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Introduction to Documentary

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Chapter 5

How Did Documentary Filmmaking Get Started?

THE MYTHIC ORIGIN IN EARLY CINEMA

The voice of documentary relates to the ways in which documentary film and video speaks about the world around us, but from a particular perspective. When a documentary makes a case or advances an argument, “voice” refers to how it does so. Our discussion of voice would not be complete without some consideration of how this form of speech about the world arose. When did it begin; what relation does it enjoy to other forms of cinema? How, in other words, did documentary find its voice?

We should note that no one set out to build a documentary film tradition. No one set out to “invent” documentary film as such. The effort to construct the history for documentary film, a story with a beginning, way back then, and an end, now or in the future, comes after the fact. It comes with the desire of filmmakers and writers, like myself, to understand how things got to be the way they are now. But to those who came before us, back then, how things are now was a matter of idle speculation.

Their interest was not in providing a clean, clear path for the development of a documentary tradition that did not yet exist. Their interest and passion was in exploring the limits of cinema, in discovering new possibilities and untold forms. That some of these efforts would jell into what we

now call documentary obscures the blurred boundaries between fiction and non-fiction, documenting reality and experimenting with form, showing and telling, narrative and rhetoric that fueled these early efforts. The continuation of this tradition of experimentation is what allows documentary itself to remain a lively, vital genre.

A standard way of explaining the rise of documentary involves the story of the cinema’s love for the surface of things, its uncanny ability to capture life as it is, an ability that served as a hallmark for early cinema and its immense catalog of people, places, and things culled from around the world. Like photography before it, the cinema was a revelation. People had never seen images that possessed such extraordinary fidelity to their subject, and they had never witnessed apparent motion that had imparted such a convincing sense of motion itself. As film theorist Christian Metz noted in the 1960s in a discussion of the phenomenology of film, to duplicate the impression of movement is to duplicate its reality. Cinema achieved this goal at a level no other medium had ever attained.

The capacity of photographic images to render such a vivid impression of reality, including movement as a vital aspect of life that painting and sculpture had been able only to allude to but not to duplicate, prompts two complementary stories to unfold—one about the image and one about the filmmaker.

The remarkable fidelity of the photographic image to what it records gives such an image the appearance of a document. It offers visible evidence of what the camera saw. The underlying sense of authenticity in the films of Louis Lumière made at the end of the nineteenth century, such as *Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory*, *Arrival of a Train*, *The Waterer Watered*, *The Gardener*, and *Feeding the Baby*, seem but a small step away from documentary film proper. Although they are but a single shot and last but a few minutes, they seem to provide a window onto the historical world. (Fiction films often give the impression that we look in on a private or unusual world from outside, from our vantage point in the historical world, whereas documentary films often give the impression that we look out from our corner of the world onto some other part of the same world.) The departing workers in *Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory*, for example, walk out of the factory and past the camera for us to see as if we were there, watching this specific moment from the past take place all over again.

These early works have typically served as the “origin” of documentary by maintaining a “faith in the image” of the sort the influential French critic André Bazin admired when he tried to answer the question “What is Cinema?” through a series of important essays in the 1940s. Lumière’s films seemed to record everyday life as it happened. Shot without adornment or

editorial rearrangement, they reveal the shimmering mystery of events. They appear to reproduce the event and preserve the mystery. A note of humility was in the air. The cinema was an instrument of extraordinary power; it required no exaggeration or spectacle to win our admiration.

The second story involves the filmmaker. The remarkable accuracy of the image as a photographic representation of what the camera saw fascinated those who took the pictures. A compelling need to explore this source of fascination drove early cinematographers to record diverse aspects of the world around them. Even if they staged aspects of the action or decorated the scene, as Georges Méliès did in works such as his *A Trip to the Moon* (1902), a fascination with the power of the photographic image to record whatever came before it and to present the product of this power to an audience by means of the film strip, capable of projection over and over, took precedence over the niceties of story telling or character development.

We have, then, two stories, (1) the uncanny capacity of film images and photographs to bear the physical imprint of what they record with photographic precision thanks to the passage of light energy through lenses and onto a photographic emulsion, combined with (2) the compulsion that was ignited in early film pioneers to explore this capacity, form, for some, the foundation for the rise of documentary film. The combination of a passion for recording the real and an instrument capable of great fidelity attained a purity of expression in the act of documentary filming.

This conventional story culminates in the dual attainments of the narrative polish with which Robert Flaherty brought inuit life to the screen in *Nanook of the North* (1922) and of the marketing skill with which John Grierson established an institutional base for what, by the late 1920s, had become known as documentary film. Grierson spearheaded the government sponsorship of documentary production in 1930s Britain as Dziga Vertov had done throughout the 1920s in the Soviet Union and as Pare Lorentz would do in the mid-1930s in the United States. In point of fact, Vertov promoted documentary quite a bit earlier than Grierson but remained more of a maverick within the fledgling Soviet film industry; he did not attract a corps of like-minded filmmakers nor gain anything like the solid institutional footing that Grierson achieved. John Grierson became the prime mover of the British and, later, the Canadian documentary film movements. Despite the valuable example of Dziga Vertov and the Soviet cinema generally, it was Grierson who secured a relatively stable niche for documentary film production.

Coupling the uncanny power of film to document pre-existing phenomena with the rise of an institutional base corresponds to the four-way definition of documentary discussed in Chapter 2. These developments provide

a group of practitioners, an institutional frame, a body of films with common characteristics, and, presumably, an audience attentive to these distinguishing qualities. These developments, though, amount to necessary but not sufficient conditions. Their use to tell the story of documentary film's beginnings presumes too clear a set of intentions and too straightforward a march from the origins of cinema to the achievements of documentary. This story amounts to a myth.

The capacity of film to provide rigorous documentation of what comes before the camera leads in at least two other directions: science and spectacle. Both directions begin with early cinema (roughly from 1895 to 1906, when narrative cinema begins to gain dominance). Both have contributed to documentary film development but are hardly synonymous with it. The differences can be noted briefly.

First, the capacity of the photographic image (and later of the recorded soundtrack) to generate precise replicas of certain aspects of their source material forms the basis for scientific modes of representation. These modes rely heavily on the indexical quality of the photographic image. An indexical sign bears a physical relation to what it refers to: a fingerprint replicates exactly the pattern of whorls on the fleshy tips of our fingers; the asymmetrical shape of a wind-swept tree reveals the strength and direction of the prevailing wind.

The value of this indexical quality to scientific imaging depends heavily on minimizing the degree to which the image, be it a fingerprint or x-ray, exhibits any sense of a perspective or point of view distinctive to its individual maker. A strict code of objectivity, or institutional perspective, applies. The voice of science demands silence, or near silence, from documentary filmmaker or photographer. Documentary flourishes when it gains a voice of its own. Producing accurate documents or visual evidence does not lend it such a voice. In fact, it can detract from it.

Documentary film practice allows for the image to generate an appropriate impression rather than guarantee full-blown authenticity in every case. Just as a photograph can be "doctored," so can a documentary. The "father" of documentary, Robert Flaherty, for example, created the impression that some scenes took place inside Nanook's igloo when, in fact, they were shot in the open air with half an oversized igloo as a backdrop. This gave Flaherty enough light to shoot but required his subjects to act as if they were inside an actual igloo when they were not. *Hoop Dreams* adds music to enhance the power of the story, just as a fiction film might do. For *The Thin Blue Line* Errol Morris shot a series of reconstructions that represent the murder of a Dallas police officer as various figures in the film describe it. Not only are the reconstructions discrepant from each other, raising the

question of "What really happened?" but every one of them was shot not in Dallas but in New Jersey. These choices all represent tactics by the filmmaker to generate the effect they desire on an audience. They may amount to bad science, but they are part and parcel of documentary representation.

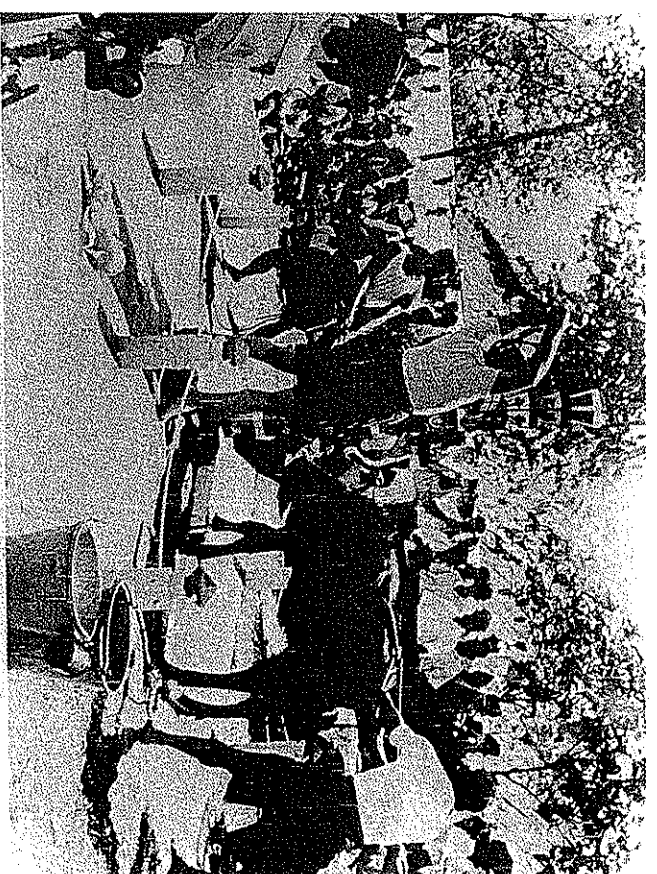
When we believe in something without conclusive proof in the validity of our belief, this becomes an act of fetishism, or faith. Documentary film often invites us to take on faith that "what you see is what there was." This act of trust, or faith, may derive from the indexical capabilities of the photographic image without being fully justified or supported by it. For the filmmaker, creating trust, getting us to suspend doubt or disbelief, by rendering an *impression* of reality, and hence truthfulness, corresponds to the priorities of rhetoric more than to the requirements of science. We accept the evidentiary value of images as an article of faith with some peril.

Early cinema not only supported the scientific use of images, it also led to what film historian Tom Gunning has termed a "cinema of attractions." His term refers to the idea of circus attractions and their open delight in showing us a wide variety of unusual phenomena. Such attractions could both whet the curiosity and satisfy the passion of early cinematographers and audiences alike for images that represented aspects of the world around them. A tone of exhibitionism prevailed that differed radically both from the sense of looking in on a private, fictional world and from documenting material that would serve as scientific evidence. This exhibitionism also differs from documentary.

The cinema of attractions relied on the image as document to present viewers with sensational sketches of the exotic and lingering depictions of the everyday. The "cinema of attractions" paralleled the excitement surrounding the great world fairs and exhibitions of the time, such as the St. Louis World Exhibition in 1904 with its "authentic" recreation of a Filipino village populated by Filipinos imported into the United States more as specimens than citizens. (The exhibit was presented as an anthropological display of native culture.) The "cinema of attractions" pitched its appeal directly to the viewer and took delight in the sensationalism of the exotic and bizarre.

But the voice of the filmmaker was again noticeably silent. The discovery of a celluloid world remarkably similar to the physical world invited us to behold what the camera could put on display. The distinctive point of view of the filmmaker took second place. Louis Lumière sent scores of camera operators around the world armed with his newly patented cinématographe (an invention that not only shot film like a modern motion picture camera but also served to develop and project it). We remember the names of only a handful of them. What they shot mattered more than how they shot it.

Aspects of this tradition of a "cinema of attractions" linger on just as sci-



Mondo Cane (Gualtiero Jacopetti, 1963)

A slew of "Mondo" films has followed in the wake of *Mondo Cane*. The sense of spectacle and sensationalism goes back to early cinema and clearly carries over to contemporary "reality TV" shows from *Cops* to *Survivor*.

entific uses of the photographic image remain strong. It is vividly on display in a variety of films that peek into the underbelly of everyday life. We find it, for example, in "mondo" movies, beginning with the classic tour of outrageous customs and bizarre practices, *Mondo Cane* (1963), with its catalogue of bare-breasted women, the mass slaughter of pigs, and august pet cemeteries in different corners of the world. We find a similar display of "attractions" in the hard-core scenes in pornography, where an exhibitionist tone seems to know no limits. Safari films and travelogues on everything from surfing to architecture also rely heavily on this exhibitionist impulse to appeal to us directly with the wonders of what the camera discovered. In addition, reality TV shows such as *Cops* or *Rescue 911* flourish by presenting a succession of images and scenes, as if to say little more than, "Isn't that amazing!" Clearly an element of documentary film, this "cabaret of curiosities" is often an embarrassing fellow-traveler more than a central element.

THE 1920S: DOCUMENTARY FINDS ITS LEGS

Neither an emphasis on showing off (a "cinema of attractions") nor one on gathering evidence (scientific documentation) provides an adequate basis for documentary film. A direct line does not exist from Louis Lumière's train arriving in a station to Hitler arriving at Nuremberg (in *Triumph of the Will*) nor from the fascination with movement itself to fascination with moving audiences to action. We continue to lack a sense of the filmmaker's oratorical voice in these early tendencies. If there were a linear path from these qualities of early cinema to documentary, we would expect documentary to develop in parallel with narrative fiction through the 1900s and 1910s rather than gain widespread recognition only in the late 1920s and early 1930s.

If we couple these two directions that go back to early cinema—display and documentation—into one "leg" of documentary, we need to consider three more legs before we can speak of the arrival of a documentary film genre: (1) poetic experimentation, (2) narrative story telling, and (3) rhetorical oratory. The recognition of documentary as a distinct film form becomes less a question of the origin or evolution of these different elements than of their combination at a given historical moment. That moment came in the 1920s and early 1930s. We can review the nature of these additional three elements here briefly.

Poetic Experimentation

Poetic experimentation in cinema arises largely from the cross-fertilization between cinema and the various modernist avant-gardes of the twentieth century. This poetic dimension plays a vital part in the emergence of a documentary voice. The poetic potential of cinema, though, remains largely absent in the "cinema of attractions," where "showing off" took higher priority than "speaking poetically." Poetry flourished most vividly in the practices of the modernist avant-garde that began after the turn of the century and flourished through the 1920s. Classic examples would include the work of 1920s French impressionist artists and critics such as Jean Epstein (*L'Affiche* [*The Poster*], 1925), Abel Gance (*La Roue* [*The Wheel*], 1922), Louis Delluc (*Fièvre* [*Fever*], 1921), Germaine Dulac (*The Smiling Madame Beudet*, 1923), and René Clair (*Paris Qui Dort*, aka *The Crazy Ray*, 1924) and the experimental work of Dutch filmmaker Joris Ivens (*The Bridge*, 1928; *Rain*, 1929), the German artist Hans Richter (*Rhythmus 23*, 1923; *Inflation*, 1928), the Swedish artist Viking Eggling (*Diagonal Symphony*, 1924), French artist Marcel Duchamp (*Anemic Cinema*, 1927), the Ukrainian filmmaker Alexander Dovzhenko (*Zvenigora*, 1928), and the expatriate American Man Ray (*Retour à la Raison*, 1923).

It was within the avant-garde that the sense of a distinct point of view or voice took shape in ways that refused to subordinate perspective to showing off attractions or creating fictional worlds. This work often began with photographic images of everyday reality, although some, such as Man Ray's "rayograms," were made without a lens by exposing undeveloped film to various objects. These images of a recognizable world quickly veered in directions other than fidelity to the object and realism as a style. The filmmaker's way of seeing things took higher priority than demonstrating the camera's ability to record what it saw faithfully and accurately.

Voice came to the fore in modernist works such as Dimitri Kirsanov's *Merilmontant* (1924), a tale of love betrayed, murder, and contemplated suicide told from a woman's point of view; Alberto Cavalcanti's *Pien que les Heures* (1926), a day in the life of Paris that flips whimsically between images of reality and the reality of images (images of a woman descending a staircase become a strip of film that is torn up and tossed into the street, for example); Joris Ivens's *The Bridge* (1928), with its "story" of the rise and fall of a bridge told primarily through carefully composed but fragmented shots of the bridge's structure, and Man Ray's *L'Étoile de Mer* (1928), a surreal series of scenes involving events in the everyday life of a Parisian woman.

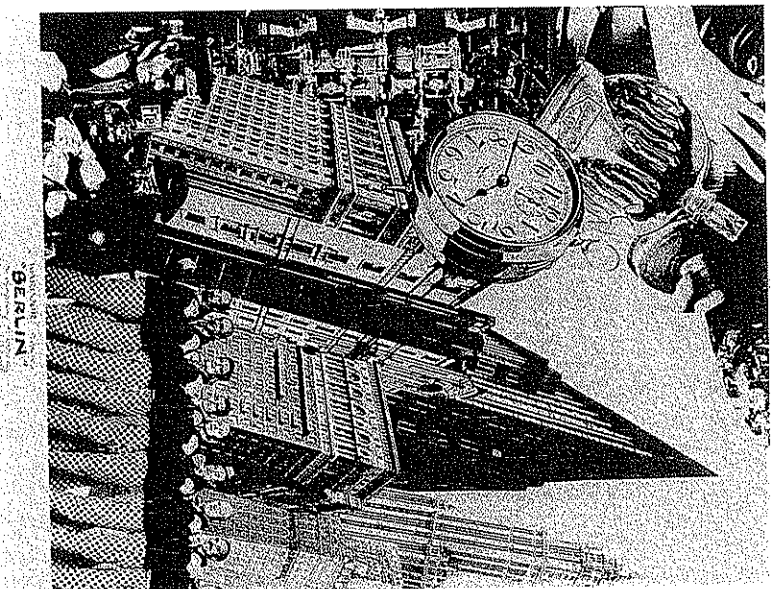
The empirical ability of film to produce a photographic record of what it recorded struck many of these artists as an impediment or handicap. If a perfect copy was all that was desired, what room was left for the artist's desire, for the impulses and idiosyncrasies of vision that saw the world anew? A film technician would do. French impressionist theory in the 1920s celebrated what Jean Epstein termed *photogénie*, whereas Soviet film theory championed the concept of montage. Both were ways of overcoming the mechanical reproduction of reality in favor of the construction of something new in ways only cinema could accomplish.

Photogénie referred to what the film image offered that supplemented or differed from what it represented. A machine-governed, automatic reproduction of what came before the camera became secondary to the magic worked by the image itself. Details of reality could become wondrous when projected onto a screen. The image offered a captivating rhythm and a seductive magic all its own. The experience of watching film differed from looking at reality in ways that words could only imperfectly explain.

Abel Gance's *La Roue*, for example, used single-frame flashbacks and numerous motifs of wheels, rotation, and movement to capture the delirium of a train engineer caught up in an impossible love. Robert Flaherty, in a spirit different from the French impressionists, also suggests what this sense of wonder can be like when he begins *Louisiana Story* with a slow,

Berlin: Symphony of a City (Walter Ruttmann, 1927)

This publicity still for the film uses photomontage to celebrate the dynamism and energy of the modern city but does so without the sharp, political edge that photo- and film-montage achieved elsewhere in 1920s Germany and in 20s Soviet cinema and constructivist art. Montage can stress formal relationships or political associations. The editing of *Berlin*, like the photomontage in this still, opts for the poetic over the political.



enchanting journey through the Louisiana bayou as seen from the pirogue of a young boy.

The idea of *photogénie* and editing, or montage, allowed the filmmaker's voice to take center stage. Ruttmann's *Berlin: Symphony of a City* (1927), for example, has a poetic but non-analytic voice; it celebrates the diversity of daily life in Berlin unrelated to any clear social or political analysis of urban life. Dziga Vertov's *The Man with a Movie Camera* (1929), by contrast, adopts a poetic but also reflexive, analytic voice to examine the transformative power of the coordinated masses as they, like the machinery of cinema, go about the business of producing a new, post-revolutionary Soviet society.

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

space beyond mainstream cinema became the proving ground for voices that spoke to viewers in languages distinct from feature fiction.

Narrative Story-telling

Together with the development of a poetic voice, the period after 1906 also saw the development of an even more dominant narrative voice. This is the second element missing from scientific observation and the "cinema of attractions" that goes into the construction of documentary and its voice. In narrative story telling, style (from individual preferences to common approaches such as expressionism, neo-realism, or surrealism) coupled with the construction of a plot to tell a story that revealed, through the unique combination of style and plot, the voice or perspective of filmmakers on the world they created, and, obliquely, through this imagined world, on the historical world they shared with others.

What mattered most for the development of documentary was the refinement of story-telling techniques for the cinema as such, from the parallel editing of D. W. Griffith to the ways in which an action or event could be told from different perspectives (from the perspective of an omniscient narrator, the perspective of a third-person observer, or the points of view of different characters, for example).

Narrative offered a formal way of telling stories that could be applied to the historical world as well as an imaginary one. History and biography, for example, usually take the form of narratives but in a non-fiction mode. Narratives resolve conflict and achieve order. The problem/solution structure of many documentaries makes use of narrative techniques as well as rhetoric. Narrative perfects the sense of an ending by returning to problems or dilemmas posed at the beginning and resolving them.

Narrative also welcomes forms of suspense, or delay, where complications can mount and anticipation grow. It provides ways of elaborating a sense of character, not only through the performance of actors trained to act for the camera, but through the techniques of lighting, composition, and editing, among others, that can be applied to non-actors as readily as actors. It refined the techniques of continuity editing to give a seamless sense of coherent time and space to the locations in which characters acted. Even when documentaries turned to evidentiary editing and the assembly of material from various times and places, the techniques of continuity editing facilitated the smooth flow of one image to another by matching movement, action, eyeline, or scale from one shot to another. All of these developments found uses in documentary, most vividly, perhaps, in strictly observational films (such as *Primary* or *Salesman*) that looked in on the lives of people and invited the audience to interpret what it saw as if it were a fiction.

Writing in the postwar years in France, André Bazin celebrated the achievements of Italian neo-realism for reasons similar to those later used to celebrate *cinéma vérité* or observational documentary. Although the Italian films were fictional narratives, they demonstrated what Bazin considered a profound respect for reality by finding a narrative "voice" that was humble and modest but hardly silent.

The neo-realists eschewed attempts to evoke the quality of *photogénie* through extremes of stylization favored by the French impressionists. They avoided the expressionist techniques favored by German directors such as Robert Wiene (*The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, 1920), F.W. Murnau (*Nostalgia*, 1922), and Fritz Lang (*Metropolis*, 1927) that also modified the look of the image to suggest a distorted, unbalanced world of menacing forces and unstable personalities. The neo-realists shunned the montage techniques favored by Soviet directors such as Sergei Eisenstein (*October*, 1927), Vsevolod Pudovkin (*The End of St. Petersburg*, 1927), and Dziga Vertov (*The Man with a Movie Camera*, 1929) that juxtaposed shots to jar the spectator and produce new insights from the way different shots are brought together. They coupled narrative to the documentary purity of Lumière to achieve a style of enduring significance.

Neo-realists such as Roberto Rossellini (*Rome, Open City*, 1946), Vittorio De Sica (*Bicycle Thief*, 1948), and Luchino Visconti (*La Terra Trema*, 1948) stressed narrative qualities in tune with the photographic realism of the motion picture: a casual, unadorned view of everyday life; a meandering, coincidence-laden series of actions and events; natural lighting and location shooting; a reliance on untrained actors; a rejection of close-ups dotting on the faces of stars; and a stress on the problems confronting ordinary people in the present moment rather than the historical past or an imagined future. Here was an important strand of narrative filmmaking that contributed to the continuing development of documentary.

This sense of a photographic realism, of revealing what life has to offer when it is filmed simply and truly, is not, in fact, a truth but a style. It is an effect achieved by using specific but unassuming, definite but self-effacing means. It corresponds to what amounts to one of three important ways in which the term "realism" has significance for documentary film.

- *Photographic realism* can also be referred to as *physical* or *em-pirical realism*. It generates a realism of time and place through location photography, straightforward filming, and continuity editing where the distorting and subjective uses of editing favored by the avant-garde are minimized.



THE BICYCLE THIEF

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The Bicycle Thief (Vittorio De Sica, 1948)

The genius of Robert Flaherty lay in drawing out stories that felt as if they were intimately tied to a concrete sense of time and place. This type of story-telling skill reverberated throughout the Italian neo-realist film movement, with its use of location photography, non-actors, and stories of everyday life and basic survival.

- *Psychological realism* involves conveying the inner states of characters or social actors in plausible and convincing ways. Anxiety, happiness, anger, ecstasy and so on can be realistically portrayed and conveyed. We consider the representation of such states realistic when we sense that the inner life of a character has been effectively conveyed even if this calls for inventiveness on the part of the director, such as holding a shot longer than usual, adopting a revealing camera angle, adding suggestive music, or juxtaposing one image or sequence with another.

- *Emotional realism* concerns the creation of an appropriate emotional state in the viewer. An outlandish musical number can generate a feeling of exuberance in the audience even though there is little psychological depth provided to the characters and the

physical setting is clearly a fabrication. We still recognize a realistic dimension to the experience: it is like other emotional experiences we have had. The emotion itself is familiar and genuinely felt.

All three of these forms of realism hold relevance for documentary film. Neo-realism made use of all three, giving us a vivid sense of the look of post-war Italy, of the hopes and anxieties of ordinary people, and generating a strong sense of empathy, if not humanistic sentimentality, in its audience. Documentary also frequently relies heavily on a realism of time and place. It depends on finding people, or social actors, who reveal themselves in front of a camera with an openness and lack of self-consciousness similar to what we find in trained professionals. And documentary seeks to impart to viewers a feeling of emotional involvement or engagement with the people and issues portrayed. Neo-realism helped to demonstrate that this form of narrative style provided a common thread between fiction and non-fiction that continues to the present: story telling and giving voice to a view of the historical world need not be seen as polarized alternatives.

RHETORIC AND ORATORY

Showing (in the tradition of the "cinema of attractions"), telling (in the tradition of narrative cinema), and poetic form (in the tradition of the *avant-garde*) provide three of the legs for documentary film. The fourth is also shared with other genres but remains most distinctive to documentary itself.

The classic voice of oratory sought to speak about the historical world in ways that reveal a particular perspective on the world. It sought to persuade us of the merits of a perspective as well as to predispose us to action or to the adoption of sensibilities and values of one kind or another in relation to the world we actually inhabit. Such a voice was clearly heard in Robert Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* as it had been by a smaller audience for Edward Curtis's 1915 film, *In the Land of the Headhunters* (a film restored and reissued in 1972 as *In the Land of the War Canoes*). These films combined a series of "attractions" with a coherent narrative, the poetic orchestration of scenes, and an oratorical voice that confirmed a perspective on the historical world.

Along with Flaherty's *Moana* (1926), about Polynesian culture, other early works such as Merian Cooper and Ernest Schoedsack's *Grass* (1925), about the nomadic peoples of Turkey and Persia, Victor Turin's *Turks* (1929), on the construction of an important new rail link between far-flung parts of the Soviet Union, and Jean Vigo's *A Propos de Nice* (1930),

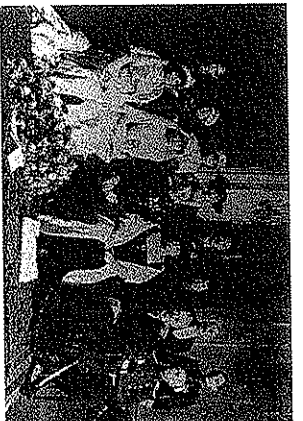
a savage look at class differences at this beach resort, affirmed the idea of a documentary voice. This voice adapted showing "attractions," telling stories, and cinematic poetry to speak about the social world in important ways. These developments took distinctive shape in the Soviet Union, where an earlier, pre-revolutionary period of experimentation in the arts continued to flourish in the early years of the new Soviet state in the forms of constructivist art and Soviet cinema. (The gradual imposition of an "official" state style of art and film, Socialist Realism, eliminated almost all experimentation by the middle of the 1930s.)

In an influential essay, the constructivist painter, designer, and photomontage artist Aleksandr Rodchenko argued against the "synthetic portrait," which would capture a whole personality in a single painting. Instead, he championed an assembled series of documentary photographs, each revealing a different facet of a complex figure. In another essay, "Constructivism in the Cinema" (1928), the Russian artist Alexei Gan called for a new type of cinema, both poetic and demonstrative:

It is not enough to link, by means of montage, individual moments of episodic phenomena of life, united under a more or less successful title [*Berlin: Symphony of a City* may have been the type of work Gan had in mind]. The most unexpected accidents, occurrences and events are always linked organically with the fundamental root of social reality. While apprehending them with the shell of their outer manifestations, one should be able to expose their inner essence by a series of other scenes. Only on such a basis can one build a vivid film of concrete, active reality—gradually departing from the newsreel, from whose material this new *ciné* form is developing. ("Constructivism and the Cinema," in Stephen Bann, ed., *The Tradition of Constructivism*, p. 130)

Dziga Vertov also championed an attitude of poetic reconstruction to those records of what the camera saw. Editing and the interval (the effect of the transitions between shots) formed the core of his style of non-fiction cinema called *kino-eye*:

1. Editing during observation—orienting the unaided eye at any place, any time.
2. Editing after observation—mentally organizing what has been seen, according to characteristic features [akin to the functions of invention and memory in classic rhetoric].
3. Editing during filming—orienting the aided eye of the movie camera in the place inspected in step 1.
4. Editing after filming—roughly organizing the footage according to characteristic features. Looking for the montage fragments that are lacking.
5. Gauging by sight (hunting for montage fragments)—instantaneous orienting in any visual environment so as to capture the essential link shots. Exceptional attentiveness. A military rule: gauging by sight, speed, attack.
6. The final editing—reveal minor, concealed themes together with the ma-



The Prince Is Back (Marina Goldovskaya, 1999). Photos courtesy of Marina Goldovskaya.

The Family. This group portrait of the Meschersky family from 1912, in pre-revolutionary Russia, affirms both their kinship and their good standing within the Russian aristocracy.



The Prince Is Back
The Prince. In the 1990s, Prince Meschersky decides to reclaim his family estate from the government and restore it.

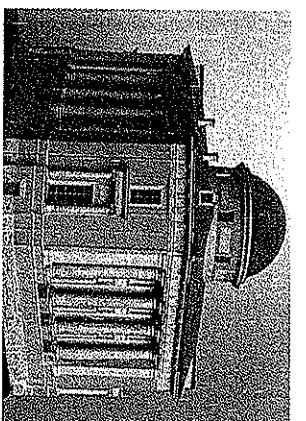
for ones. Reorganizing all the footage into the best sequence. Bringing out the core of the film-object. Coordinating similar elements, and finally, numerically calculating the montage groupings. ("Kino-Eye," 1926, in Annette Michelson, ed., *Kino-Eye: The Writings of Dziga-Vertov*, p. 72)

These writings addressed issues of film form, specifically the assembly of shots into a pattern that both disclosed less visible aspects of the world and affirmed the voice of the filmmaker. This call for montage or assembly moved beyond showing "attractions" or making scientific observations but still summoned cinema to acknowledge its capacity to represent the historical world with photographic fidelity. Soviet theories of constructivist art and cinematic montage harnessed this capacity to the filmmaker's desire to remake the world in the image of a revolutionary new society.

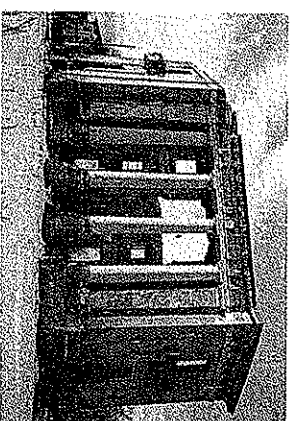
Montage stressed the rearrangement of events into fragments. By juxtaposing shots that did not "naturally" go together, the filmmaker constructed new impressions and insights. Eisenstein likened traditional photographic realism to an imposed ideology:

Absolute realism is by no means the correct form of perception. It is simply the function of a certain form of social structure. Following a state monarchy, a state uniformity of thought is implanted. ("The Cinematographic Principle and the Ideogram," in Jay Leyda, ed., *Film Form and the Film Sense*, p. 35)

What did Eisenstein see as an alternative? Distorting reality to create a radically new vision of it.



The Prince Is Back
The Estate. This model suggests how the prince's palace looked prior to the 1917 Revolution.



The Prince Is Back
The Problem. Eighty-plus years after the Revolution. Can one man and his family restore what's left of the family home? Can a country move forward if its citizens want to go backward? Marina Goldovskaya raises larger issues only implicitly in her intimate portrait of the prince's pursuit of a dream.

Is this not exactly what we of the cinema do . . . when we cause a monstrous disproportion of the parts of a normally flowing event, and suddenly dismember the event into "close-up of clutching hands," "medium shot of the struggle," and "extreme close-up of bulging eyes," in making a montage disintegration of the event in various planes? In making an eye twice as large as a man's full figure! By combining these monstrous incongruities we newly collect the disintegrated event into one whole, but in *our* aspect. According to the treatment of our relation to the event. ("The Cinematographic Principle," p. 34, italics in original)

The Soviet cinema was a vividly rhetorical cinema. In the work of many of its practitioners, from the famous films of Sergei Eisenstein himself (*Strike*, *Battleship Potemkin*, *October*, *The Old and the New*, etc.) to the less well known but pioneering compilation documentaries of Esther Shub (*The Great Road*, 1927; *The Fall of the Romanov Dynasty*, 1927; and *The Russia of Nicholas II and Leo Tolstoy*, 1928) techniques of montage laid the groundwork for the didactic emphasis that John Grierson gave to documentary in the Great Britain of the 1930s.

In the 1920s, the sense that the voice of the filmmaker—and through this voice a government or society—took shape through the ways in which views of the world were recast in shooting and editing held paramount importance. These practices demonstrated that complex films could be constructed from fragments of the historical world rejoined to give expression to a particular viewpoint. Rhetoric in all its forms and all its purposes pro-

vides the final, distinguishing element of documentary. The exhibitor of attractions, the teller of stories, and the poet of *photogénie* condense in the figure of the documentary filmmaker as orator, speaking in a voice all his own about a world we all share.

These elements first came together in the Soviet Union through the 1920s as the challenge of constructing a new society took precedence in all the arts. This particular melding of elements took root in other countries in the late 1920s and early 1930s as governments, thanks to advocates like John Grierson, saw the value of using film to promote a sense of participatory citizenship and to support the role in government in confronting the most difficult issues of the day, such as inflation, poverty, and the Depression. Answers to these problems varied widely from democratic Britain to fascist Germany and from a New Deal United States to a Communist Russia, but in each case, the voice of the documentarian contributed significantly to framing a national agenda and proposing courses of action.