiences. But she had a documentary fervor and repeatedly asked for permission to study old newsreels as feature-film material. After many refusals, this permission was finally granted, and in 1926 she went into action. Among the footage she studied, analyzed, and painstakingly catalogued was material accumulated by the Museum of the Revolution—much of it unmarked, disintegrating, and stored in rusty cans in Leningrad cellars. Here her months of work were rewarded by a historic find—one she had hoped for but almost despaired to achieve. A collection of "counterrevolutionary film" turned out to be the home movies of Tsar Nicholas II. They became a key element in her immensely absorbing feature-length documentary, *The Fall of the Romanov Dynasty* (*Padeniye Dinasti Romanovikh,* 1927).[10]

The long-time newsreel obsession with royalty, and the Tsar's own devotion to film—as in various other royal households, a court cinematographer had immortalized birthday celebrations, tennis matches, croquet games, boating parties, and innumerable rituals—now boomeranged in overwhelming fashion. Placed meticulously in proper time context along with footage of war, strikes, munitions assembly lines, arrests of troublemakers, breadlines, the "counterrevolutionary film" proved to have powerful pro-revolutionary impact. Brief subtitles were used to document or explain individual shots: we are told that the legislative body, the Duma, included 241 landowners, seven workers. We see endless parades of religious dignitaries, in opulent garb. Officers in dress uniform dance the mazurka at a battleship deck party. A subtitle occasionally makes a sharp propaganda stab. A close shot of a munitions assembly line is explained in these words: "The hands of workers preparing the death of their brothers."

The Fall of the Romanov Dynasty used documents of the years

1912–17. Its success led to two similar Esfir Shub projects: *The Great Road* (*Veliky Put,* 1927), covering the period 1917–27; and *The Russia of Nicholas II and Leo Tolstoy* (*Rossiya Nikolaya II i Lev Tolstoy,* 1928), dealing with 1896–1912. The three form an epic trilogy of Russian history from the birth of cinema to 1927.

Esfir Shub's scholarly achievement played an important role in encouraging the development of film archives. Her later editing work concentrated on other kinds of cinema, but she returned occasionally to the genre of newsreel compilation which she had so notably advanced.

The repertorial documentary pioneered by Vertov attracted other Russian film makers of the 1920's and resulted in some masterworks. The most celebrated was probably *Turksib* (1929), by Victor Turin, a feature-length film on the building of the Turkestan-Siberia railway. Turin's organization of his huge project, and his success in giving it cumulative dramatic impact, won wide admiration and influenced documentary film makers throughout the world. The Whitmanesque style of the subtitles, linking long sequences, was reminiscent of *One Sixth of the World* and, like Vertov's film, seemed to anticipate spoken commentary. Turin's tracing of small mountain rivulets into a raging, swollen river has been widely imitated. A memorable sequence—introduced with the simple title "Strangers . . ."—shows people in a remote Turkestan desert village watching the arrival of surveyors. This sets the stage for a later climactic sequence in which an engine for the first time arrives on the new track. Men—some on horseback—come cautiously to look it over as it stands at rest, puffing quietly. As the engine starts up, the terror of the horses and men and their temporary retreat provide fascinatingly authentic moments. Later we see them joyfully racing the engine across vast plains.

Another remarkable achievement in journalistic documentary, of special interest because it represented early Soviet observation abroad, was Yakov Blyokh's *Shanghai Document* (*Shanghaisky Dokument,* 1928). Blyokh generally worked in fiction and had assisted Eisenstein in the production of *The Battleship Potemkin.* In *Shanghai Document* he portrayed, in revealing actuality material, a city of divided societies: the suppressed, swarming Chinese, and the heavily armed concessions of the International Settlement. The final portion of the film reflects the rise of revolutionary resistance and the strife between various Chinese factions. It touches briefly on the bloody

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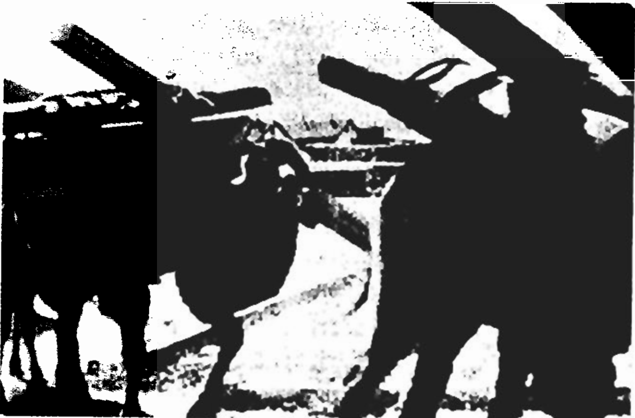

Turksib, 1929.

Shanghai Document, 1928.

Salt for Svanetia, 1930.

slaughter in Shanghai by forces of Chiang Kai-shek as he sought to consolidate his anti-communist regime. *Shanghai Document* emerged as a film of great historic interest.

Another impressive reportorial project was *Salt for Svanetia* (*Sol Svanetii,* 1930) by Mikhail Kalatozov. It pictures a starkly isolated mountain community between the Black and Caspian seas. Culturally bizarre in its fierce isolation, it is also seen to suffer in strange ways from a total lack of salt. As we see a farmer lie in a field to rest from his labor, a cow comes to lick the sweat from his brow. When he urinates, cattle lick his urine. As a baby is born, a dog is at hand to lick the placental fluid from its body. The climax of the film is the coming of a Soviet-built road, which will bring salt to Svanetia.

The Stalin regime apparently felt that Kalatozov had been far too fascinated by the backwardness and superstition of Svanetia, and too perfunctorily interested in the socialist solution. The film was considered unbalanced and unfair to Svanetia. Kalatozov was for a time in disfavor—an increasingly frequent occurrence during this period.*

Another memorable documentary was *Moscow* (*Moskva,* 1927), made by Vertov's brother Mikhail Kaufman in collaboration with Ilya Kopalin, also a Vertov co-worker. It presented an absorbing kaleidoscope of life in the Soviet capital. Still another was Mikhail Kaufman's *In Spring* (*Vesnoy,* 1930), much admired by contemporaries but seldom seen abroad in original form. Portraying the springtime devastation of rain and flood—preliminaries to rebirth—Kaufman makes spring a metaphor for revolution. Portions dealing with this theme, in which religion is seen as a distortion of the symbolism of spring, were generally excised abroad.

Vertov's influence went beyond documentary. Many observers felt that he influenced fiction films of the 1920's, in that his work and polemics helped to turn them away from earlier artificialities. Thus he may have strengthened the Soviet fiction film, though he scarcely intended to do so. There may also be a Vertov influence in the use of climactic actuality sequences in a number of fiction films—as in Kuleshov's celebrated satire *The Extraordinary Adventures of Mr. West in the Land of the Bolsheviks* (*Neobychainiye Priklucheniya Mistera Vesta v Stranye Bolshevikov,* 1924) and in Ermler's *Fragment of an*

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* Decades later, Kalatozov scored a world-wide success with *The Cranes Are Flying.*

In Spring, 1930.

Mikhail Kaufman collection

In Spring, 1930.

Empire (*Oblomok Imperii,* 1929). Both end with tours of restored and rebuilt Moscow: in the first, serving to disabuse the American Mr. West of his preconceptions of Soviet life; in the second, opening the eyes of a long-time victim of amnesia who had lost his memory during a battle of the revolutionary war, and regains it a decade later. The film has a *Rip Van Winkle* pattern: the hero is suddenly confronted with the vast changes that have taken place.

The work of Dziga Vertov and of those he influenced had unquestionable propaganda values for the Soviet government in the early and middle 1920's. Yet Vertov thought of himself not as a propagandist, but as a reporter: his mission was to get out the news. Conflict—or potential conflict—between the obligations of a journalist and the demands of doctrine was not yet sensed as a problem in the early Vertov days. This happy moment passed quickly.

During the Stalin period increasing international tension, increasing fear of encirclement, increasing armament production and secrecy, along with pressures on film makers to support policy and tactics, all this laid a heavy hand on fiction and documentary alike. A golden film moment—brief, like many a renascence in the arts—was over, and the spotlight shifted elsewhere.

Painter

All the arts were shaken by the rise of film. Practitioners of other arts re-examined their own roles, assailed cinema, staked out new positions for themselves, developed isms to fortify them, appropriated elements from cinema, wrote manifestos. Some transferred their main interest to film.

In the 1920's painters infiltrated in numbers into the film world. Along with sculptors, musicians, writers, architects, still photographers, and others they joined cine-clubs—the first was formed in Paris in 1924—to look at films, talk about films, and present their own experiments. The cine-club was in part a protest against the commercialism of cinema; even more, a recognition of its power over men.

Painters inevitably brought with them ideas and ways different from those of other film makers. Plot and climax were not among their habitual concerns. They tended to think of film as a pictorial art in which light was the medium, and which involved fascinating

composition problems in that the interrelationship of forms was always evolving, developing unexpected and mysterious dynamics. They were also interested in texture and its interplay with light.

In 1921 two painters who had been members of a Zurich avant-garde movement—the Swedish Viking Eggeling and the German Hans Richter—began joint experiments in abstract film. Richter admired the "perfect order" of Eggeling's abstract paintings—"as clear as Bach." Together they hoped to generate a Bach-like feeling from movements counterpointed on the screen in fugue-like patterns. At first their experiments seemed remote from documentary, but they acquired a documentary link. The artists often photographed familiar objects—"fragments of actuality" in Vertov parlance—and used them as the basis for their interplaying movements. Thus they carried the ideas of Vertov to an ultimate conclusion. The artist was beginning with actuality, then creating his own expressive synthesis.[1]

Any sort of actuality could be used as a basis for such abstractions. Richter made his *Racing Symphony* (*Rennsymphonie,* 1928) from horse-race footage, which he organized into complex overlapping patterns. It was Muybridge fused with abstractionism.

A striking example of this abstract-documentary trend was *Ballet Mécanique* (1925) by the French artist Fernand Léger and the American artist Dudley Murphy. It won such vogue that Léger considered abandoning painting for film. Much of it is a composition built out of moving gears, levers, pendulums, eggbeaters, and other items. Its most celebrated sequence shows a cleaning woman climbing a flight of stairs. It was so edited that just as the woman appears to reach the top, she is seen to be at the bottom again. The effect is repeated many times, and audiences acquire an agonizing desire to see the upward journey completed. In this sequence, suggesting the degradation of repetitious labor, the film had strong philosophic overtones.

The work of Jean Painlevé gave the avant-garde film makers a link with science. Trained as a biologist, he experimented with photography of underwater life—sometimes in speeded, sometimes in slowed motion, often hugely magnified, and always artfully lighted—producing astonishing studies in the surrealism of natural phenomena, with their bizarre shapes and movements. Starting in 1928 with *Devilfish* (*Le Pieuvre*), *Stickleback Eggs* (*Oeufs d'Épinoche*), and *Sea Urchins* (*Les Oursins*), he later won wide celebrity with his *Sea Horse* (*L'Hippocampe,* 1934) for which Darius Milhaud composed an accompaniment.

Most such experiments circulated largely in cine-clubs. But in 1927 one painter-documentarist, Walther Ruttman, released a work of such impact that it created a genre, which established itself in theatrical cinema.

Walther Ruttman (1887–1941) was born in Frankfurt, Germany. Along with painting, he studied architecture and music. He became a successful designer of posters. Admiring Viking Eggeling, he also became an early film experimenter, and in 1924 created a nightmarish dream sequence about black hawks for Fritz Lang's films on the *Nibelungen* saga. He also admired Dziga Vertov and Sergei Eisenstein. All these influences seemed to come together in *Berlin: Symphony of the City* (*Berlin: die Sinfonie der Grosstadt,* 1927), directed and edited by Ruttman and photographed by Karl Freund. It was by no means the first film about a great city; predecessors included Kaufman and Kopalin's *Moscow* and numerous short films including *Mannahatta* (1921) by the Americans Paul Strand and Charles Sheeler, and an earlier venture by a Swedish visitor to New York, Julius Jaenzon—*New York 1911.* But none of these had so strikingly suggested a painting heritage, and none spurred so many imitations. *Berlin* started a wave of "city symphonies," to which Ruttman himself later contributed films on Düsseldorf, Stuttgart, and Hamburg.

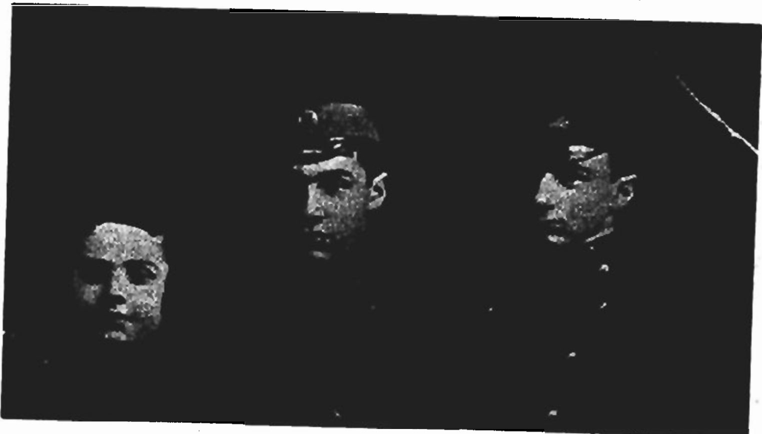
In *Berlin: Symphony of the City* the word "symphony" is significant. Ruttman was interested in rhythms and patterns. People form part of the patterns, but Ruttman is not especially interested in the people themselves. The film depicts a day in the life of the city: this dawn-to-dusk progression is the only "plot." An early morning entrance into the city, by railroad, opens the film. It is an extraordinarily dynamic opening, and characteristically devoid of human content. It is compounded of telephone lines bobbing up and down along the track, stroboscopic patterns of railroad bridge beams, tracks dividing and coming together as seen from the front of the train, jiggling movements of couplings—all these intercut with glimpses of landscape, changing from rural to metropolitan to industrial. In the city we first see a quiet sequence of empty streets, restfully interlaced; then the city awakes via a catalogue of opening shutters, blinds, curtains, windows, doors. All manner of machinery gradually goes into

action. Machines are a major interest throughout and are often seen without human operators. An office sequence gives us frenzy compounded of typewriter and telephone activity. Eisenstein "shock" editing techniques are here injected: in the midst of phone calls we see monkeys chattering, dogs lunging at each other. Such animal-human intercutting is done at several points. A symphonic score by Edmund Meisel was composed to accompany the film, and was featured in big-city showings.[2]

In France the Brazilian artist Alberto Cavalcanti was at the same time making a strikingly similar film, *Only the Hours* (*Rien Que Les Heures,* 1926), about dawn-to-dusk life in Paris. Cavalcanti had been trained in Brazil for a career in architecture, but in Paris he moved into scene design, and from there into film experimentation. His Parisian film, begun after Ruttman's *Berlin* but completed and released earlier, is less severely compartmentalized. It had moments of humor, rare in Ruttman. Its opening suggests a Vertov trick: elegant ladies are seen descending a stairway, as though we are beginning a Hollywood high-life movie. But the action freezes: a pair of hands picks up the frozen frame, which has become a still photograph, and tears it into bits; the bits become garbage on a street. This is no Hollywood dream-movie, Cavalcanti is telling us; actuality will be the theme.

Rich-poor contrasts are suggested throughout the film, but no meanings are developed from them: rich and poor are mere threads in the fabric of city life. As in Ruttman's work, pattern and design are dominant interests. Over a girl selling newspapers Cavalcati superimposes a swirling ballet of newspaper titles and headlines. Paris as seen by various painters forms another such montage composition; another is developed from movie posters. Cavalcanti loves tricks. We see a gentleman eating a steak for lunch; over the center of his plate —replacing the steak—Cavalcanti superimposes a slaughterhouse scene. The fancy design of the luncheon plate remains visible, framing bloody mayhem. Cavalcanti wanders from topic to topic. He uses a few staged scenes, sometimes embarrassingly amateurish. He lacks Ruttman's sense of organization, but seems far more genial.[3]

Another city symphony also involved a foreigner drawn to Paris. He was Boris Kaufman, brother of Dziga Vertov and Mikhail Kaufman, and youngest of the three by a number of years. During the chaos of Russian civil war his parents had taken him back to Poland,



The three Kaufman brothers—before the Russian Revolution.

Mikhail Kaufman collection

and a few years later he went to Paris for study. He corresponded with Mikhail, who attempted to give him cinematography instruction by mail. In Paris Boris was able to see a number of Dziga Vertov films, and he saw Dziga when the latter visited France. Boris inevitably gravitated toward cinematography, making admired film studies of the Seine and the Champs Élysées. These led to a collaboration with a brilliant young *cinéaste,* Jean Vigo.[4]

Jean Vigo (1905–34), son of a radical journalist of Basque descent who had died mysteriously in jail, was educated in various boarding schools. A siege of tuberculosis made him settle in Nice, a resort which fascinated and revolted him. He became assistant in a photo studio, and a leading force in the Nice cine-club. Corresponding with film experimenters far and wide to secure films for his cine-club programs, he became saturated with film theory and determined to make films of his own. In 1929 he invited Boris Kaufman to Nice to work with him, and the collaboration resulted in *On the Subject of Nice* (*À Propos de Nice*), released the following year.

Kaufman photographed, Vigo directed. Vigo often wheeled Kaufman up and down the boardwalk in a wheelchair; Kaufman had a camouflaged camera in his lap. Wheelchairs were common enough in Nice to pass unnoticed, and this facilitated catching action unaware. Kaufman and Vigo were both committed to this *Kino-Pravda* approach; if someone became aware of being photographed, they

À Propos de Nice, 1930.

Cinémathèque Française

stopped instantly. At the same time, Vigo wanted a personal film—*point de vue documenté,* he called it. The maker of such documentaries, Vigo later told an audience in Paris, should be "thin enough to squeeze through a Romanian keyhole and shoot Prince Carol getting up in his nightshirt"—if the spectacle proved interesting—and "small enough . . . to squat under the chair of the croupier, the great god of the Casino at Monte Carlo."

In Nice the collaborators did not succeed in squatting under the croupier's chair, but they made up for it with ingenuity. Early in their film is a device characteristic of city-symphony films. On a chessboard, in evening clothes, we see some small dolls—somewhat like those used on wedding cakes. Suddenly a croupier's rake sweeps them away. This movement is at once followed by a matching movement in which a streetcleaner sweeps away rubbish: in Nice, each batch of tourists becomes tomorrow's garbage.

À Propos de Nice has many similarities to other city films, but adds an edge of biting satire. Vigo felt that he was portraying "the last twitchings of a society that neglects its own responsibilities to the

point of giving you nausea and making you an accomplice in a revolutionary solution."

Vigo, with Kaufman at the camera, later directed two brilliant fiction films—*Zéro de Conduite* and *L'Atalante.* But his first film remained a documentary landmark. Vigo died at the age of twenty-nine.

The city symphonies, while initiated by a painter, represented a crossbreeding of all the arts. This was a natural outcome of the ferment of the cine-clubs, where the interrelationship of the arts was constantly discussed. The cine-clubs were in touch with each other, often propelling each other along parallel lines. Many film makers toured the cine-clubs with their films.

In the Belgian seaside town of Ostende, where many artists worked, a cine-club was founded by Henri Storck, son of the leading shoemaker. Sooner or later everyone came to the shoe store, so Storck as a boy already knew many Ostende artists and considered a painting career. But a store opposite the shoe shop was converted into a theater, and night after night he fell asleep to laughter and piano music from across the street; trips to the store-cinema soon saturated him in melodrama and comedy. Then a visit to Brussels and its cine-club—the first in Belgium—showed him films of other kinds. The program included Flaherty's *Moana,* and it was a revelation to him. His immediate response was the organizing of the Ostende cine-club, for which he recruited local painters, sculptors, writers, musicians, while seeking advice from other cine-clubs. He began an intense correspondence with Jean Vigo in Nice. Finally, in 1930, his own film *Images of Ostende* (*Images d'Ostende*) began the round of the cine-clubs. Storck visited some of them with his film, meeting many film makers. In Paris he got advice from Boris Kaufman. He also met young Joris Ivens, a moving spirit in the Amsterdam cine-club, the Filmliga, or film-league.[5]

Joris Ivens managed the Amsterdam branch of his father's photographic business while pursuing university studies. At the Filmliga his first enthusiasm had been for the abstract films sent to them—in some cases, *brought* to them—from Germany by Ruttman, Eggeling, Richter, and others. Ivens's own early work took a similar direction. In *The Bridge* (*De Brug,* 1928) he concentrated on the complex action involving a Rotterdam railroad bridge. Its middle section was raised and lowered to let ships pass underneath and trains pass overhead. As

Joris Ivens editing, 1928.

Nederlands Filmmuseum

it moved, counterweights moved in the opposite direction. These movements, plus those of streaking trains, chugging boats, billowing smoke, waves, and traffic in the city beyond, made the bridge "a laboratory of movements, tones, shapes, contrasts, rhythms, and the relations between all of these." Day after day Ivens, climbing on the bridge during lunchtime intervals, searched out expressive angles. He discovered the joy and rewards of prolonged viewing. "You will always discover something new, the countermovement of a gliding shadow, a significant trembling as the cables come to a halt, or a more telling reflection. . . ."

The Bridge prepared Ivens for his later film *Rain* (*Regen*, 1929), a gem-like study made with the writer Mannus Franken and with help from John Fernhout—later known as Ferno. It appears to portray a passing shower in Amsterdam, but the footage required four months of shooting. With extraordinary beauty and precision, Ivens portrays the patterns made by rain—at first gentle, later of mounting violence—falling in puddles, gutters, canals, rivers, running down windows, umbrellas, wagons, cars, bicycles, dripping from gutters, spouts, umbrella spokes, and limbs of statues. The film starts modestly but develops richness and complexity; we are seeing a great city

Filming *Rain*, 1929.

Nederlands Filmmuseum—Van Dongen collection

Rain, 1929.

Nederlands Filmmuseum

through the lens of rain. Made under the influence of the painter-as-documentarist genre, *Rain* was perhaps its most perfect product.[6]

The late 1920's produced other films in the genre, large and small: in Paris, Man Ray's *Emak Bakia* (1927), built on light patterns from rotating objects; in Belgium, Charles Dekeukeleire's *Boxing Match* (*Combat de Boxe,* 1927), in which boxing footage becomes raw material for editing experiments; in the United States, Ralph Steiner's *H_2O* (1929), a montage of water patterns; in Germany, Wilfried Basse's *Market in the Wittenbergplatz* (*Markt am Wittenbergplatz,* 1929), in which the erection and later dismantling of market stalls are dramatically compressed through time-lapse photography; in France, Eugene Deslaw's *The Electric Night* (*La Nuit Électrique,* 1930), a small symphony of Parisian illuminated signs. And the genre persisted.

But the painter-as-documentarist had only a brief moment of glory. There were reasons. His spurt of activity came at the last moment of the silent film. With the arrival of the spoken word, images were suddenly downgraded. Games of movement and texture were, for the moment, almost forgotten. Furious aesthetic battles over the uses of sound took their place.

This transition coincided with another: from prosperity to economic collapse and world-wide depression. The two transitions were not unrelated: the cinema transition to sound had been started as a desperate gamble by producers facing economic ruin.

To the documentary film the two transitions brought sharp change. During the 1920's explorer, journalist, artist, and others had experimented with the moving image in a spirit that was usually zestful and optimistic. Their films had seldom been contentious. But economic collapse brought tension and strife. Ideological combat began to dominate all media. Documentary film, acquiring the spoken word at this precise moment, was inevitably called on to join the battle. In the documentary field, the word-film became an instrument of struggle.

John Grierson.

Photograph by Virginia Leirens

Advocate

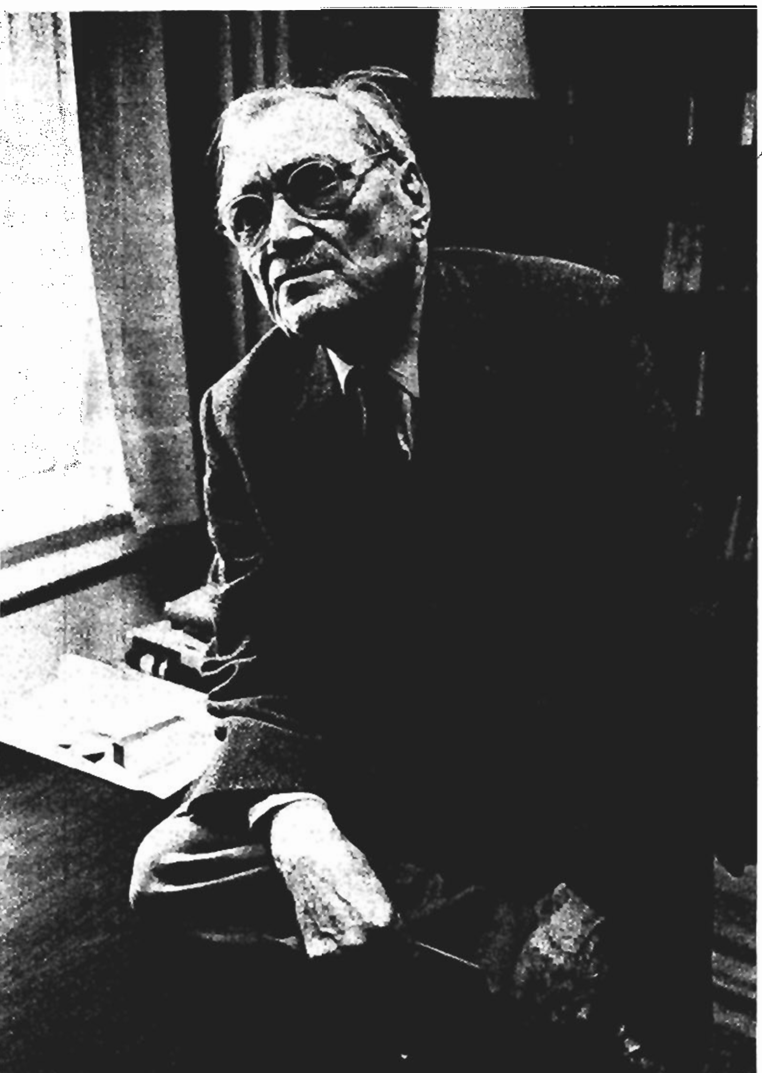
When John Grierson (1898–1972), son of a Scots schoolmaster and grandson of a lighthouse keeper, was studying at Glasgow University and earning distinction in moral philosophy, he was already thinking about film. He sensed that film and other popular media had acquired leverage over ideas and actions once exercised by church and school. These thoughts became the mainspring of his life.

A Rockefeller Foundation grant took him to the United States in 1924 for research in social sciences. While studying at the University of Chicago he crisscrossed the land interviewing film makers, scholars, politicians, journalists. Above all, he observed the American melting pot in action. And he began to feel—with Walter Lippmann—that expectations once held for democracy were proving illusory. Problems facing society had grown beyond the comprehension of most citizens; their participation had become perfunctory, apathetic, meaningless, often nonexistent.[1]

While Lippmann was pessimistic about all this, Grierson was not: he saw a solution. The documentary film maker, dramatizing issues and their implications in a meaningful way, could lead the citizen through the wilderness. This became the Grierson mission.

That this implied an assumption of leadership, of an elitist role, did not trouble Grierson. He believed in "the elect having their duty." They must not only explain, they must inspire. He was not frightened by the word "propaganda." He could even say: "I look on cinema as a pulpit. . . ."[2]

In the United States Grierson met Robert Flaherty, with whom he began a lifelong, stormy hate-love relationship, hailing Flaherty as the father of documentary while deploring his obsession with the remote and primitive. Grierson's determination was to "bring the citizen's eye in from the ends of the earth to the story, his own story, of what was happening under his nose . . . . the drama of the doorstep." In this respect Grierson felt more drawn to the social relevance of Russian cinema. In New York, Grierson helped prepare *The Battleship Potemkin* for American audiences. This involved some tampering with the film, and months of struggle with New York State censors. The task gave him a detailed familiarity with Eisenstein's



Grierson: "I look on cinema as a pulpit . . ."

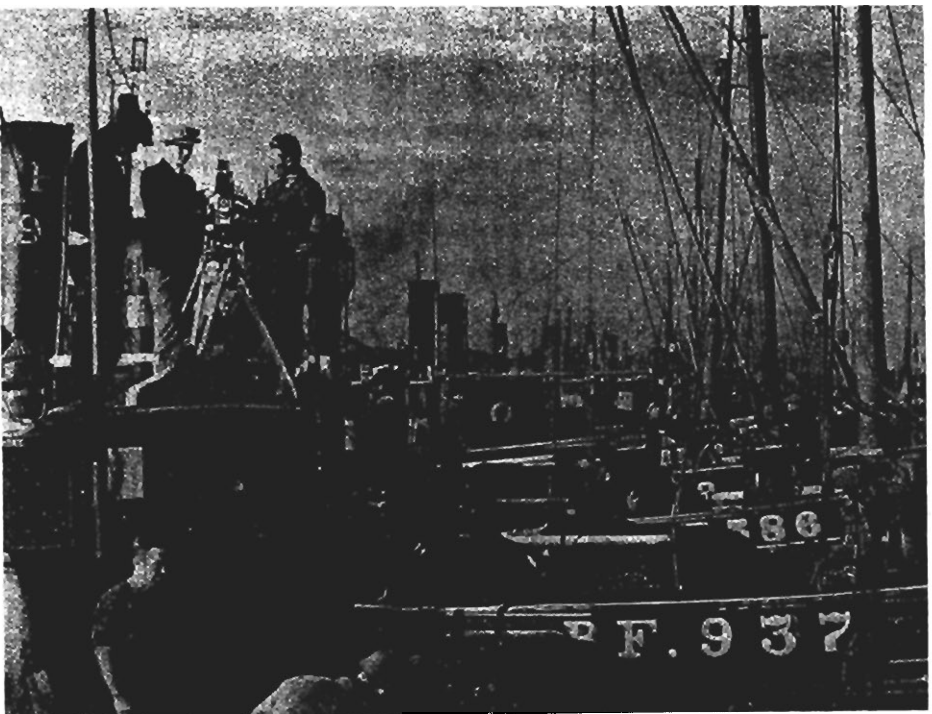
National Film Archive

editing techniques, which became a further major influence on his own film ideas.

Early in 1927 Grierson was back in England, visiting the Empire Marketing Board to call on its chief, Sir Stephen Tallents, who found him "brimming with ideas." The Empire Marketing Board was intended to cement the British Empire by promoting trade and a sense of unity among its various parts, and it was attempting this through posters, pamphlets, exhibitions. The next step, argued Grierson, must be film; Tallents already held the same view. But this required a meeting of minds with the Financial Secretary of the Treasury, Arthur Michael Samuel, who was considered the leading authority on the herring industry and who was flatly opposed to film. Grierson met this problem with a characteristic head-on approach. He came to the meeting recommending immediate production of a film on the herring industry. The result was an appropriation of £2500, with which Grierson produced and directed his first film, the fifty-minute silent film *Drifters*, photographed by Basil Emmott. It was premiered at the London Film Society late in 1929.

The society, a pioneer in the cine-club movement, had been formed in 1925. Programs of previous years had suggested an art-for-art's-sake orientation, with films like *Mannahatta, Berlin: Symphony of the City,* and *Rien Que les Heures*. The program of November 10, 1929, was representative of a shift. The main attraction was the Grierson version of *The Battleship Potemkin,* with *Drifters* as an added item. *The Battleship Potemkin* was, by British censorship decision, forbidden to theaters—but not to the London Film Society, a private group. As films grew more issue-oriented, this private status tended to make the society a place where forbidden films could be seen—usually leftist, sometimes Russian. The London Film Society, already tending leftward in its membership, became more so during the Depression years; the same was true of cine-clubs in many countries.

The *Potemkin* unveiling was a total triumph, and some London Film Society members were even more impressed with *Drifters*. Vigorously paced and imaginatively edited—some felt they saw an Eisenstein influence, but the style was less obtrusive—it brought the daily work of the herring fisheries to life in a way that astonished the audience. There was nothing doctrinally radical about it, but the fact that British workingmen—virtually ignored by British cinema except as



Shooting *Drifters*, 1929. Above, Grierson directing.
National Film Archive

comedy material—were the heroes gave the film an almost revolutionary impact. In a British cinema grown stale with artificiality, it was a breath of salty sea air. The film went on to a successful run in theaters.

Drifters made clear the Grierson deviation from Flaherty. The herring fisheries, a subtitle tells us, used to be a thing of quaint old villages; the men still lived in the old villages, but the fishing had meanwhile become "an epic of steam and steel." Grierson gives only the briefest glimpse of the quaint old villages; his eye is on the steam and steel. Flaherty would have chosen otherwise. Amid churning sea and rolling ship, Grierson shows us in vivid detail "the teamwork of man and machine." Final scenes depict quayside auctioning of the catch and project the herring business into international trade—"a market for the world." Grierson must have had the Empire Marketing Board in mind in his final subtitle: "So to the ends of the earth goes the harvest of the sea."

The success of *Drifters* meant a new career for Grierson. Instead of directing further films, he became creative organizer; at the Empire Marketing Board he assembled untrained recruits and proceeded to turn them into a bustling EMB Film Unit, finding funds for them to function, goading them, teaching them—and meanwhile shielding them fanatically from bureaucratic interference. That all this called for a special kind of genius may be seen in the paradox of his position. His mandate and funds were from sources intent on consolidating the status quo and the British Empire. This was true of the Empire Marketing Board as well as of other entities, such as the Ceylon Tea Propaganda Board, that underwrote specific projects. Grierson's recruits, almost without exception, were socialistically inclined activists inspired by *Drifters* and *Potemkin*. After *Drifters* they flocked to the Grierson banner.

In a sense, all were learning together. The EMB Film Unit grew from a staff of two at the start of 1930 to over thirty in 1933. Most of the young recruits had little or no professional experience. For Edgar Anstey, Arthur Elton, Stuart Legg, the chief preparation had been London Film Society screenings. Paul Rotha, a Film Society member from the start, was already a film scholar and had written *The Film Till Now* (1930), but he had not produced or directed films. Basil Wright had done one avant-garde experiment, Vertov-inspired. All these men were in their early twenties. Grierson himself, with only *Drifters* behind him, scarcely had a start on the staff and was only a few years their senior. Yet he assumed at once an almost god-like position among them, dominating them with a "fierce benevolence." He was "the chief."

While handling sponsor negotiations, he managed to supervise all on-going projects. The viewing of rushes, or of an edited workprint, could be an intimidating occasion. The fledgling director would notify Grierson's aide, the soft-spoken J. P. R. Golightly, when the material was ready; then he would wait in the projection room. After a time Grierson would crash in and sit down. "Right. Shoot." His concentration on the film was total; then came a rapid stream of comments, which might range from lens choice to philosophical context. They were often a mixture of encouragement and stern reprimand. "Anstey, you've failed badly here." (He always used last names.) Identifying points of failure, he left solutions to the director; when the latter found a solution, Grierson gave full credit. "There,

you've done it—pure genius." The staff, all tyros, seemed to welcome the tyrannical supervision, even when it was brutal.[3]

The atmosphere was strangely monastic. Working hours were limitless. Staff members got the impression that marriage was taboo, and the existence of girl-friends was kept from Grierson. Grierson himself fell for Margaret Taylor, sister of staff member John Taylor, and they got married, but Grierson did not mention it for eighteen months. She went to work at the unit, but they never arrived or left together. Harry Watt, who joined the unit in 1932, thought of Grierson as a "Presbyterian priest." Another recruit, William Coldstream, wondered whether the preference for film themes of work and corporate effort—never involving the intimacy of a Flaherty film—had something to do with Grierson's fastidiousness about personal matters. Yet Grierson and his staff spent hours at the pub together, drinking and talking. In a way these were seminars, heady and memorable, crammed with pungent observation.[4]

Beginning with mere scraps of equipment, the EMB Film Unit was confronted at once with problems of sound. To inspire and educate his staff, and to give the unit prestige, Grierson brought two celebrated names into the work. From France came the Brazilian Alberto Cavalcanti, who proved invaluable in sound experiments. From America came Robert Flaherty, to do photography for *Industrial Britain* (1933). Of his participation Grierson said later: "The amount of money put aside for Flaherty was £2,500, so I probably fired him by the time he spent £2,400. . . . We'd finish it within the £2,500 all right."[5] In fact, the group made several films from the Flaherty footage. All bore the Grierson rather than the Flaherty stamp.

Grierson importuned his staff to avoid the "aestheticky." He told them they were propagandists first, film makers second. Art is a hammer, not a mirror, he said. It was part of Grierson's genius that he could build an atmosphere of enthusiasm for necessary, vital propaganda without ever being quite clear about its aim, other than the general idea that it was citizenship education, looking toward a better and richer life. For many staff members it was enough that, like *Drifters,* their work was giving new dignity to the working man. "Every film we made," said Harry Watt, "had this in it, that we were trying to give an image of the workingman, away from the Edwardian, Victorian, capitalist attitudes." Looking at issues from a workingman's point of view, some films—such as *Housing Problems* (1935) and *Coal Face* (1936)—sounded a note of protest and of urgent need for reform. In this, Watt felt, they were suspect to many in government, and living on a razor's edge. "Not many of us were communists, but we were all socialists and I'm sure we had dossiers. . . ." For a time they were apparently observed by a secret-service operative in the guise of a trainee film-editor. All this kept them sharply aware of the political limits inherent in government sponsorship—a favorite subject of Grierson admonitions. Yet the emotional center of the output was pro-labor. They were giving the workingman his rightful place.

The sponsors had a different rationale. In later years Grierson explained it in these terms:

> When it came to making industry not ugly for people, but a matter of beauty, so that people would accept their industrial selves, so that they would not revolt against their industrial selves, as they did in the late 19th century, who initiated the finding of beauty in industry? The British government—as a matter of policy.[6]

That their task was to nurture a more amenable labor force would have surprised the film staff. Grierson avoided such problems by putting himself firmly between sponsor and artist.

But the ambiguous relationship is implicit in many of the films. *Song of Ceylon* (1935)—directed, photographed, and edited by Basil Wright with the assistance of teenaged trainee John Taylor—is perhaps the most brilliant example.

The film is in four parts: (1) The Buddha, (2) The Virgin Land, (3) The Voices of Commerce, (4) The Apparel of a God. Wright was clearly enthralled by the Ceylonese people, and conveys his admiration throughout the film. The film was sponsored by the Ceylon Tea Propaganda Board, but the tea trade does not enter the film until the third part, when its activities are introduced on the sound track.

The first two parts, portraying the Ceylonese and their heritage, are of special interest. Accompanying scenes of extraordinary beauty, Wright uses passages from a travel book of 1680 written by Robert Knox. Thus the antiquity of Ceylonese culture is dramatically emphasized: we hear age-old words that were still applicable in British-ruled Ceylon. The words are linked with photographed action:

> COMMENTARY: . . . But husbandry is the great employment of the people. In this the best men labour; nor is it held any disgrace to work for

Song of Ceylon, 1935.

National Film Archive

oneself be it at home or in the fields; but to work for hire with them is reckoned for a great shame, and very few are here to be found who will work so. They are very active and nimble in their limbs and very ingenious, and all things they have need of, except ironwork, they make and do themselves, insomuch as they all build their own houses.

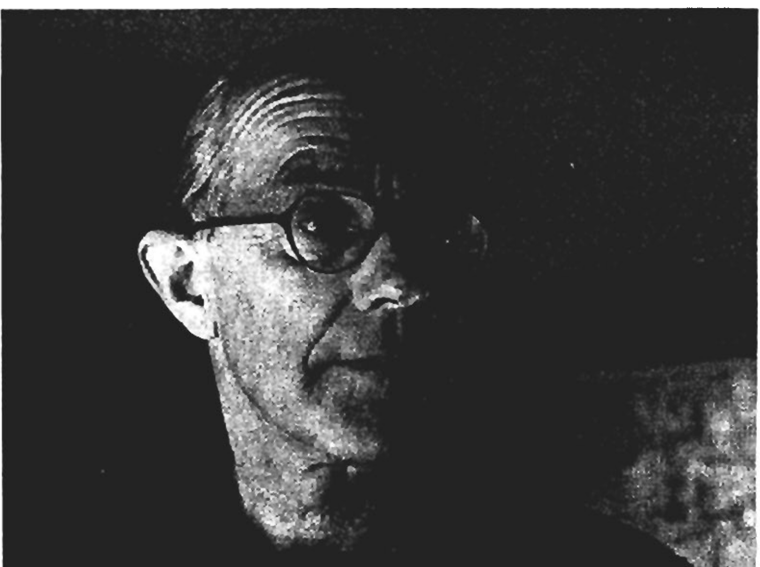
In the third part we continue to see handsome people, but commerce enters the sound track with a montage of voices: market quotations of tea prices, telephone orders, invoices, mail inquiries. The sequence ends with "faithfully yours . . . faithfully yours . . . faithfully yours." The overriding impression is of commerce intruding on a lovely, age-old environment.

In the fourth part commerce finally appears visually, in scenes of ships, docks, and loading operations. We see files of Ceylonese carrying cargo. Perhaps—perhaps not—we will recall the Robert Knox words: ". . . but to work for hire with them is reckoned for a great shame. . . ." Near the end of the film we return to a theme from the first part, extolling the beauty of the Buddha. But it is the beauty of the Ceylonese that the images compel us to contemplate.

Song of Ceylon exemplified the working atmosphere of the film unit, in which anyone could be enlisted for any sort of task. The "voices of commerce" heard in the sound track montage included voices of Cavalcanti, Grierson, Legg, and Wright.[7]

Like *Drifters*, *Song of Ceylon* won enthusiastic plaudits at the London Film Society and went on to successful theatrical showings. Perhaps the Ceylon Tea Propaganda Board was delighted with it: the film put the Board on record as fervently admiring the Ceylonese and their culture. It made clear the role of tea as an imperial link. To others it may have suggested exploitation. Without question, the film made the rising British documentary movement known throughout the world.

In 1934 the Empire Marketing Board was dissolved, and the film unit was moved bodily into the General Post Office to become the GPO Film Unit. *Song of Ceylon*, begun under EMB, was completed as a GPO project. The unit's task was now to "bring the post office alive." But the General Post Office was in reality a sort of communication ministry, which also had charge of the development of wireless in all its forms, including radio and television broadcasting. Grierson saw the situation as a mandate to explore the entire role of communication in modern society—a favorite Grierson topic.



Basil Wright.

Photograph by Virginia Leirens

From this emerged another of the most renowned works of the unit—*Night Mail* (1936), directed by Harry Watt and Basil Wright. Again the skill of workers and the importance of their role were dominant themes. As in *Song of Ceylon*, the sound track was an experiment; Cavalcanti as sound supervisor seems to have contributed much to this. A verse sound track had been tried in *Coal Face* with only minor success; the trippingly rhythmical *Night Mail* narration, written by W. H. Auden and scored by Benjamin Britten, was immensely successful, and became a model for numerous imitations. The film was edited to the rhythm of its sound track. A lyric poem celebrating the rushing of the mail to homes and businesses of northern England and Scotland, *Night Mail* is infectious in spirit and style—a cinema classic of lasting interest.

Another sound-track experiment, of a prophetic sort, was carried out in *Housing Problems* (1935), directed by Edgar Anstey and Arthur Elton. The Gas Light and Coke Company sponsored it, persuaded by Grierson that the demolition of derelict slums and their replacement by government-financed housing—a key demand of the socialistic Labour party—would inevitably bring modernization and

increased use of gas. Thus the company financed a film of blunt and moving protest.

The method was novel. Instead of the commentator or narrator characteristic of Grierson documentaries, slum-dwellers appeared as spokesmen. In their rat-infested kitchens, unheated living rooms, crumbling hallways, they talk directly to the camera and provide a guided tour. Horror and humor merge for powerful impact. At least one of the spokesmen—a lady who tells of epic battles with a rat—had never seen a film—but sensed that she was having a chance to communicate her problems to a large constituency. Arthur Elton had used such direct testimony in an earlier GPO film for the Ministry of Labour, *Workers and Jobs* (1935). But *Housing Problems* more clearly demonstrated the potential values of the device—later used extensively in television.

As the film unit grew, it also proliferated, giving birth to a Strand Film Unit with Paul Rotha as production director; a Realist Film Unit under Basil Wright; a Shell Film Unit begun by Edgar Anstey; a Film Centre under Grierson himself, which provided an advisory service. Government support had been the starting point, but corporate sponsors were soon underwriting many of the films. The "movement" retained cohesiveness throughout the 1930's, continuing to look on Grierson as its godfather and to congregate and confer in pubs. Meanwhile films gushed forth in a steady stream: Elton's *The Voice of the World* (1932), Rotha's *Contact* (1933), Anstey's *Granton Trawler* (1934), Legg's *BBC: the Voice of Britain* (1935), Rotha's *Shipyard* (1935), Anstey's *Enough to Eat* (1936), John Taylor's *The Smoke Menace* (1937), Mary Field's *They Made the Land* (1938), Watt's *North Sea* (1938), Elton's *Transfer of Power* (1939).

The influence of the movement, at home and abroad, was fed by speeches and writing, especially by Grierson and Rotha. Rotha's book *Documentary Film* (1935) appeared in many translations. Such magazines as *Sight and Sound, Cinema Quarterly,* and Grierson's *World Film News* furthered the process.

At first, members of the film unit disagreed as to whether they should fight for a place in the theatrical film world or build an alternative system based on club, school, church, library, business firm. In the end they did both. Outstanding films such as *Song of Ceylon* and *Night Mail* got wide theatrical exposure; meanwhile nontheatrical

Night Mail, 1936.

National Film Archive

Housing Problems, 1935.

distribution, encouraged by the rise of 16mm film, began to assume some importance.*

The divergence of the apostle Grierson from the master Flaherty was increasingly apparent, and often mentioned by Grierson. He liked to pay tribute to Flaherty, then follow with a comment cutting the master down. In a typical statement, Grierson wrote:

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

Such comments became increasingly frequent—from Grierson and his followers—after the appearance of a new Flaherty film, *Man of Aran* (1934). Flaherty's visit to England had enabled him to make a new start via a contract with Gaumont British, giving him the freedom he needed and a topic to his liking. The setting was the bleak Aran Islands off Ireland, swept by storms and battered by incredible seas; the theme, the struggle for survival. As in Samoa, Flaherty had the help of his wife Frances and brother David, and assorted technicians. John Taylor, Grierson trainee, joined the unit. Laboratory work was done on the spot in an old stone wharf-house. The film was edited by John Goldman and scored by John Greenwood.

Flaherty and his group spent almost two years on the Aran Islands. What emerged was a film of far greater professional polish than *Nanook of the North* or *Moana,* and with epic grandeur. The "caressing" movements of Flaherty's camera over landscape and people won admiration from Paul Rotha, among others. With long-focus lenses Flaherty followed in detail the perilous maneuvers of small boats heaving in mountainous waves—often at distances of several hundred yards from his camera positions on the cliffs. Sound effects were later added to the film with telling effect. Fragments of dialogue were also post-synchronized. Almost lost in the roar of wind and wave, they were used with exceptional skill—almost as an additional sound effect. Along with these production values were familiar Flaherty elements. As in *Nanook* and *Moana*, he concentrated on a small group; again,

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* The need for a less bulky alternative to 35mm was recognized early in film history. Manufacturers introduced 9½mm, 11mm, 15mm, 16mm, 17½mm, 21mm, 22mm, and 28mm equipment; in the competitive chaos, none could win a foothold. In 1923 Eastman, Bell & Howell, and Victor Animatograph agreed to standardize on 16mm and a nonflammable type of film; other companies followed suit. This enabled 16mm to begin a slow advance.

Man of Aran, 1934.

Museum of Modern Art

a child played an important part. There was once more a return to the past. The Aran islanders had not for many decades hunted the basking shark in small boats with harpoons; Flaherty brought in an expert to teach them how, and in the process exposed them to much danger, but they welcomed it. "God bless the work," they would say. Frances Flaherty later recalled: "They served us and the film hand and foot; they lived and died with us with the ups and downs of the film. It was a way Bob had." Pat Mullen, Aran islander who interpreted for them, put it this way: "He won me and won my soul out of me as well."[8]

Man of Aran won first prize at the Venice film festival and was hailed by many as a great film, and Flaherty's finest. Dissenters—especially Grierson and his group—asked how Flaherty could possibly have ignored, amid a world economic crisis, the social context in which Aran islanders carried on their bitter struggles. Was he unaware of the evils of absentee landlordism? With all its cinematic craftsmanship, the film seemed to Paul Rotha a "reactionary return to the worship of the heroic." He began to write of Flaherty's characters

Paul Rotha.

Photograph by Virginia Leirens

as "waxwork figures acting the lives of their grandfathers." He added: "Surely we have the right to believe that the documentary method, the most virile of all kinds of film, should not ignore the vital social issues of this year of grace." To many, *Man of Aran* seemed a hold-over from an earlier period.[9]

Grierson and his movement had in a few years changed the expectations aroused by the word "documentary." A Flaherty documentary had been a feature-length, close-up portrait of a group of people, remotely located but familiar in their humanity. The characteristic Grierson documentary dealt with impersonal social processes; it was usually a short film fused by a "commentary" that articulated a point of view—an intrusion that was anathema to Flaherty. The Grierson pattern was spreading.

In 1939, with war apparently in the offing, the Imperial Relations Trust dispatched Grierson to Canada to apply his organizing skills in another part of the empire; the National Film Board of Canada was the result. Later he went on similar missions to Australia and New Zealand.

He had already played a pivotal role in the British cinema, and one

which, in a curious way, was richly representative of his time. He had presided over pro-Labour film production under Conservative sponsorship. "In that sense," thought Grierson years later in retrospect, "*Night Mail* and *Housing Problems* were the films of a Tory regime gradually going socialist. . . ." He would hardly have said so at the time.[10]

The politicizing of documentary was not a Grierson innovation but a world phenomenon, a product of the times. In Germany it took a different form, with very different results.

As soon as Hitler came to power in 1933, his thirty-six-year-old Minister of Popular Enlightenment and Propaganda, Joseph Goebbels, began steps to bring all media under his control. On political or racial grounds, countless workers were driven from their jobs; many went abroad. These were replaced by Nazi adherents. By October 1933 anyone with editorial duties had to be licensed by Goebbels. Proclaiming that censorship would be positive, not merely negative, he gradually took charge of all aspects of production, distribution, and exhibition.[11]

In Germany, as in a number of countries, cine-clubs had operated outside regular rules of censorship. Goebbels abolished the distinction, decimating the cine-clubs. There would be no independent cine-club movement in the new Germany.

As a result of these sweeping moves, films in Nazi Germany began a rapid, catastrophic decline. But there was an exception: the work of one genius who—due to unusual circumstances—flourished outside the Goebbels dominion.

Leni Riefenstahl was a dancer before turning to acting, and a screen star and pin-up beauty before becoming a director. As fiction-film star and director she was especially associated with "mountain films"—a German genre often compared to American westerns. The setting evoked heroism and virtue, and had mythic overtones. For a highly industrialized nation, the misty peaks and streams and crashing storms provided a sense of contact with primordial beginnings; the films sometimes reached back into Teutonic mythology. Among successes in which she appeared were *The Sacred Mountain* (*Die Heilige Berg*, 1926), *The White Hell of Piz Palu* (*Die Weisse Hölle von Piz Palu*, 1929), and *The Blue Light* (*Das Blaue Licht*, 1932), which she also directed.[12]

A prominent Riefenstahl admirer was Adolf Hitler. In 1933 she received a call from him. It was a few months after he had achieved dictatorial power, and just two days before the annual rally of the National Socialist German Workers party—the Nazi party. According to her account, he asked how she was getting on with the work. She asked, "What work?" He said that months earlier, he had ordered his propaganda ministry to have her make a film about the rally. She had heard nothing of this, but he insisted she proceed, doing whatever she could. Without time to prepare, she gathered equipment and a few assistants and rushed to the rally. There a succession of bureaucratic harassments—emanating, she thought, from a Goebbels resentful at being bypassed—made the experience a nightmare, but she completed the short film *Victory of Faith* (*Sieg des Glaubens*, 1933), financed by the Nazi party.

Exhausted, she left for Spain for work on a new feature, but there she collapsed, spending two months in a Madrid hospital—an aftermath, she was sure, of the sufferings Goebbels had caused her. Their mutual resentment grew into a feud.

On her return to Germany, Hitler got in touch with her again. He wanted her to make a film of the 1934 party rally, which was to be the largest ever staged—announcement and demonstration, to all the world, of German rebirth. For this film she must have all necessary time to prepare, and all resources would be at her disposal.

She demurred. She suggested Walther Ruttman, creator of the famous *Berlin: Symphony of the City*, and even discussed it with Ruttman. Though he had been considered on the left politically, he was eager to do the project and drafted plans. But Hitler insisted it must be Leni Riefenstahl. According to her account, she then agreed on condition that neither Hitler nor Goebbels nor anyone else would interfere, nor even see the film until it was finished. The film appears to have been made under these terms. An ample budget was set up by the UFA studio—Universum Film Aktiengesellschaft—which also distributed the film.

She got to work. Never had there been such mobilization and deployment of resources—men and gear. Before long she had assembled a staff of 120 people, including sixteen leading cameramen, their assistants, and supporting technicians. Thirty cameras and four sound trucks would be in operation. Twenty-two automobiles and their

drivers were assigned to her, along with uniformed field police. She felt they must all live together in Nuremberg, location of the rally, for constant coordination through the week of scheduled events—September 4–10, 1934. But all hotels were booked. More than a million people were expected in Nuremberg, tripling its population. Leading Nazi official Julius Streicher owned a large Nuremberg building and offered it. Making an advance inspection, she was dismayed to find scores of empty rooms without furniture, water, light, or telephone. But within forty-eight hours miracles had been performed for her—bedrooms for all her 120 people had been fully furnished; offices, conference rooms, dark rooms stood ready; a telephone switchboard had been installed; kitchen and dining hall were being equipped and staffed.[13]

Meanwhile with relentless drive and sense of detail Leni Riefenstahl—then thirty-two years old—was plotting camera locations and movements with her staff, and the town of Nuremberg was constructing, to her specifications and on a scale without precedent, special bridges, towers, ramps. A 120-foot flagpole at the Luitpoldhain was being equipped with an electric elevator, which was to be able to take a cameraman to the top in seconds. Along Adolf Hitler Square a ramp was being built at second-floor level to allow a camera dolly to move with marching troops while photographing them from bird's eye vantage. She commandeered a fire department truck; atop its ninety-foot extension ladder, a cameraman would be able to soar over the gables and monuments of Nuremberg, high above marching troops and their banners. Other vehicles with extension ladders were put at her disposal by utility and streetcar companies.

Planning of rally events and of their film coverage went on together. On a field, huge parades of spade-carrying men—the Labor Service—were to march past Adolf Hitler, then line up in perfect order to hear his speech extolling labor. Wooden rails were laid out so that cameras would be able to photograph the men from within their ranks. A camera platform was built at the precise spot where they would give the Führer an "eyes right" salute. Camera positions were staked out on city rooftops, on church towers, and in road-side ditches. In meeting halls cameras would peer down through skylights and up from orchestra pits. All cameramen were given elite-troop uniforms; the Chief of Staff had expressed the opinion that the pres-

ence of cameramen in civilian dress would "mar the solemnity of the occasion."

As crowds began to descend on Nuremberg, Riefenstahl's cameramen were rehearsing on their fantastic ladders, ramps, and towers.

A report on all these arrangements was later published, with a text credited to Leni Riefenstahl. It paid tribute to Hitler:

> The Führer has recognized the importance of cinema. Where else in the world have the film's inherent potentialities to act as the chronicler and interpreter of contemporary events been recognized in so far-sighted a manner? . . .
>
> That the Führer has raised film-making to a position of such pre-eminence testifies to his prophetic awareness of the unrealized suggestive power of this art form. One is familiar with documentaries. Governments have ordered them and political parties have used them for their ends. But the belief that a true and genuinely powerful national experience can be kindled through the medium of film, this belief originated in Germany.[14]

According to her own accounts, of then and later, Riefenstahl was at this time dazzled by Hitler, though disliking many around him. And he had put her as film maker in a position unique in film history.

She did not invent the actions captured by her cameras. She saw it as her task to bring them to the screen with maximum impact.

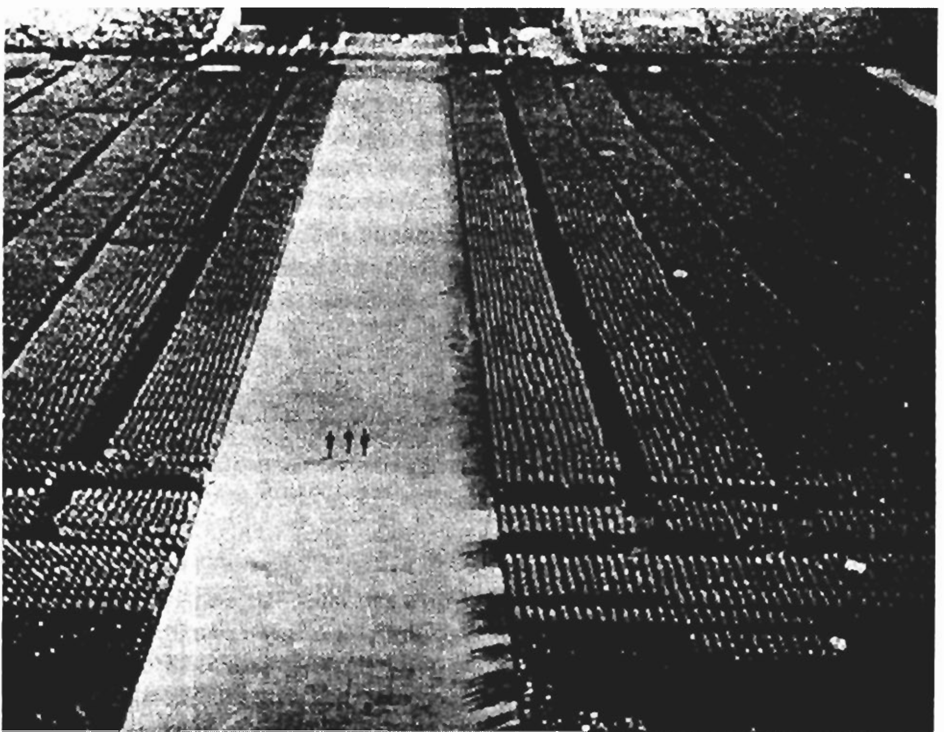
During the week of photography she coordinated her forces with an almost maniacal drive and discipline, mirroring the atmosphere of the events themselves. Then she gave months to editing. A score in Wagnerian style was provided by Herbert Windt. The final result, *Triumph of the Will* (*Triumph des Willens*), was premiered in March 1935 and was at once hailed as a masterpiece—inspiring to some, sinister and terrifying to others. The Venice film festival gave it a top award; so did a Paris festival.

The opening credits stated:

Produced by Order of the Führer
Directed by Leni Riefenstahl*

Triumph of the Will has no spoken commentary; she considered any commentator an "enemy of film." Verbalization of the message is left to speeches by Hitler and other Nazi leaders. But the almost phys-

* Various translations are possible. The original titles: "Hergestellt im Auftrage des Führers/Gestaltet von Leni Riefenstahl."



Triumph of the Will, 1935.

Museum of Modern Art

ical impact of the film derives much from her choreography of images and sounds: marching men, cheers, banners, swastikas, eagles, crowds, ancient German streets and towers, folksongs, clouds, oratory, uniforms, women, children—and above all, in a series of apparitions, the Führer.

The film opens with an amazing sequence—one that makes Hitler a sort of deity descending to earth to save the German people. This sequence uses subtitles, which Riefenstahl credited to Walther Ruttman. They were, according to her account, the only part of Ruttman's proposals used in the final film.[15] The sequence shows us a lone plane skimming over cloud tops; occasionally mists obscure it, but it re-emerges. Eventually the earth is seen: spires of Nuremberg, wrapped in mists. The shadow of the plane touches the city. Crowds are waiting, looking up. Finally the plane lands. A door opens. After a moment, Hitler appears. Deafening roars of vast crowds split the air.

The subtitles have set the stage:

On September 5
1934

20 years
after the outbreak
of the World War

16 years
after the start
of German suffering

19 months
after the beginning
of Germany's rebirth

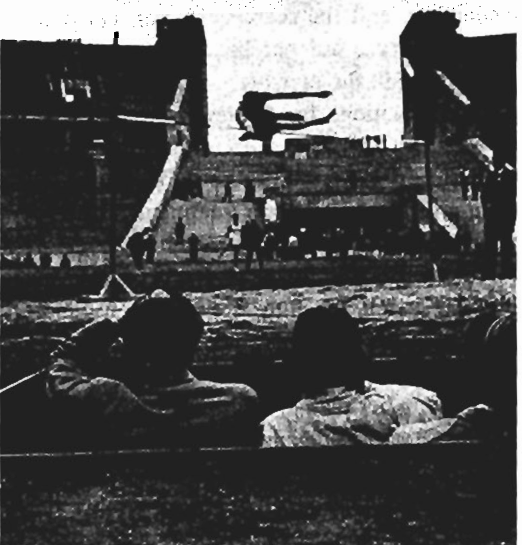
Adolf Hitler flew
again to Nuremberg
to review the columns of his faithful followers

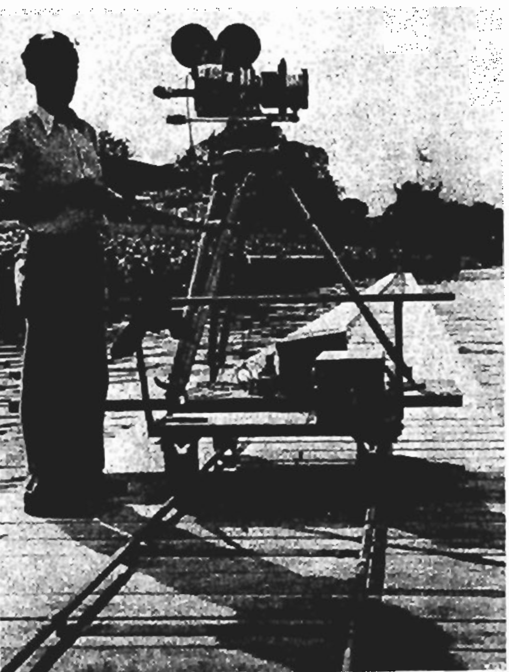
Triumph of the Will was considered an overwhelming propaganda success, rallying many to the Hitler cause. Some critics have felt that the role of Leni Riefenstahl in this success was unforgivable. But it is also pointed out that no film has been more widely used by opposition forces. Every nation ultimately arrayed against Hitler used huge segments of *Triumph of the Will* in its own propaganda films; nothing else depicted so vividly the demoniac nature of the Hitler leadership, and the scarcely human discipline supporting it. Riefenstahl's cameras did not lie; they told a story that has never lost its power to chill the marrow.

Amid ovations for *Triumph of the Will,* Riefenstahl proposed a new project to UFA: a long film on the Olympic games to be held in Berlin in 1936. UFA was dubious: the Olympic games had never been given feature-length treatment. The 1932 Olympics, held in Los Angeles, had been virtually ignored by Hollywood except as newsreel material. Besides, Riefenstahl wanted more than a year for editing; UFA felt the film would be obsolete when issued. However, Tobis—a smaller company than UFA—agreed to finance the film. She meanwhile negotiated with the International Olympic Committee, not mentioning her plan to Hitler; she wished to avoid official sponsorship.

The Olympic officials were cautious. Riefenstahl wished to prepare pits beside jumping areas, camera rails along running tracks, towers at the diving sites. Fearing that the outcome of contests might eventually be challenged on the ground of distraction, officials required

Making *Olympia*, 1936. Directing in pit, Leni Riefenstahl. The film was released in 1938.





Riefenstahl-Film

Early morning training run—from *Olympia*, 1938.

Museum of Modern Art

her to obtain approvals from all national committees and from all contestants individually. At enormous effort, over many months, she secured these approvals.

Olympia eventually became two feature-length films, and another organizational achievement of amazing virtuosity. She was restricted to six camera positions on the stadium field, but supplemented these with cameras in grandstands and many elsewhere. She had the opening of the games photographed from the Zeppelin Hindenburg. Automatic cameras were sent aloft via free balloons, with attached instructions for returning the film to Leni Riefenstahl. The most startling photographic innovation involved diving; dives were followed through the air and then under water without a break. The start of the dive was photographed from the surface of the water; at the moment of impact the cameraman went under water with his special camera while changing focus and aperture. It took months to perfect the procedure. For boat-racing sequences, shots of a coxswain were

made by an automatic camera placed in the boat during practice runs. Along race courses, photography by amateurs supplemented that of the professionals.

Most of the film was shot silent; sound elements were added later. Even footsteps of runners and jumpers were created and post-synchronized during the editing process. The state of technology, in Germany and elsewhere, discouraged sound recording on location, except for static sequences such as speeches.

While the Riefenstahl forces were at work, the Propaganda Ministry was producing its own Olympia film. Far from cooperating with her, Goebbels—still resentful—forbade leading cameramen to work with her; at one point, ministry employees tried to bar her from the stadium. Hitler is said to have ordered a ceremony of reconciliation to quiet scandal over this waspish feud.

The Riefenstahl *Olympia* has an extraordinary Wagnerian opening, reminiscent in its mythic overtones of *Triumph of the Will* and of Leni Riefenstahl's early "mountain film" career. We begin with shots suggesting a misty, primitive world. Soon we see a runner carrying a torch across rugged landscape; architecture and coastline tell us this is ancient Greece. We briefly see nude athletes and dancers training—one of them is Leni Riefenstahl. Then we see the torch handed from one runner to another, as they carry it from ancient Greece to modern Germany, and into a vast stadium presided over by Adolf Hitler. The sequence seems to tell us that the torch of civilization has been carried from its ancient center, Greece, to modern Germany, watched over by a pantheon at whose apex is Hitler.

While any such opening, placing Hitler at the center of international pageantry, was bound to suggest a dominant propaganda intention, the remainder gives a different impression. The first of the two films concentrates on track and field events, in which the high points are victories by nineteen-year-old Jesse Owens and other black athletes. It is said that Goebbels representatives pressed Riefenstahl to exclude these from her films, but that she declined. She accords these victories a dramatic buildup, and an admiration of muscular beauty, comparable to her treatment of other victors and victories. Many critics have stressed this fairness—often with expressions of surprise.

But she could not eliminate the historic context from the minds of audiences. Outside Germany it was widely reported that Hitler had

left the stadium just before an Owens triumph, and had thus avoided witnessing a setback for the master race. This "snub" is not shown or mentioned in the film. To American screen writer Budd Schulberg the omission exposed Riefenstahl as a dedicated Nazi propagandist. But its inclusion would surely have damned her on similar grounds.[16]

The second of the two *Olympia* films suggests that her main obsession was not politics, but the magnificence of the body in action. Dropping earlier attention to victories and statistics, she composes sequences of unforgettable splendor—moving, as she explained to interviewer Gordon Hitchens, from "reality" to "poetry." The high point of this comes at the climax of the diving events, in a sequence based on a simple but brilliant editing idea. In a series of dives, she gives us only the flight through the air, eliminating the climactic splashes. We see a long succession of such dives, sometimes overlapping via dissolves. The impression is one of total victory over gravity, as body after body tumbles through the air, in choreographed patterns of stunning beauty, without ever being brought to earth. Few lovelier sequences have ever been put on film.

The *Olympia* films, released in 1938—two years after the event—won their quota of prizes, critical hosannahs, and box-office success. But amid world tension, they also met storms. Britain banned the films, using the footage for physical-education films for war training. During 1938–39 Leni Riefenstahl visited Hollywood to help launch American distribution. She was the guest of Walt Disney, but was ignored by most of the film colony. On the eve of war she returned to Germany, and to fiction films. She tried to organize a film to be titled *Penthesilea,* in which she was to appear as queen of the Amazons. But war brought a long hiatus in her work.

Among the cameramen she employed for the *Olympia* films was Heinz von Jaworsky—later, in America, Henry Jaworsky. He had worked on some of her fiction films, and she had tried to enlist him for *Triumph of the Will.* Being in part "non-Aryan"—Jewish—he told her it would be best for him to stay out of it. But she asked him again for *Olympia,* with possible risks to both, and he gladly worked on it. She continued to befriend him. When war broke out she told him Germany would lose the war. She apparently still believed in Hitler but felt he was surrounded by criminals—*verbrecher*. Her career as propagandist seems to have been a product of unique gifts for spectacle,

and political ingenuousness. Her two major films stand as valuable documents of an age.[17]

Walther Ruttman, abandoning his early leftist bent, apparently became an ardent Nazi advocate. His films for the cause included the UFA short *German Tanks* (*Deutsche Panzer,* 1940). He is reported to have died of wounds received while making a film on the eastern front.

While Goebbels was snuffing out the German cine-clubs, another cine-club movement was on the rise. This was in the United States.

Cine-clubs arrived late in America, probably because it was home base of the leading film empire. Elsewhere Hollywood films were foreign culture, and challenged pride and the sense of identity. In the United States this nationalistic challenge was not a factor.

When cine-clubs did burgeon, it was as by-product of Depression unrest, which in the final days of the Hoover regime became almost revolutionary. Now the deprived experienced an identity problem: nowhere in the mass media did they find their plight represented.

President Hoover considered the Depression to be mainly a crisis of confidence; undermining confidence was therefore a public disservice, and optimism was statesmanship. The press, almost wholly Republican, tended to reflect this view; it constantly noted signs of upturn, even as the breadlines lengthened. Meanwhile radio concentrated on smooth music, fortune-telling, and advertising; it scarcely had the beginnings of a news service. Fiction films from Hollywood were in an opulent phase of Busby Berkeley choruses, and were beginning to seem as remote to many Americans as to Asians and Africans. And its "non-fiction" product, the newsreel, was perhaps even more irrelevant and bizarre—and was so by design.

To theaters throughout the world, major American studios were selling a contract service of 52 features, 52 shorts, and 52 newsreels per year. In this block-booking system—later altered by antitrust action—newsreels were only an item in an entertainment package. Studio executives generally felt that controversy could only bring troubles; its avoidance became hallowed principle. The attitude actually hardened in the early Depression. In 1931 the Fox Corporation issued a statement that none of its theaters would be allowed to show newsreels of a controversial nature.[18]

All this set the stage for the Workers Film and Photo League,

which began in New York City in 1930 and spread rapidly. Within two years local Film and Photo Leagues (the "Workers" was dropped from the name) were in operation in major cities, loosely united in a National Film and Photo League.

The years 1930–32 were a time of hunger marches and "Hoovervilles"—clusters of shacks thrown up in parks and along railroad tracks. Evictions, foreclosures, strikes, protests were epidemic. Members of the Film and Photo Leagues concentrated on documenting these phenomena. Exchanging material, they organized a *Workers Newsreel* which was circulated among members and successfully pressed on some theaters. Many of the groups participated in documenting the National Hunger March of December 1932; their combined footage grew into a feature documentary, *Hunger*.

The newsreel activity used silent film, mainly 35mm. The market value of silent projectors had collapsed with the coming of sound; thus the equipment was readily available to the League groups.

The New York Film and Photo League met in a loft at 22 West 17th Street. Its secretary was Thomas Brandon, later a pioneer distributor of foreign films. Sessions included screenings of such films, as well as current work brought by participants. Meetings welcomed members and nonmembers, still photographers and film makers, veterans and novices—all united by crisis.

Margaret Bourke-White and Berenice Abbott (both associated with *Fortune* magazine) were among the still photographers who came to the loft. So were Ralph Steiner and Paul Strand—photographers already deeply involved in film. Other participants were Leo Hurwitz and Herbert Kline, who were associated with the magazine *New Theatre*, which often reflected the Film and Photo League ferment. Willard Van Dyke, arriving from California with a reputation in still photography, was a later participant.[19]

The New York Film and Photo League issued its own mimeographed bulletin, *Filmfront*. It sometimes included translations of articles by European film theorists—the Russian Dziga Vertov, the Hungarian Béla Balász, the Frenchman Léon Moussinac.

In 1934 the Film and Photo Leagues joined in organizing a National Film Conference in Chicago, screening and discussing forty reels of film made the previous year. A report on the conference stated:

> . . . in the same way as the Soviet cinema began with the kino-eye and grew organically from there on . . . the Leagues started also with the simple newsreel documents, photographing events as they appeared to the lens . . . exploited in a revolutionary cinematic way.[20]

The Film and Photo Leagues formed a loose movement, but their agitation generated organized production ventures. Notable among these was Frontier Films, which in 1935 began an impressive career of militant film making, involving a galaxy of talent—Paul Strand, Leo Hurwitz, Irving Lerner, Sidney Meyers, Jay Leyda, Willard Van Dyke, Harry Dunham, and many others.

But meanwhile the surge of protest activity was having high-level effect. After President Franklin D. Roosevelt took office in 1933, visual documentation of the sort fostered by the Film and Photo Leagues began to find broader support. An early example was the short film *Hands* (1934), by Ralph Steiner and Willard Van Dyke. Dramatizing the relief work of the WPA—Works Progress Administration—it concentrated on hands: idle hands, hands at work, and finally hands putting earnings (from government relief projects) back into circulation. Artful in its understatement, the film was underwritten and distributed by Pathé. But it was soon eclipsed by far more ambitious projects sponsored by RA—the Resettlement Administration, which concerned itself with dust storms and their human toll. In its information division was Roy Stryker, heading a photographic unit. Under him a group of extraordinary photographers—Walker Evans, Dorothea Lange, Carl Mydans, Ben Shahn, and others—began touring the land, photographing dust-storm victims, migrant workers, sharecroppers, and other rural derelicts. Through publications and exhibits they began to open the eyes of the nation to the unchronicled devastation of rural poverty. The head of the agency, ex-professor Rexford Guy Tugwell, wanted to extend this work to motion pictures. This ushered in the meteoric career—brief and brilliant—of Pare Lorentz.[21]

Born in 1905 and reared in the southern college town of Clarksburg, W. Va., Pare Lorentz had a home life saturated in the arts. After college he headed for New York and was soon writing film criticism for the humor magazine *Judge*, the sophisticated *Vanity Fair*, the New York *Evening Journal*, and other publications. Along with film screenings—commercial and experimental—he soaked up

concerts, opera, theater, and married the actress Sally Bates. Fascinated by the social role of cinema, young Lorentz collaborated with civil-libertarian lawyer Morris Ernst in the book *Censored: the Private Life of the Movies,* published in 1930. His interests were gradually shifting to politics. In 1933 he published *The Roosevelt Year: 1933;* he had hoped to use the material for a film but, unable to raise film funds, he turned it into a book full of photos of protests, breadlines, farm riots, dust storms, accompanied by a lucidly written text. The book won him an offer from King Features, syndication arm of the Hearst publishing empire, to write a political column. Thus *Washington Sideshow* began appearing in 1934, but when Lorentz in an early column praised the New Deal farm program, he was promptly fired via telegram by Hearst from his headquarters in San Simeon, California. Lorentz was out of a job, but was already trying to promote a film about the dust bowl. It was just what Rexford Guy Tugwell wanted.

Lorentz had never made a film, but he gave an impression of extreme competence. He was handsome, articulate, and seemed to know everything about film. He was resolved to make a film that could win theater distribution and reach a wide public. Few government films had achieved this, but he felt it could be done. Asked if he could do it for $6000, he said he could.

Lorentz realized that government film production was, to many in Hollywood, an outrage—in fact, "socialism." He hoped to overcome this attitude. But with his absurdly minuscule budget he knew he must, for the moment, stay away from Hollywood. He turned first to the experimental talent of New York, on the margins of the film world. As cameramen he engaged Ralph Steiner, Paul Strand, Leo Hurwitz. All had been associated with the New York Film and Photo League; all had films to their credit. Paul Strand had recently completed *The Wave,* a widely praised semidocumentary film about a Mexican fishing village, sponsored by the Mexican government.

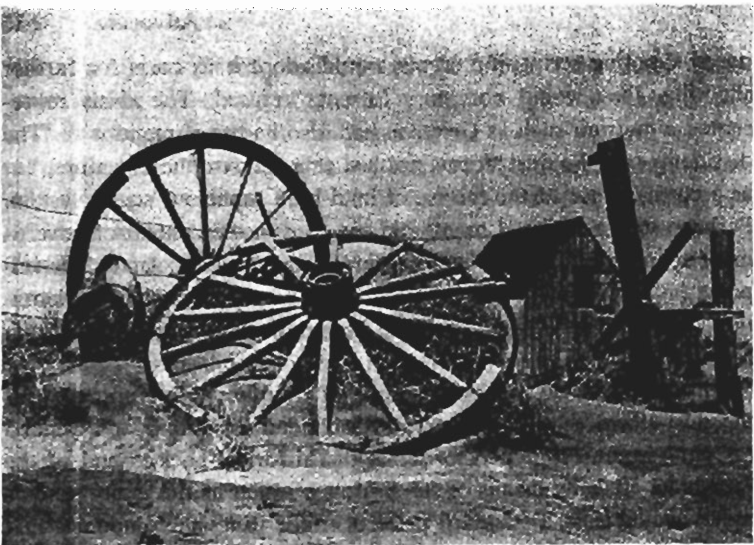
The group began photography in Montana and moved southward to Texas—following dust storms that were rapidly turning millions of acres of farmland into desert. Amid the choking blizzards Lorentz searched for images of the sort he wanted, but he had no precise script. This sometimes annoyed his cameramen and finally brought an "ultimatum." Strand and Hurwitz presented Lorentz with a proposed shooting script; if Lorentz would adopt it as basis for further shooting, they would continue. Lorentz refused. The crisis represented a division such as Grierson had also had to contend with. The dissidents saw the dust storms not just as a catastrophe of nature, but as a consequence of the misuse of land by a rapacious social system. Perhaps—to an extent—Lorentz did too. But in the context of government sponsorship his task was conservation, not iconoclasm. The impasse involved questions of tactics, as well as philosophical orientation. Lorentz managed to hold his crew together, but tension continued.

The crew was not the only source of trouble. With completion of the dust-storm sequences Lorentz disbanded his group and headed for Hollywood. He hoped to depict the historical background of the dust-bowl crisis by means of stock footage, such as the major studios make available at a standard price per foot. But the companies had apparently adopted a policy of noncooperation with government—or at least with the Roosevelt administration. The stock film libraries refused to serve Lorentz.

Lorentz had expected Hollywood opposition, but scarcely at this stage. Fortunately some leading Hollywood artists—notably King Vidor—were angered at the studio policy and, *sub rosa,* acted as intermediaries to get Lorentz the footage he needed. Later Lorentz obtained 1917–18 war footage from the Signal Corps in New York.

His troubles were only beginning. His $6000 budget had been spent. He hired a girl to teach him the mechanics of film editing and made himself an editor. Then he achieved a crucial coup. The composer Virgil Thomson, moved by the material Lorentz was assembling, agreed to work with him for whatever funds Lorentz might scrounge. They began their collaboration as Lorentz pressed Washington for additional appropriations.

The Lorentz-Thomson teamwork became a key element in *The Plow That Broke the Plains.* They shared enthusiasm for folk-music themes, rich in association, and abhorrence for "mickey-mousing" scores—those which regularly underline points made by word or image. Thomson's music constantly supplied added dimensions. An example was his music for a 1917–18 wartime sequence. To meet world demand for wheat, farmers were being pressed to turn grazing lands into wheatlands. As we see tractors coming over a hill, we hear



The Plow That Broke the Plains, 1936. Museum of Modern Art

Library of Congress

a strain from *Mademoiselle from Armentières*—marching song of American troops. It provides momentary emphasis that farmers are becoming part of a war machine.

For Lorentz and Thomson, editing and composing became a unified process. Neither wanted a score imposed on a finished film, or vice versa. The commentary written by Lorentz evolved as part of the same process. Eventually read by Thomas Chalmers, a former Metropolitan Opera baritone, it became a kind of *recitatif*. It sometimes addressed people seen on the screen: "Settler, plow at your peril. . . ." The score was finally recorded by performers from the New York Philharmonic under the baton of Alexander Smallens—recruited by Virgil Thomson.

A series of previews early in 1936 soon made it known, in and out of government and film circles, that *The Plow That Broke the Plains* illuminated a national problem with strong documentation, and with emotional power and beauty. This was its glory, and the nub of its further problems. Government film activity had been going on unimpressively for almost three decades: the Department of Agriculture had been making demonstration films of sorts since 1908; the Department of the Interior had used films to announce availability of western lands; Signal Corps cameramen had documented practice maneuvers and battle action. As long as these and other projects had special functions, or were ineffectual, they raised few problems. But films addressing a general audience with overwhelming impact were another matter. This was government competition with Hollywood; besides, it was controversy threatening to disturb temples sacred to Entertainment. In Congress the power of the film agitated opponents of Roosevelt farm policies; they saw it as New Deal propaganda—an election-year stab in the back. Some politicians felt their states had been irreparably damaged by being depicted as wastelands.

At the same time Lorentz was in trouble with his own agency. His $6000 project had become a $19,260 film. He had paid many bills en route from his own resources, and arrived in Washington with receipts—some written on scraps of wrapping paper and backs of envelopes. This did not suit government protocol: in the end, much of the surplus cost had to be defrayed by Lorentz—who had earned $18 per day for his work on *The Plow That Broke the Plains*—and by his actress wife. Amid these crises the Resettlement Agency itself was in trouble; it was declared unconstitutional by the U.S. Court of Ap-

peals. Litigation continued, but plans were afoot for transferring the work, or part of it, to the Department of Agriculture.

The united-front opposition of the film industry was, once again, broken by a man with an independent spirit. Although the major distributors had rejected *The Plow That Broke the Plains,* the urbane Arthur Mayer, former Paramount executive who had become manager of New York's important Rialto Theater, decided to show the film. What is more, he resolved to capitalize on the industry's opposition. Opening it on May 28, 1936, he called the film "The Picture They Dared Us to Show!" His advertisements quoted critical eulogies obtained via previews, then added: "Yet Hollywood has turned its manicured thumb down!" From the Rialto came word that audiences were cheering at every performance. Theaters in other major cities—Philadelphia, Boston, Washington—followed the Rialto example; then came an explosion of bookings. Some 3000 theaters eventually showed the film—without benefit of major studio distribution.

Lorentz had lived through months of unrelieved, almost inhuman pressures, and felt he had had enough. In mid-1936 he visited the office of Tugwell—by then in the Department of Agriculture—to announce his resignation, but stayed to urge a new film idea—*The River.* "You people," he told Tugwell, "are missing the biggest story in the world—the Mississippi River." Within days this discussion seemed to produce miracles. The suggested topic reached into numerous issues of concern to the New Deal: flood control, hydroelectric power, soil conservation, rural electrification. At home Lorentz received a phone call from Tugwell, saying he had talked with the President; Roosevelt was providing a budget of $50,000 for *The River.* This time Lorentz would get $30 per day. A fiscal expert would accompany the unit to handle finances. They were to begin at once. By the fall of 1936 Lorentz had completed research and hired several cameramen: Willard Van Dyke, who with Ralph Steiner had made *Hands;* and Stacy and Horace Woodard, nature-film specialists. The Woodards left the project early but were replaced by Floyd Crosby, cameraman for the Murnau-Flaherty film *Tabu,* who had been recommended by King Vidor. By January 1937 the planned shooting was done and the crew was disbanded, when it became clear that a flood along tributaries of the Mississippi was about to produce a thousand-mile catastrophe. Lorentz hastily recalled Crosby and Van Dyke. The Department of Agriculture provided additional

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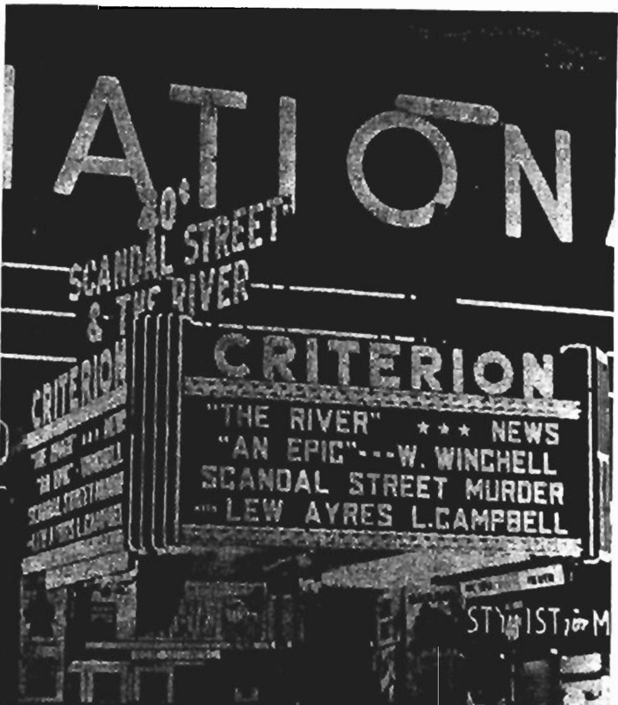
The River, 1937.



funds. The cameramen, improvising as they went, were in action for one of the greatest of film climaxes—and momentous ammunition for the New Deal.

Again the music of Virgil Thomson and the sonorous voice of Thomas Chalmers became part of the project. This time narration took an incantatory style, reminiscent of Walt Whitman—and also of the film *Turksib,* known to all the participants. There was constant use of cadenced catalogues—of the names of places, rivers, trees. In a review of the insensate destruction of primeval forests—

NARRATOR: . . . Black spruce and Norway pine; Douglas fir and red cedar; scarlet oak and shagbark hickory—we built a hundred cities and a thousand towns, but at what cost!

Repetition was part of the style. The words "we built a hundred cities and a thousand towns" were used as a refrain. Lorentz sometimes called the film an "opera."

On completion of the film late in 1937, Lorentz once more built up interest through previews in major cities, as well as special screenings along the Mississippi. This time a historic breakthrough was achieved: Paramount offered to distribute *The River.*

When President Franklin D. Roosevelt saw the film at a screening at his home in Hyde Park, N.Y., he turned at once to Lorentz and said: "That's a grand movie. What can I do to help?" This led to talk of a U.S. Film Service, to make such films for various agencies.

During the months that followed, *The River* won several prizes, including best-documentary award of the Venice festival. In August 1938, as *The River* was showing unexpected box-office pull for Paramount, the U.S. Film Service was established by presidential order, under the National Emergency Council. The herculean labors of Pare Lorentz now seemed to win success after success. A film on unemployment—tentatively titled *Ecce Homo*—was begun with funds from federal relief agencies. Shortly afterward a film on infant mortality was begun—a fiction film with professional actors, under Public Health Service auspices, also using relief funds. At the same time the Rural Electrification Agency contracted for a film, eventually titled *Power and the Land.* Concurrently the Department of Agriculture decided to back a film on soil conservation, *The Land,* which Robert Flaherty agreed to direct. There were discussions with the State Department about a film on Latin America. Lorentz seemed to have

achieved a status comparable to that of Grierson, watching over a spreading documentary empire. But Grierson was a skilled politician who knew how to keep his fences mended; Lorentz was not. Lorentz was in the field, trying to maintain artistic control over diverse enterprises. In the midst of his whirlwind efforts, he received a shock: the appropriations committee of the House of Representatives had scuttled the U.S. Film Service budget.

Desperate efforts were made to save the situation. But opponents had united in a deadly strategy. In using relief appropriations for "movies," they said, the U.S. Film Service was violating the law. The appropriation bill had not mentioned "movies."

President Roosevelt did not press the battle. His attention was shifting to international crises and defense needs. In mid-1940 the U.S. Film Service died. Some of its projects had already been abandoned; others had been transferred to the sponsoring agencies. The leadership the government had briefly assumed in documentary production was being relinquished. The spotlight shifted back to private entrepreneurs.

The atmosphere of cinema had meanwhile changed. With such films as *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), Hollywood was following where Lorentz and others had led. Even newsreels seemed to be yielding to the times—mainly under the impact of *The March of Time.*

Launched in 1935, *The March of Time* was not a newsreel in any accepted sense. It used actuality sequences but combined these with freewheeling dramatizations. Events were re-enacted not only by participants—this had often been done—but by professional actors in scenes scripted, directed, edited, and scored by professionals, in a manner established in a radio series also titled *The March of Time.* Thus the ambiance of events as depicted on *The March of Time* was often entirely a *Time* creation, and hardly of a "documentary" or "newsreel" character. *March of Time* executives had no difficulty rationalizing this: their probing of events simply went beyond elementary newsreels. Henry Luce, head of the *Time* organization, proclaimed the style "fakery in allegiance to the truth."[22]

In content as well as style, *The March of Time* broke with newsreel tradition: it set out to be provocative. Sometimes it provoked liberals, sometimes conservatives. Through its narration, delivered in an apocalyptic tone by Westbrook Van Voorhis, the Voice of Time,

it took editorial positions. The style of the series has been aptly described by Raymond Fielding in his book *The American Newsreel 1911–1967:*

> The static camera and nervous editing, the *vox e sepulchro* strained with alarm, the posture of omniscience, and the calculated air of fearlessness—all combined to delight a contemporary audience otherwise bored with the inanities of intermission travelogues and farces. *Time* editorialized openly, infuriating its enemies and oftentimes alienating its friends. And it did all this with vigor, artistry, and showmanship which shamed its less-daring competitors.[23]

In 1937 *The March of Time* received an Academy Award for having "revolutionized" newsreels. Some industry elements deplored the award and the trend. It meant the destruction, warned the *Motion Picture Herald,* of the theater as "the public's escape from the bitter realities, the anguishes, and the turmoil of life." But newsreels seemed, at least for a time, to enter a more adventurous phase. RKO later (1942) started a monthly release, *This Is America,* competitive with *The March of Time* but working on a less panoramic scale. It tried to "relate the small cog to the big wheel instead of showing the big wheel"—as *The March of Time* did.[24]

Meanwhile the New York film makers whose activism had started the documentary upturn of the 1930's were not resting. In 1939 they produced one of the most impressive films of the period—*The City,* directed by Ralph Steiner and Willard Van Dyke. Sponsored by the American Institute of City Planners, it was based on a brief outline by Pare Lorentz, elaborated by Henwar Rodakiewicz. Lewis Mumford wrote the commentary, which was read by Morris Carnovsky. Like other ambitious documentaries of the time, the project enlisted a major composer—Aaron Copland. The film was produced for use at the 1939 New York World's Fair, which became a significant documentary showcase. *The City* was full of experiments, some highly successful. A stylized lunch-counter montage was a triumph of satire; traffic jams provided memorable sequences. Choral voice montages—as in concurrent radio experiments by Norman Corwin and in several British documentaries—were occasionally used. Concealed cameras in a suitcase on a counter, or on a street behind a military recruitment poster, yielded rich moments. On a crowded street we see a man discarding a newspaper into a trash barrel; a second later another recovers and examines it. Children playing irrepressibly amid filth and

Willard Van Dyke.

Museum of Modern Art

traffic congestion provide fascinating vignettes. *The City,* as impressive as the Lorentz films in developing its thesis, has the advantage of streaks of humor that are lacking in Lorentz. As an exposition of the urban crisis, *The City* was notable. The film *Valley Town* (1940), directed by Willard Van Dyke and edited by Irving Lerner, with a score by Marc Blitzstein, applied similar techniques to the problems of an industrial town.

The most prolific documentary production group of these years was the hard-hitting Frontier Films, formed by veterans of the Film and Photo Leagues. Its *People of the Cumberland*—about the Highlander Folk School promoting unionization among Cumberland Mountain people—represented a rich array of talent. Photographed by Ralph Steiner, it was written by Erskine Caldwell, with music by Alex North and Earl Robinson, conducted by Elie Siegmeister. In a manner reminiscent of *Housing Problems,* it featured a sequence foreshadowing television. A farmer working in a field is suddenly asked a question by a disembodied voice. Stopping his work, he considers the question for a moment, then answers. A final sequence offers a number of such "at-work" statements—clearly not life caught on the run, but a highly stylized device, deliberately discarding illusion.

The City, 1939.

Museum of Modern Art

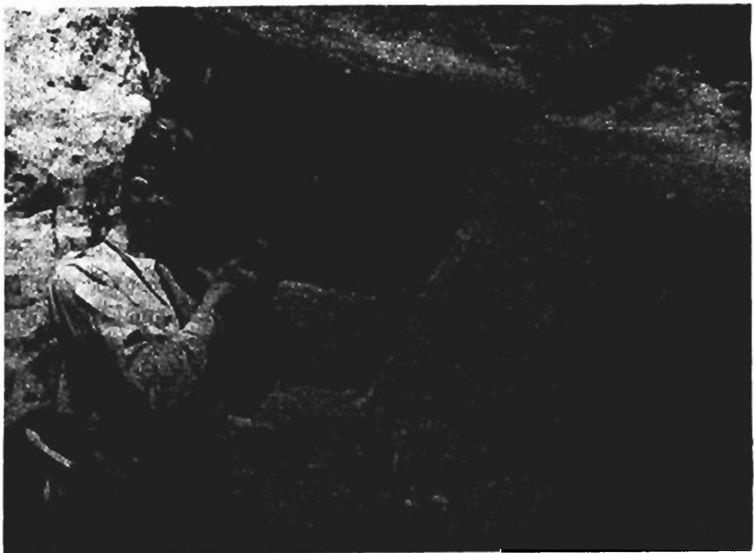
Another Frontier Films production, *Native Land*, by Paul Strand and Leo Hurwitz–narrated by Paul Robeson with a score by Marc Blitzstein–dealt with civil rights violations cited in government hearings. The film used dramatized reconstructions. Since few civil rights violations were occurring on camera, the film makers felt no more difficulty than did *The March of Time* in justifying dramatizations: they were going beyond surface truth. Years in the making, the film was not released until 1942. Meanwhile public concern, and that of Frontier Films, had shifted to the international arena, and here Frontier Films did its most notable work.

The "civil war" that erupted in Spain in 1936 was, more precisely, a rehearsal for world war. An insurrection under General Francisco Franco against the elected Spanish government was aided with arms and troops by Hitler's Germany and Mussolini's Italy. This went on in blatant violation of a "nonintervention" pact they had proclaimed, along with France and Britain–which nations nonetheless observed the agreement, refusing to sell or give arms to the combatants. The United States meanwhile had its hands tied by an arms embargo law, passed by Congress after revelations of vast profits made by American "merchants of death" during the 1914–18 World War. With arms withheld by France, Britain, and the United States, the elected Spanish government–the "loyalist" forces–depended mainly on limited supplies arriving from the Soviet Union, and seemed ultimately doomed. The "nonintervention" thus seemed to guarantee a Hitler–Mussolini–Franco victory, and this aroused indignation through much of the world. Volunteers by the thousands began to arrive in Spain to fight for the loyalists in an International Brigade, or to assist it through medical or relief work. Fund-raising to support these efforts, and propaganda to end the "nonintervention" and arms embargo, occupied artists and writers in many countries. For the moment, it was a cause that united liberals, socialists, communists, anarchists. Among numerous film makers who arrived on the scene was a young Russian, Roman Karmen, whose vivid film reports from Spain laid the basis for a long and notable documentary career. His reports provided the nucleus for a feature-length compilation titled *Spain* (*Ispaniya*, 1939), edited by Esfir Shub. Another early arrival in Spain was the American Herbert Kline, who collaborated with the Hungarian photographer Geza Karpathi to document a shining fragment of history: the work of Dr. Norman Bethune, dapper Canadian

society physician who had suddenly given up his Montreal practice in order to join the loyalist forces, and who in their service invented the blood bank. The footage by Kline and Karpathi was turned over to Frontier Films; edited and amplified by Paul Strand and Leo Hurwitz, it became *Heart of Spain* (1937).

Another Frontier Films production proved even more newsworthy —and prophetic. The Japanese war on China had flared intermittently since 1931, when Japan had seized Manchuria. While China was being nibbled away, it was also ravaged by civil struggle, which was the subject of many rumors, seldom reliable. Most news dispatches centered on—and emanated from—Chiang Kai-shek and his Wellesley-graduate wife, Madame Chiang, who were depicted as unifiers of China. But there were also reports of another force, which had somehow made its way in an epic march—in the face of incredible hardships, and attacked and pursued by Chiang Kai-shek forces —from eastern China to a remote, mountain-locked stronghold in the northwest—under one Mao Tse-tung and the military leader Chu Teh. The first American observer to reach this stronghold was the journalist Edgar Snow, who wrote of his findings in the book *Red Star Over China,* published in 1937. But before its appearance another American, Harry Dunham—a ballet dancer turned cameraman, who had published pictures in *Life* magazine—made his way through the chaos of China to Mao's domain and—even more miraculously—was able to bring hundreds of feet of film back through China and to the United States, reportedly in Chinese ginger jars. The film became *China Strikes Back* (1937), completed for Frontier Films by the scholarly Jay Leyda with Irving Lerner and Sidney Meyers, who were among the busiest of film editors, and the poet and screen writer Ben Maddow. For the mysterious Harry Dunham, who apparently explored numerous arts, it was the one major contribution to cinema; he died during World War II.

China Strikes Back shows us the youthful Mao Tse-tung, Chu Teh, and other early associates. It reveals to us the rugged Yenan area adopted as their base. It makes clear that Mao has set aside an orthodox Marxist principle, at least for China: he sees in the Chinese peasantry—not in a city-based proletariat—the power base from which a new China is to emerge. The film makes clear Mao's emphasis on guerrilla struggle against the Japanese, on close relations with the



Roman Karmen filming Mao Tse-tung—Yenan, 1939. The expedition resulted in the feature *In China,* released 1941.

Karmen collection

peasant population, and on punctilious cleanliness and respectful dealing. The revelations in *China Strikes Back,* meshing with Snow's report in *Red Star Over China,* won attention as far away as Moscow, which until then had apparently had little communication with Yenan. According to Jay Leyda, Stalin had referred to Mao's forces contemptuously as "margarine communists." But a Moscow screening of *China Strikes Back* persuaded young Roman Karmen—back from Spain in 1938—to propose a film expedition to Yenan. The result was another notable series of film reports, culminating in the Russian feature documentary *In China* (1941).[25]

It is significant that those who completed *China Strikes Back* for Frontier Films—Lerner, Leyda, Maddow, Meyers—used pseudonyms. The film brought news that ran against prevailing tides of doctrine, which made Chiang Kai-shek savior of China. As war clouds gathered, unorthodox ideas increasingly stirred suspicion. In segments of Congress and the press, a witch-hunting atmosphere was developing. The men of Frontier Films, veterans of the Film and Photo Leagues, had had an impact on the history of American documentary. But as

war approached, some of its leaders found themselves working in increasing isolation.

Something of the same sort was happening in Japan, but with more drastic results. As in other countries there had been a cine-club movement, which leaned leftward under the impact of economic crisis.

One of its leaders was Akira Iwasaki. While studying German literature and philosophy at Tokyo Imperial University in the late 1920's, he found his interest shifting to cinema, and he took up film criticism. He saw foreign films whenever he could—American, German, French. Few Russian films were admitted to Japan, but he did see *Turksib* and *Storm Over Asia*. He became part of a group calling itself the Proletarian Film League, or Prokino—formed in 1929. Like the Film and Photo Leagues in the United States, Prokino members met to screen films and went on to make them—newsreels and longer documentaries. Working with meager funds, they generally used 16mm reversal film. This meant that original films could be used for projection, and they usually were; when these wore out, nothing remained. Like the Film and Photo Leagues, Prokino organized its own distribution system, holding screenings for labor unions and farm groups over a widening area.

Among youthful Prokino recruits was Fumio Kamei. Originally a painter, he had visited the Soviet Union to study industrial arts. There the work of Pudovkin and Blyokh especially excited him, and weaned him from painting to film. On his return to Japan he fell under the influence of Akira Iwasaki and the Prokino group. Work on public-relations films won him his first film earnings and led to a job in the documentary unit of Toho, one of the major Japanese studios.[26]

The documentary had been slow to develop in Japan, but military expansion on the Asian mainland became a subject of frequent newsreel items and of occasional documentaries. These adhered to a special foreign-policy vocabulary. The 1931 seizure of Manchuria and a concurrent ferocious attack on Shanghai were introduced with such subtitles as "Manchurian Incidents" and "Movements in East Asia." When conquered Manchuria became Manchukuo, it was the occasion for rituals prominently featured in newsreels: the founding of Manchukuo, the crowning of its Emperor, and his state visit to Japan. In western news media Manchukuo was a "puppet state"; in Japanese newsreels it was part of the "new order in Asia" and of an Asian "co-prosperity sphere."[27]

In 1937 Japan renewed its war on China in full force with drives on Shanghai, Soochow, Nanking, Peking. The rising pitch of events gave the documentary new standing. With the fall of Shanghai, Toho sent young Fumio Kamei to film the occupation of the city. The result was the feature-length *Shanghai*, a Toho release made with army cooperation—a film of fascinating ambiguity.

The film shows no battle action; the battle itself had received exceptionally strong newsreel coverage, mainly from the vantage of the international settlement. But Kamei invited Japanese officers of varied rank to explain, on camera, how they had achieved their victory. This they do, fulsomely and proudly, with occasional reference to maps. Meanwhile Kamei occasionally cuts away from them to shots in which the camera travels over battlefield devastation and over city ruins teeming with uprooted humanity. On the battlefields we see innumerable Japanese graves, suggesting that the Japanese paid a higher price for the victory than news reports have suggested. Within the city, the shots of conquered people are unforgettable. We see endless lines at a water pump. In scenes of Japanese soldiers trying to make friends with Chinese children—through pats on the head, gifts of candy, and donkey rides—the confused faces of the children are haunting.

The film, released by Toho, appears to have infuriated army officials, and to have made Kamei a marked man. His film *Fighting Soldiers* (*Tatakau Heitai*), about the life of soldiers, completed for Toho in 1939 and released, was banned the following year, and its negative destroyed. His script for a Toho short on the geology of Mt. Fuji was vetoed on grounds that Fuji symbolized the empire and must not be examined scientifically. The fate of the completed *Kobayashi-Issa*, a lyric tourist film released in 1940, was especially curious. It dealt with the haiku poet Kobayashi, but more particularly with the rugged part of the country where he grew up. His poems were used by Kamei as the commentary—occasionally sardonic. The region consists largely of unarable land, so that farmers toil endlessly on small hillside strips. Hence the climactic haiku:

Spring has come
but my happiness
is moderate.

Fighting Soldiers—released 1939, banned 1940. Toho

The opening of the film tells us:

> Three things are important
> here: the moon, Buddha,
> and noodles.

The film was denounced for excessive concern with poverty.

In 1939 Japan, following the German example, decreed that films could be directed only by those with government licenses; Kamei was denied a license. A preventive detention law was adopted, permitting arrest of those suspected of dangerous tendencies. Kamei was arrested in October 1941 and remained in prison for almost two years.

Prokino had been outlawed. However, interest in documentary was on the rise. It was stimulated by a Japanese edition of Paul Rotha's *Documentary Film,* which was translated by a young woman, Taka Atsugi, and appeared in 1938. In 1940, as a war measure, the showing of *bunka eiga*—cultural films, including documentaries—was made compulsory for all theaters in major cities; the following year the rule was extended to other areas. The newsreels were consolidated into one official newsreel, Nippon Eiga Sha—often shortened to Nichiei. Newsreel and documentary began to root themselves firmly in Japanese cinema. But it became a highly controlled movement, having no room—at least for the moment—for a Kamei or Iwasaki.

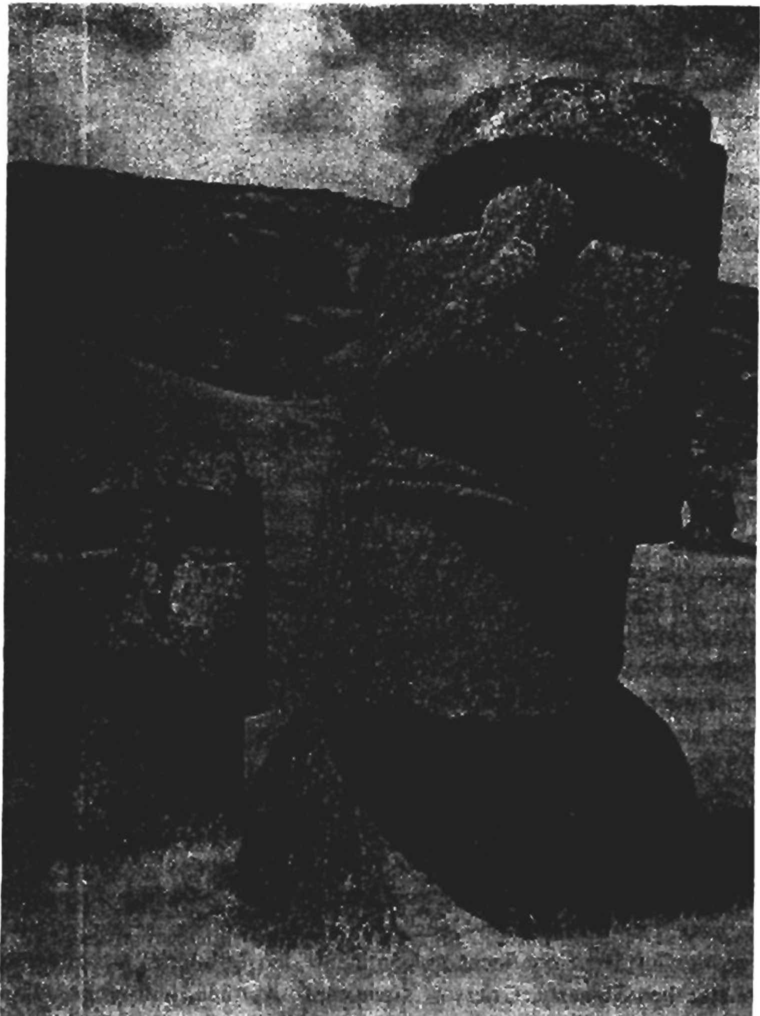
Asia, Europe, America—in diverse places, documentary film continued to show parallel developments. During the 1930's these involved not only the rise of advocacy—subtle or overt—and such phenomena as the guerrilla pressure of cine-clubs, suppressed in some places; it involved also matters of form. The typical film of advocacy was shot like a silent film, with "voice-over" narration added. This had almost become the standard documentary form. Even the Spanish Luis Buñuel, associated with surrealism, made a voice-over documentary, the sardonic *Land Without Bread* (*Tierra Sin Pan* or *Las Hurdes,* 1932), banned in Spain for its horrifying portrayal of a Spanish village. Voice-over was also the technique used in the Belgian film *Easter Island* (*L'Ile de Pâques,* 1935), a Henri Storck production shot in the South Pacific by John Ferno, a former co-worker of Joris Ivens. Its portrait of an island dominated by monuments of a civilization whose inhabitants had virtually exterminated each other in warfare—the camera showed scraggy remnants living in squalor—seemed to carry a warning to a world increasingly dominated by strife. There were voice-over passages, accompanying newsreel material, in Jean Renoir's *Life Belongs to Us* (*La Vie est à Nous,* 1936), a semi-documentary tract for the French *Front Populaire.*

In the voice-over format, some narrators were characterized but most were abstract voices. Some were calm but most were resonant with authority, and backed by impressive music. These were becoming documentary clichés.

Reenactments played a part in some documentaries—and these, as in *The March of Time,* occasionally involved actors. There was little public discussion about the validity of such techniques.

The parallel developments were furthered by traveling documentarists. From the start, the documentary had been represented by artists moving from continent to continent: the Lumière cinematographers; then Flaherty, Grierson, Cavalcanti, Karmen, and others. The film of advocacy produced an especially striking example, in a single career linking nations, genres, and eras. This was the leading film maker of Holland, Joris Ivens.[28]

Although his early films *The Bridge* and *Rain* had been experiments in design, social issues were already important to him. He had been a student activist. Later, in the mid-1920's, he had worked in a German camera factory and had marched in protest against working conditions. When the marchers were fired on by police, he felt he had



Easter Island, 1935.

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been involved in an early battle against spreading fascism. Then, in Amsterdam, the Filmliga provided continuing political stimulus. Its showings of foreign films included films forbidden to Dutch theaters. The right of artists to view such films in privacy had been upheld after a stormy 1927 incident in which police had tried to stop a

screening of Pudovkin's *Mother* (*Mat,* 1926)—apparently the first Soviet film to reach Amsterdam. The libertarian victory had given the Filmliga its initial organizing impulse and helped it to grow dramatically.

Unlike similar groups elsewhere, Ivens and his friends did not produce newsreels, but they contrived a provocative equivalent. In the Netherlands, cinemas were closed on Sundays; during this weekend interval newsreels were borrowed from cooperative projectionists, then retitled and rearranged for totally revised, left-wing impact. Having relished the results and used them for discussion meetings, the *cinéastes* restored the films to their original form for the Monday theater showings.

The rapid growth of the Filmliga enabled it to institute meetings at which prominent film makers were invited to discuss their work. From France came several, including Alberto Cavalcanti and René Clair. From the Soviet Union came Sergei Eisenstein, Vsevolod Pudovkin, Dziga Vertov. While Russian studios were being converted to sound, their directors were encouraged to make such travels.

The Pudovkin appearance brought a turn in the life of Ivens. Netherlands authorities, nervous about Pudovkin's visit, allowed him to be on Dutch soil not more than twenty-four hours before, and twenty-four hours after, his Filmliga appearance. But during those hours Pudovkin saw several films, including *The Bridge* and *Rain,* and he said to Ivens: "It might be a good thing for us if you would come and visit us in the Soviet Union." Three months later a letter from Pudovkin brought a specific follow-up: "Why don't you come now? Your expenses from the frontier will be paid. Be sure to bring your films." In December of 1929 Ivens headed for the Soviet Union.

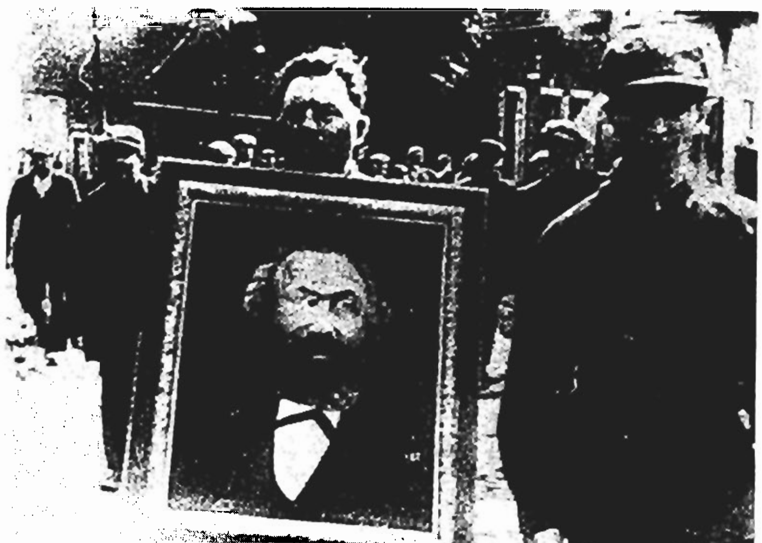
During the following months he gave scores of lectures, with screenings of his films. Shunted from place to place with an interpreter, he answered questions about film, social conditions, and his own life and background. And he saw films: at the Ukraine studio Dovzhenko showed him his new film *Earth* (*Zemlya,* 1930); at the Georgia studio Mikhail Kalatozov showed him the recently completed *Salt for Svanetia.* Then, to his astonishment, Ivens was invited to direct a film, on a topic of his choosing. He chose a new steel center at Magnitogorsk, which was being built and organized largely by youth brigades. The film eventually became *Song of Heroes* (*Pesn o Gueroyakh,* 1932).

Before he could start production, he made a return trip to the Netherlands, where in a short time he improved his financial situation by making two industrial films, including one for Philips Radio. Working in its almost luxurious plant he made *Industrial Symphony* (also known as *Philips-Radio,* 1931), a film of great technical beauty, with emphasis on textures and patterns of movement—as in *The Bridge*. (He had suggested photography in workers' homes, but the idea was vetoed by the company.) Returning to the Soviet Union, he launched into his other factory film: here, on the frontier between Europe and Asia, he lived in log-house barracks, working sometimes in a sea of mud, sometimes in incredible cold. Equipment was scant, and all film production material—like every other kind of material—was in short supply. Yet Ivens later wrote in his memoirs: "It was the first time in my life that I felt integrated with my work, a part of my environment."

On completing *Song of Heroes,* he returned to the Netherlands in time for the climax of something he had begun years earlier: a continuing film record of the draining of the Zuider Zee. But the completion of this engineering feat, designed to create new wheatlands, brought an unexpected, bitter irony—which became the final point of his film. In 1933 wheat was being dumped into the seas to maintain its price on international markets. Ivens expressed his anger in the jolting finish of *New Earth* (*Nieuwe Gronden,* 1934). In a sudden change of mood, accented by Hanns Eisler's music, the film indicts a system placing wheat prices above the hunger of millions.

Meanwhile the Belgian Henri Storck was in touch with him. Storck was outraged over the problems of coal miners in the Borinage section of Belgium, and the violent police action used to quell their strike, which had been precipitated by wage cuts. Ivens joined Storck to make *Borinage* (1933), financed by the Brussels cine-club, Club de L'Écran. To elude the police they worked in extreme secrecy, living in miners' homes, moving frequently from home to home. Recent evictions, demonstrations, and clashes with police were re-enacted with the help of miners. It was virtually "underground" film making, shadowed by secret police.[29] Censors banned the completed film in both Belgium and Netherlands, but it had substantial cine-club circulation.

Ivens was becoming a celebrated man of causes. He was invited to the United States. A group of prominent writers and artists—Herman



Borinage, 1933.

Storck collection

Shumlin, Lillian Hellman, Dorothy Parker, and others—proposed to raise funds and form a corporation, Contemporary Historians, Inc. They wanted Ivens to go to Spain to make a film about the anti-fascist struggle. Ivens cabled young John Ferno to join him on the Spanish project. Both would contribute their services to the cause. Ernest Hemingway joined the project, writing and speaking the narration. In Spain they found Roman Karmen of the Soviet Union at work on his film mission. For both Ivens and Ferno, it was the first filming of war. In a village they saw Caproni planes coming and bombs descending—smooth, shining brilliantly in the sun. Then came the crash of bombs and silence all over the village, followed by the cries of the wounded. Then, amid the dust of the explosions, women began to emerge, bewildered, not yet knowing what had happened. Ivens and Ferno followed them, with cameras in action. Two women picking up a baby. Ivens found himself thinking, how can I possibly be so brutal? But he was determined to keep shooting, and did. They kept on for weeks. Hemingway said they took "too many chances" and would be killed. The editing was done in New York by Ivens's editor, Helen van Dongen, who came from Holland for the project. Irving Reis, director of the experimental CBS radio series *Columbia*

Spain, 1936: Roman Karmen, Ernest Hemingway, Joris Ivens.
Karmen collection

Workshop, worked with her, adding sound effects to the silent footage. For their bombardment effect they found the sort of solution not unusual for this period: they appropriated a sequence of earthquake noises from the film *San Francisco* and ran it backwards. The effect was found triumphantly authentic. Virgil Thomson and Marc Blitzstein culled music from recordings of Spanish folk tunes. President Roosevelt saw a preview of *The Spanish Earth* at the White House and asked questions about the Russian tanks. Mrs. Roosevelt asked about the chances of a loyalist victory. The film was premiered in 1937. Some critics said Ivens had turned from art to propaganda. The *Motion Picture Herald* said it was "too stark, bitter and brutal to please the general audience." But many felt they had seen a classic. *Time* said:

> Not since the silent French film, *The Passion of Joan of Arc,* had such dramatic use been made of the human face. As face after face looks out from the screen the picture becomes a sort of portfolio of portraits of the human soul in the presence of disaster and distress. These are the earnest faces of speakers at meetings and in the villages talking war, exhorting the defense. These are faces of old women moved from their homes in Madrid for safety's sake, staring at a bleak, uncertain future, faces in terror after a bombing, faces of men going into battle and the faces of men who will never return from battle, faces full of grief and determination and fear.

For those most concerned with the loyalist cause, Ivens was a hero of the hour. He had become one of the great names of documentary film. Pare Lorentz, making plans for a U.S. Film Service, wanted him for a project—the film he was planning on rural electrification. But there were more urgent topics, such as the war in China. The artists and writers who had sent Ivens to Spain wanted him now to film the Chinese-Japanese war. They formed a new corporation—History Today, Inc. Luise Rainer, who had starred in *The Good Earth,* headed the fundraising. The Chinese ambassador was helpful. Early in 1938 Joris Ivens and John Ferno—they were co-directors on this project—were on their way; Robert Capa of *Life* went with them, to make stills. Footage would go—via Hollywood laboratories—to Helen van Dongen in New York for editing. They devised with her a cable code. The message JOHNNY VERY ILL would tell her: "Get us out of this country as soon as possible—tangling with the Japanese army or occupation authorities."[30]

But there were problems besides the Japanese. A Colonel Huang, assigned by the Chiang Kai-shek government to advise them, seemed to be in charge of making obstacles. Every move of the film group was apparently reported to Madame Chiang. In Hankow, temporary capital, the group encountered a new censorship system.

> Every time I took a shot, one of the Chinese censor people took exactly the same shot with a 16mm camera. The 16mm print was sent to Hong Kong, developed there by Kodak, flown back to Hankow and seen by the censor before we were allowed to send the identical 35mm film to Hollywood.

Ivens asked for permission to visit the Mao Tse-tung Eighth Route Army—but without results. Guerrilla units, they were told, could be found anywhere. All requests and inquiries concerning the Yenan forces precipitated a runaround. Ivens and Ferno tried, nevertheless, to make their way to the northwest; their efforts were watched, and a telegram from Hankow brought warning:

> MADAME WANTS ME TO INFORM YOU CHINA HAS ONLY ONE ARMY UNDER GENERALISSIMOS COMMAND IN YOUR PRODUCTION YOU ARE CAUTIONED NOT TO PUBLICIZE ANY PARTICULAR UNIT BUT GIVE PROMINENCE TO THE CHINESE ARMY STOP JULY AND AUGUST VERY HOT FOR HANKOW FILMING HOPE YOU TAKE FULL ADVANTAGE OF JUNE WEATHER HERE.

The Four Hundred Million, 1939.

Nederlands Filmmuseum

China, 1938: John Ferno, Joris Ivens and Chinese associate—at work on *The Four Hundred Million.*

The film, *The Four Hundred Million,* scored by Hanns Eisler with a narration written by Dudley Nichols and read by Fredric March, was premiered in 1939, and was both acclaimed and attacked. As an explanation of the upheavals in China, the film had limited value. As testimony on the horrors of modern war, it provided unforgettable moments.

From *The Bridge* through *New Earth* to *The Four Hundred Million,* Joris Ivens had moved long distances. At first it had been a matter of patterns in motion; then of social problems; now it seemed mainly a matter of loyalties. Ideological debate was being drowned by bombs. Ivens had moved on into a time when film makers, surrounded by the rumble of explosions, would not be asked to probe issues, but to sound the call to action.

Bugler

When German armies drove into Poland in September 1939, they plunged also into the film genre that was to dominate documentary production throughout World War II: the bugle-call film, adjunct to military action, weapon of war. The film maker's task: as to the faithful, to stir the blood, building determination to the highest pitch; as to the enemy, to chill the marrow, paralyzing the will to resist. In all these tasks, German war films made a glittering start.[1]

The importance attached to the work was evident. In the advance on the Polish city of Gdynia, the attack is said to have been delayed so that cameramen could take positions ahead of the assault troops, so as to document the full impact. In the later conquest of Norway, which made unprecedented use of parachute troops in coordination with naval landings, 300 German cameramen were said to be in action. Many German cameramen were killed during the war.

The accumulating battle footage was processed into expanded newsreels in the *German Weekly Review* (*Deutsche Wochenschau*) series—it often ran to forty minutes during the early part of the war—and into long documentaries. Captured footage, stirring music, animated maps, and highly emotional narration were important additional elements. While the overwhelmingly dynamic action riveted attention, speech and music were used to impose specific meanings and values on the events. The viewer was word-regimented.