"Documentary Films"

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DOCUMENTARY FILMS

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I. Introduction
II. Origins of the documentary
III. The silent film era
IV. The sound film
V. The arrival of television
VI. Deregulation: the 1980s and 1990s
VII. Conclusion: Art and Facts

GLOSSARY

Camcorders Portable electronic cameras capable of recording video images.

Film loop A short length of film running continuously with the action repeated every few seconds.

Kinetoscope Box-like machine in which moving images could be viewed by one person at a time through a view-finder.

Music track A musical score added to a film and projected synchronously with it. In the first sound films, often lasting for the entire film; later blended more subtly with dialogue and sound effects.

Nickelodeon The first movie houses specializing in regular film programs, with an admission charge of five cents.

On camera A person filmed standing in front of the camera and often looking and speaking into it.

Silent film Film not accompanied by spoken dialogue or sound effects. Music and sound effects could be added live in the theater at each performance of the film.

Sound film Film for which sound is recorded synchronously with the picture or added later to give this effect and projected synchronously with the picture.

Video Magnetized tape capable of holding electronic images which can be scanned electronically and viewed on a television monitor or projected onto a screen.

Work print The first print of a film taken from its original negative used for editing and thus not fit for public screening.

The origins of the film and video documentary can be traced back to the period of the European Enlightenment when artists, followed later by photographers, began using visual documentation to support scientific projects, notably land and sea-borne expeditions of exploration and discovery. Their efforts predate the invention of the motion picture camera, which appeared in the last decade of the nineteenth century. In the twentieth century the history of the documentary was marked by changes in technology as well as by the political and cultural uses to which documentary films were put. The first half of the century, the era first of the silent and then of the sound film, saw documentaries emerging as a distinctive genre but one that had difficulty competing with fictional drama for audiences in commercial movie theaters. Both totalitarian and democratic governments in the 1930s financed nonfiction films with the result that in World War II the documentary form effectively succumbed everywhere to the demands of propaganda. The advent of television after World War II brought new sources of funding and new outlets for documentary films, as well as new approaches to their form. Faced with an enormous demand for television programming, commercial networks and public service broadcasters alike saw a need to balance entertainment shows with news-based, historical, and human interest documentaries. For some 25 years documentaries became a staple of network television schedules, watched by mass audiences and covering all sides of human experience. Deregulation in the 1980s transformed this situation, with the documentary migrating from commercial networks to cable channels. While public service broadcasters maintained their interest in the traditional documentary, video technology made independent production of documentaries more widespread, further extending the range of subject matter, and enabling documentary makers with marked individual styles to emerge. By the end of the twentieth century, the documentary genre had established itself worldwide, though in a wide variety of forms, and with no general agreement on how the genre itself should be defined. But whatever technological or cultural changes may lie in the future, documentary makers still face the challenge of making the right aesthetic choices when they present information about the actual world in which we live.

I. INTRODUCTION

Documentary is an elastic term that has been stretched to cover almost every kind of nonfiction film or video production. The first person to use it about motion picture records seems to have been the Seattle based photographer, Edward S. Curtis. In 1911-1912 Curtis was lecturing in cities on the east coast of the United States to raise funds for a monumental project, a photographic record of all the native people of North America. In programs for his lectures Curtis advertised the “documental value” of his material. “They show,” he wrote, “what the artist with the camera can do in rendering a record of a people - a record which not only gives a documentary story, but also the atmosphere and soul of the primitive life.”

Curtis planned a full length motion picture about native Americans living on the Pacific north-west coast. In a prospectus he stressed the ethnographic value of the “documentary material,” writing that it “will be one the most valuable documentary works which can be taken up at this time.” It would be “A documentary picture of the Kwakiutl tribes, the natives of Vancouver Island.” Curtis’ use of the documentary term

may have been prompted by Theodore Roosevelt, whose support of his photographic project helped Curtis get started. In a letter from the White House of December 1905 President Roosevelt referred to the value of Curtis' photographs "as historical documents" and to the Indian, the subject of the photographic record, as "a living historical document." The film historian Kevin Brownlow (1978) has suggested that documentary film makers owe a debt to Theodore Roosevelt, a keen conservationist, for his openness with film cameras, which helped build popular interest in the early nonfiction film.

French dictionaries date the use of the term *documentaire* in relation to film to the mid-1920s. Like its English equivalent, the word carries an implication of a record that supplies evidence or proof. In everyday speech documents refer to papers, specifically identification papers. If we say we are documenting something or someone, we are establishing facts about that object or person, verifiable by some kind of paperwork.

The form of the documentary film and the uses to which it has been put have been determined by social changes and advances in technology. Four main eras may be identified: 1) the era of the silent film, from 1895 to the end of the 1920s; 2) the classical era of the sound film, the 1930s and 1940s; 3) the first three decades of television, following upon the medium's reappearance after World War II, the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s; 4) the 1980s, 1990s, and the beginning of the 21st century, an era of new technology and change in the structure of the television industry.

By the end of the twentieth century documentaries were being made virtually everywhere in the world, in all shapes and sizes, often in great numbers, and about every imaginable subject. This survey does not attempt to plot the global practice of documentary. The approach followed here proposes that the documentary, like a free press, is essentially an instrument of democracy. It is a Western artifact, as is the technology that has made it a universal form. We focus here chiefly on its appearance and development in the United States.

II. ORIGINS OF THE DOCUMENTARY

The documentary impulse predates the film camera. It can be traced back to the enlightenment, the spirit of scientific enquiry that transformed the intellectual climate of Western civilization in the 17th and 18th centuries, and incidentally produced the first encyclopedias. A prime Enlightenment project was to discover more about the globe itself. In the 18th century Britain and France, the premier maritime powers of Europe, commissioned voyages of discovery with the dual purpose of establishing national claims to distant lands and reporting on topography and strange peoples. Both the mercantile and the scientific objectives required detailed reports with accurate visual records. Professional artists were recruited to accompany expeditions.

The first and most famous example of a project of this kind were the three sea-borne explorations (1768-1780) undertaken by the British navy under the command of James Cook which led to the discovery of New Zealand and Australia, and the mapping of a third of the globe. Cook, himself a brilliant navigator and cartographer, carried with him on all his voyages a retinue of naturalists, astronomers, and artists. Between them the professional artists Francis Parkinson, Alexander Buchan, William Hodges and John Webber produced many hundreds of images of people and places until then unknown

outside their own world.

Half a century later, a similar documentary motive inspired a famous private expedition in the United States. In 1833 a Prussian aristocrat, Prince Maximilian of Wied (near Coblenz on the Rhine), set out to explore the American West, at that time known only to a handful of mountain men and fur trappers. Maximilian brought with him, at his own expense, a young Swiss artist, Karl Bodmer. Together they travelled up the Missouri River to the heart of the Indian territory in the foothills of the Rockies. Bodmer's drawings and watercolors (some 500 in all) formed a comprehensive visual record of a way of life that was soon to disappear. Bodmer paid careful attention to the marks Indian chiefs painted on their faces and torsoes, to details in their headdresses and ornamentation on their clothes and bodies, realizing that these signs were the Indians' own form of documentary record.

Bodmer's work appeared on the eve of the invention of the camera. After Louis Jacques Mandé Daguerre's demonstration of the new device in 1839, photography quickly spread throughout the world. A mechanical means of making a visual record challenged the older technology of the artist's eye and hand. By mid-century it had supplanted it.

The relationship between artistic form and factual detail that marked documentary artists like Bodmer was dramatically illustrated on the Hayden Federal Survey expedition of 1871 to the Yellowstone region of the Rockies. Accompanying the scientists on the expedition were two artists, the photographer Henry Jackson and the painter Thomas Moran, and each was conscious he would be judged by the other's work. Together, their images convinced Congress to declare the Yellowstone a national wilderness park, the first national park in the world (Goetzmann, 1986).

By the end of the nineteenth century photography had become the dominant form of visual record. Its truth telling status had worked a revolution in human perception. In this connection, two precursors of the filmed documentary should be mentioned, Jacob Riis (1849-1914) and Lewis Hine (1874-1940). Both men used photography for the purpose of social reform, Riis in the course of reporting on police work in the New York slums for the *New York Tribune* and Hine as an activist with the Progressive Reform Movement's survey of Pittsburgh in 1907 and then as a reporter on child labor. Hine's photographs of immigrants, industrial workers, and children have been used countless times by later makers of documentary films to illustrate the human face of America's industrial revolution.

III. THE SILENT FILM ERA

A. The First Films

Scholars debate whether the American Thomas Edison or the French brothers Louis and Auguste Lumière deserve credit for being the first to present motion pictures to the public. In the last decades of the 19th century many inventors were involved both in the drive to capture motion in a camera and to display the results. Edison, with his interest in sound and electricity, built a large electrically driven camera anchored in his studio in New Jersey; to market the resulting images, he devised a peepshow device, the kinetoscope, which he launched in 1894. The Lumière brothers developed a small,

lightweight apparatus, which they called the Cinématograph. It was easily carried and it was flexible. It could be used to take pictures, process the negatives, and project the positive images. In late December 1895, in Paris, it was the Lumières who were the first to project moving pictures of everyday life onto a screen before a paying audience.

The Cinématograph at once became the market leader. Within a year Lumière operators were at work in all major cities in the world. Competitors, faced with patent restrictions, rushed to develop their own cameras and projection systems. But the showmen waiting to exploit these devices soon realized that the best profits lay not in the hardware - the cameras and projectors - but in the software, ownership of the moving images themselves.

The first films ran for less than a minute. They were shown initially as part of established forms of mass entertainment in music halls and other popular locations. Consisting of one shot only, taken from a fixed camera position, the film was often replayed in a loop five or six times while a new item was threaded into a second projector. After the film show, the program would return to a variety number or vaudeville act.

The subject matter of early films was extraordinarily varied. Many items simply duplicated music hall turns - girls dancing, burlesques, and comic pantomimes. But the movement of real life on the screen was what made motion pictures sensational: workers leaving a factory, a wave crashing against a promenade at Dover, the arrival of a train.

What the first motion cameras documented was motion itself. That many early news-related films were staged should make us hesitate to attribute a serious documentary motive to films that are genuine. Most of the early titles had no greater purpose beyond enticing the crowd into the tent or entertainment parlor where they were shown. Their preservation in the United States is due to reels of paper copies that were sent to the Library of Congress for copyrighting as so many individual photographs. There was no provision yet for copyrighting films.

In this “paper print” collection, however, some items suggest they may have been taken from a different motive. For example, *Scenes in an Infant Orphan Asylum* (1904) and a series of films about the United States Postal Service (1903) do not seem to have been made for their entertainment value. In the early twentieth century, however, there were a great many orphans in New York and groups interested in their welfare. Perhaps *Scenes in an Infant Orphan Asylum* was taken for a special screening. The film is long for this time period. It runs for more than eight minutes and there are only five shots in it. The first, showing nurses serving a long line of children with a meal, runs over four minutes in itself. Other shots are of activities, with one poor fellow having his head cropped and three others being scrubbed in tin tubs.

The Postal Service assignment took the American Mutoscope and Biograph operator several days in the Washington DC area filming different operations. They illustrate mail collection, its sorting, bagging, despatch, and delivery in rural areas. Twenty-seven items relating to this assignment were sent for copyrighting to the Library of Congress, with an average length of 25 seconds each, fairly typical for the time. There’s no clue as to what lay behind this production. Perhaps they could have been shown together at a special training or recruiting session. Two items in the series depict the method whereby mail was set up on posts to be snatched up into a moving train. Thirty years later this would be the central theme of *Night Mail*, one of the best known

British documentary films of the 1930s.

B. The Emergence of Film Genres

It was soon found that the novelty of motion alone was not enough to attract audiences. Some subjects appealed more than others - prize fights were special, public events were popular when they included world leaders, celebrities, natural disasters and other happenings known to the public through newspaper headlines. It did not seem to matter much to audiences whether these pictures were real or invented. Enterprising producers fabricated scenes of all the wars of the early twentieth century - against the Boxer Rebels in China, between Britain and the Boers in South Africa, between Spain and the United States, and between Japan and Russia. The French filmmaker George Méliès specialized in recreating events, taking pains to research his real life subject. He made a point of advertising his product as "Artificially Arranged Scenes."A famous example was his version of the coronation of King Edward VII in 1901, filmed in a studio in France for the British Gaumont company (Fielding, 1972).

In 1905 the first nickelodeon opened in America, a move to fixed locations dedicated solely to motion picture projection that rapidly spread all over the country. Makers of dramatic film entertainment began to use a new visual language. Close-ups, camera movement, conventions of realism depending on visual continuity and screen space - the practice of editing itself - were techniques developed to increase the effectiveness of fictional drama. Nonfiction film had to adopt the same conventions.

While fictional dramas steadily gained the ascendancy in motion picture production in the United States, nonfiction films or *actualités*, as the French called them, remained popular in Europe. Regular newsreels appeared in Europe in 1910 and in the United States in 1911, with the French Pathé company taking the initiative. Most of the major production companies in France, Britain and America followed suit. This nonfiction form rapidly established itself as a genre throughout the world, only to be displaced from movie theaters with the growth of television after World War II.

C. The First Documentaries

Motion pictures of "current events, " as the American Vitagraph newsreel was first called, were not intended to make a social comment. The idea of using moving pictures as a living record for didactic purposes came from still photographers.

One of the first to do so was Herbert Ponting, a photographer with an international reputation based on travels in Europe, Asia, and the Far East. The trade press described him as a "record photographer," meaning one who specialized in documentary images. Invited by Captain Robert Falcon Scott to join the British South Polar Expedition of 1910-12 as its official photographer, Ponting added two motion picture cameras to his equipment and underwent quick training in how to use them. The expedition ended in disaster when Captain Scott and four companions died on their 900 miles return from the South Pole where they found that the Norwegian Roald Amundsen had forestalled them by 34 days. Ponting accompanied the polar party for a few miles only from their base at McMurdo Sound, but he had the foresight to film four of them demonstrating how they would travel, hitched to a sled by day and cramped into one tent

at night.

Ponting's motion picture coverage of the expedition was comprehensive. It included scenes on the voyage out to Antarctica, human interest sequences of life at the base, and action shots of penguins, seals, gulls and killer whales. The tragic fate of the polar party gave these records, together with other documentary material found with Scott's body, enormous emotional power. Skillfully weaving them into a dramatic narrative, "With Captain Scott in the Antarctic," Ponting filled a lecture hall in London for 10 months in 1914. Many people returned more than once to hear him. He performed for the royal family at Buckingham Palace. His script, film, and slides were so well put together that others could perform in his place. In the early months of World War I his films were sent to France where they made a big impression on British troops waiting to move into the trenches.

The war itself, however, soon claimed the public's attention and became the focus of nonfiction films, nearly all of which served a propaganda purpose. In Britain four films of big battles were released in 1916 and 1917. Spurred on by messages from King George V and Prime Minister David Lloyd George, they were said to be excellent vehicles for recruiting. Ponting meanwhile remained committed to Scott's memory. In 1921, he published *The Great White South*, a book illustrated with over 160 of his photographs telling the same story as his lecture, and in 1924 he released *The Great White Silence*, a seven reel film about the expedition. Finally in 1933 he produced a sound version of the same material, *Ninety Degrees South*, which he narrated himself. Ponting appears on camera wearing a tuxedo to introduce this version, giving modern viewers an idea of his documentary performance.

Curtis went further even than Ponting. His introduction to documentary still photography came when he was invited to join the Harriman Expedition to Alaska in 1899 as their photographer. For his North American Indian project he made sound recordings of the music and chanting of the tribes he was photographing. In 1904, he began using a motion picture camera for special tribal activities, mostly dances which outsiders were seldom allowed to witness (Gidley, 1998). His 1911-12 lectures became elaborate multimedia performances. He called them a "musicale." A nine-piece orchestra accompanied his presentation of slides and motion pictures with music transcribed from his recordings, while Curtis' program notes expanded the "documental value" of all this material.

In 1914 Curtis completed his full length motion picture which he titled *In the Land of the Head-Hunters*. Curtis' script called for the Kwakiutl people to dress themselves as they might have done in the past and enact a drama of love, magic, and intertribal fighting in which ornaments, buildings, dances and make-believe head-hunting would illustrate tribal life in earlier times. The film was not a commercial success and for half a century it disappeared from sight. But in the 1960s, ethnographers from the University of Washington recovered portions of it, returning it to circulation with a new title, *In the Land of the War Canoes* (Holm and Quimby, 1980).

D. Silent Documentaries after World War I

Ponting and Curtis were pioneers of the modern documentary. The lecture format they perfected became the most successful model for presenting documentary material

during the silent film era. Brownlow (1978) called it an "alternative cinema." To avoid using the term lecture, Burton Holmes, one of the earliest in the business, coined the word *travelogue*. He filled halls of 2,000 people at a time, paying $2 a head. Lowell Thomas gained a world reputation for his presentations on Palestine and Lawrence of Arabia, filmed during the war. He performed at London's Covent Garden and Albert Hall, introduced by the band of the Welsh Guards. In the sound era his voice alone could sell a picture. In 1922 and in 1924, Captain Noel, an experienced traveler in Tibet, was hired by the Royal Geographical Society to film British attempts to climb Everest. With the first, *Climbing Mount Everest*, Noel booked the same hall as Ponting had used, until the movie trade realized the film would make money and put it on commercial release. The second, *The Epic of Everest*, was a triumph of high mountain photography. A member of the expedition caught a tantalizing glimpse of the climbers George Mallory and Andrew Irvine moving upward some distance from the summit. The two were never seen alive again. The film was seen by over a million people in Britain and North America (Brownlow 1978).

World War I, however, had crippled the French and weakened the British film industries leaving Hollywood as the dominant film producing center in the world. To win commercial distribution in America feature length nonfiction films had to appeal to movie theater audiences looking for entertainment.

Robert Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* (1922) is often cited as being the first to succeed in this way, though the claim is questionable. One the first 25 films listed by the Library of Congress as part of the national heritage, *Nanook of the North* is universally recognized as a film classic. But its documentary claims are less certain. While it appears to depict the actual life of a real family of Inuit Eskimos living in the Hudson Bay region in northern Canada, it was a fictionalized version of a life that Flaherty imagined had existed many years earlier. The names Flaherty gave to his characters were film names only, the activities they took part in were staged, and nothing at all is learned from the film about existing conditions for the people among whom Flaherty lived when he was making the film.

Flaherty began his career in Canada exploring for iron ore deposits in the north for his employer, Sir William MacKenzie. He had grown up with a still camera which he used for portraits and to document geological formations he encountered. For an expedition he planned to Hudson Bay in 1913 he added a motion picture camera to his equipment, filming Inuit activities on Baffin Island. He showed this film, together with photographs and Inuit drawings, in lectures he gave in Toronto in April 1915. Unable to sell his film, Flaherty returned to Hudson Bay for further prospecting and more filming. As Flaherty later described it, all of this documentary material, except a work print, went up in smoke when the negative he was preparing to send to New York caught fire.

The year 1921 found Flaherty without a job and without career prospects. Lecturing with his surviving work print had proved unrewarding. His fortune turned when the French fur company Revillon Frères agreed to finance a new trip to Hudson Bay to make a new film that would help promote the fur company.

The outcome of this project, which took Flaherty a year, was *Nanook of the North*. At first Flaherty had difficulty finding a distributor, but eventually Pathé took it on. The film was a success, establishing Flaherty's reputation world-wide. In a series of beautifully executed vignettes, he portrayed what purported to be typical activities in the

annual life of the Inuit - fishing, hunting, trapping, sledding, building igloos. Its intimate images of Nanook and his pretended family acquired a kind of mythic status wherever the film was shown.

On the strength of *Nanook of the North*, Jesse Lasky of Famous Players–Paramount commissioned Flaherty to make another film in the South Seas. The result, *Moana* (1926), was a beautiful film but not a commercial success. Flaherty was never able to emulate the triumph of *Nanook of the North*.

No greater contrast to Flaherty could be imagined that the team of Martin and Osa Johnson, extroverts whose films documented their own escapades in photographing aboriginal people and wild animals in remote locations. Their first sortie was in 1917 to the South Pacific islands of the New Hebrides to film cannibals. Two years later they returned to the same island where, by means of a hand-cranked projector and a makeshift screen, they showed the cannibal chief and his people the pictures they had taken on their first visit, filming their reactions. The Johnsons made their way back to America via Borneo, Ceylon and southern India, filming wherever they got the chance. The result was a quantity of material from which several feature length films and 10-minute shorts (one reelers) were made.

Though Martin Johnson prepared lecture versions of his films, he became hugely popular through their commercial release, mostly after he and Osa had moved their operations to Africa. Most of the Johnsons' early titles are no longer available, but a list at the Martin and Osa Johnson Safari Museum gives an idea of their output: 1918, *Among the Cannibal Isles of the South Pacific* and *Cannibals of the South Seas/Captured by Cannibals*; 1919, ten one reelers titled *On the Borderland of Civilization*; 1921, *Jungle Adventures*; 1922, *Head Hunters of the South Seas*, *East of Suez*, and 17 one reelers titled *Martin Johnson's Voyages*; 1923, *Trailing African Wild Animals*; 1928, *Simba* (which is available in VHS format).

Critics have been hard on the Johnsons; their attitudes jar on modern viewers. But as Brownlow (1978) has pointed out, they made an impact on audiences as well as on professional filmmakers. Flaherty was an early admirer, seeing in Johnson's early films a model for what he wanted to do.

In their famous *King Kong* (1933) Merian Cooper and Ernest Schoedsack satirized documentary filmmakers like the Johnsons and their imitators. But they were also thinking of themselves. Both men were adventurers, Cooper had been an aviator and Schoedsack a combat photographer in World War I. Joined by a woman, Marguerite Harrison, who invested money in the project and appeared in the finished film, the three made *Grass* (1925), a record of the annual migration of 50,000 Bakhtiari tribes people across the rivers and snow-covered mountain ranges of western Iran to their summer pasture lands. The film's images of sheep, goats, donkeys, horses, men, women and children, taken on this hazardous journey, are among the most dramatic visual documents ever made. Paramount released the film, and commissioned another, *Chang* (1927), a drama with tigers and elephants shot in Siam (Thailand).

The non-fiction films of the silent era mark a period of adventure with the documentary form itself. Two notable experiments in this form were Walter Ruttmann's feature length *Berlin: die Symphonie einer Grosstadt (Berlin: The Symphony of a Great City)* (1927), a dawn to dusk portrait of Berlin before the advent of the Nazis, and the short *Rain* (1929) by the Dutch film maker Joris Ivens, a study of the city and people of

Amsterdam caught in a rain shower. Ruttmann's film now has great historical interest for its visual documentation of the life of Berlin before its destruction in World War II. Both films stand on their own without need of titles or a lecturer's argument, illustrating Ivens' comment that documentary is the poetry and fiction the prose of film making.

IV. THE SOUND FILM

The advent of sound brought technical as well as artistic challenges to all makers of non-fiction films. Production costs rose as did the risk of not filling movie theaters. The Johnsons kept going, recycling their African safari act with sound effects and new attractions - a phonograph for pygmies to dance to and stalking gorillas in the Congo for *Congorilla* (1932), and flying into the bush with two Sikorsky planes specially adapted to their needs for *Baboona* (1935). Paramount sponsored Admiral Byrd's 1928-30 and 1934 expeditions to Antarctica, making an 80 minute movie of the first which won an Academy Award, *With Byrd At The South Pole, The Story of Little America* (1930). The film ends with a (presumably) restaged version of Byrd's flight over the Pole complete with racy narration: "easy on the stick, old scout! " Michael Balcon at Gaumont British came to the rescue of Flaherty, who had made no major film since *Moana*, and backed *Man of Aran* (1934), shot on a windswept island off the Irish coast.

A music track and supercharged commentary were the first response of nonfiction filmmakers to sound. But sound came to the movies at an inauspicious time, with economic recession in the United States, the rise of the Nazi party in Germany bringing Hitler to power in January 1933, and worldwide efforts by the Comintern under Stalin to subvert democracy. It is not surprising that the 1930s are best known for government-funded documentaries under the leadership of John Grierson in Britain and Pare Lorentz in America.

A. John Grierson and the British Documentary Movement

On a Rockefeller Fellowship in America after World War I, Grierson became a convert to film as a medium for public education. From 1927, when he became a film consultant at the Empire Marketing Board (EMB), he campaigned tirelessly for the British government to support what at first he called the "Natural cinema," and the "cinema of public affairs." "For we have to build on the actual. ... The medium itself insists on the actual," he wrote. The EMB gave him limited backing. Grierson formed a small unit of filmmakers who began using the term "documentary" to describe their approach to nonfiction film. They formed a kind of film collective, managed by Grierson and funded by a parsimonious British Treasury. Flaherty joined them briefly. Other institutions commissioned similar films, often with men from Grierson's unit. The Shell Oil Company was impressed enough to start its own film unit. In 1933 the EMB was closed down and Grierson, now a government films officer, moved with his unit to the General Post Office (GPO) where for the first time they acquired sound equipment. In 1937 he suddenly resigned and went on to help found the National Film Board of Canada, becoming its first Commissioner.

Grierson's energy and the enthusiasm of his followers resulted in a quantity of films, which are noteworthy for their experiments in the documentary form. Among the best known are *Drifters* (1929), directed by Grierson himself, a silent film about Britain's

fishing industry; *Industrial Britain* (1933), which included shots of potters taken by Flaherty; *The Song of Ceylon* (1935), by Basil Wright, commissioned by the Ceylon Tea Propaganda Board, which won critical praise for the beauty of its scenes of the people and places of the island (now Sri Lanka). In one section, English voices are laid over a montage of business activities, some indigenous and some industrial, creating a sound image of the commercial importance of Ceylon to the British Empire. Also well known are *Housing Problems* (1935), by Edgar Anstey and Arthur Elton, commissioned by the Gas Light and Coke Company, in which men and women from London's slums speak directly into the camera about their battle with rats, vermin, and decaying buildings; and the best known of all, *Night Mai*l (1936), by Basil Wright and Harry Watt, a GPO film with music by Benjamin Britten and a script by W.H. Auden about the mail train that ran every night from London to Scotland picking up, sorting, and distributing mail on its way. Sound of the train's wheels running on the rail track is laid behind scenes of mail workers shot in a studio. Dialogue is added. Auden's script at one point becomes a rhythmic verse matching the pace of the train.

In Britain, scholarly opinion is mixed on Grierson's management of the documentary movement he initiated. After he left, the movement lost its sense of purpose and split up. With some exceptions, its films were not distributed commercially and made little impact on the public. As Grierson well knew, the British film industry exercised *de facto* political censorship over itself. In 1937, its head, Lord Tyrrell, one of Britain's top experts in cultural propaganda, made a telling comment. He was speaking to the industry's leaders: "We may take pride," he said, "in observing that there is not a single film showing in London today which deals with any of the burning questions of the day" (cited in Pronay and Spring, 1982, 122) Grierson's program of public education, like the contemporary radio broadcasts of the BBC, turned out to be as anemic as the British government's response to the growing threat from Hitler's Germany.

B. Pare Lorentz and U. S. Government Documentaries

Different agencies within the American government had been producing motion pictures for training and public information purposes since the first decade of the century. By 1935 scores of these were in use, with 22 federal agencies involved. Most were short films and not distributed commercially. A 1912 film, for example, *The Making of An American*, was designed to train immigrant workers in industrial safety practices. *Behind the Scenes in the Machine Age*, produced by the Women's Bureau of the Department of Labor, appeared in 1936.

Pare Lorentz's background was in film criticism and the arts, not filmmaking. An admirer of Franklin Roosevelt, he wanted to capture the spirit of the New Deal in a film. Unable to find backers, he turned his idea into a book, *The Roosevelt Year: 1933*, published in 1934. He next proposed a film about the dust bowl. Rexford Guy Tugwell, head of the Resettlement Administration, later the Farm Security Administration, was looking for someone to make a film on this very subject. It would complement the work of the documentary still photographers, Walker Evans, Dorothea Lange, and Ben Shahn among them, hired by the same agency. Lorentz became Tugwell's man. The outcome was *The Plow That Broke The Plains* (1936), the first American government sponsored documentary film designed for the general movie-going public. Major distributors

refused to handle the film, but through Lorentz's contacts and with the efforts of government information officers, it gradually reached many hundreds of movie theaters, especially in the Midwest.

Paramount Pictures, however, agreed to distribute Lorentz's next film, *The River* (1937), about the Mississippi River, which was widely screened throughout the country. In 1938 President Roosevelt created the U.S. Film Service by executive order, with Lorentz as its director, which spurred activity on a number of film projects, one of them with Flaherty, *The Land* (1942), which was not released. But over the next two years congressional opposition to the Film Service grew to the point where Roosevelt, occupied with mounting international concerns, allowed it to disappear.

Lorentz's approach to the documentary film was very different from Grierson's. He chose striking images to symbolize epic themes: what man's initiative and greed did to the land (in *Plow*); how visionary projects are called for to tame the mighty forces of nature (in *The River*). Music by Virgil Thomson and a commentary that sounded in places like a poem in free verse, gave these films a rhetorical style unlike any other documentaries of the time.

Government-sponsored films of the kind produced by Grierson and Lorentz could not compete with fictional entertainment. During the sound era, the only documentary form that could be seen on a regular basis by the general public was the newsreel. But the newsreels produced by the Hollywood studios did not set out to challenge their audiences.

An exception was the *March of Time*l. Begun in 1935 by Roy Larsen and Louis de Rochemont as a film version of the radio program Larsen had introduced in 1931, *March of Time* quickly established itself as a new form of hard hitting "pictorial journalism," as the two men called it. Its style soon became famous. Participants reenacted events and actors impersonated statesmen and celebrities, a practice Henry Luce, the owner of *Time*, defended as "fakery in allegiance to the truth." The commentary, spoken by Westbrook Van Voorhis, was distinctive, urgent, and melodious, blending into short headline-like bridging texts backed by strong music. Issues appeared every month, at first with several topics and then settling into a single topic per issue. *March of Time* was dynamic, opinionated, exciting to watch and listen to, and popular. By 1937 it was being seen by some 24 million moviegoers each month in about 10,000 American movie theaters. Its British version was admired by Grierson's followers, some of whom worked for it.

In 1942 *March of Time's* distribution arrangement with RKO came to an end and RKO-Pathé began production of *This is America*, a rival but less controversial series that ran until 1951. Its attempt to portray the life and needs of home town America during the war years and their aftermath lacked the drama of *March of Time* but provided, nonetheless, valid coverage of domestic issues. They were well made but they often fell into the preaching style of Willard van Dyke's and Ralph Steiner's *The City* (1939), a film sponsored by the American Institute of City Planners.

C. Propaganda and World War II

It was inevitable that the ideological clashes of the thirties should result in what Erik Barnouw (1993) called "the politicizing of the documentary." *The Spanish Earth* (1937),

by Ivens, for which Ernest Hemingway wrote and spoke the commentary, and *Native Land* (1942), by the left-wing group, Frontier Films, illustrate the use of the film medium by radicals within the United States. (Ivens had twice visited the Soviet Union.) In Germany, Leni Riefenstahl's close relationship to Hitler was responsible for two notable productions: *Triumph of the Will* (1935), a celebration of Hitler's leadership at the 1934 Nazi party rally at Nuremberg, and *Olympia* (1938), a two part feature on the 1936 Berlin Olympic Games. In their form and in the staging involved in their production both films offered a cinematic spectacle that foreshadowed the way television would handle live events later in the century. *Turksib* (1929), by the Soviet filmmaker Victor Turin, illustrated the achievements of Soviet engineers in constructing a rail link between Turkestan and Siberia, a film that impressed Grierson and Lorentz.

All the combatants in World War II had film units at the front gathering material for release in newsreel and longer form. Dramatic images of real war brought a new dimension to the documentary. "The moment they appeared," said Watt, the director of *Night Mail*, "the real thing, the front line shot by real army men who were being killed while doing it, the reconstructed documentary as such, was dead" (cited in Sussex, 1975, 174/5). Watt's *Target For Tonight* (1941) was itself a dramatized account of a Royal Air Force bombing raid over Germany, every participant in the film being a real service man or women. Its American counterpart was William Wyler's *Memphis Belle* (1944).

When the United States entered World War II in December 1941, Hollywood immediately joined the war effort. General Marshall himself commissioned a series of films from Frank Capra to explain the war's aims to the thousands of newly drafted American servicemen. Under the general title *Why We Fight*, the films in this series and others that followed it such *Know Your Enemy-Japan* (1944) showed the same distortions and stereotyping as the output of the Axis powers. Hollywood directors were as responsive to the demand for propaganda in nonfiction as in fiction films. Among the best known is the film John Huston made of a battle that had taken place at San Pietro in Italy in December 1943 during the American Fifth Army's campaign to take Rome. The film itself was titled *San Pietro*, but it is widely referred to as the *Battle of San Pietro*. Huston staged the most dramatic footage in the film two or three weeks after the battle itself with infantry units assigned for the purpose and using techniques for achieving realism that had been perfected in Hollywood's fiction films.

V. THE ARRIVAL OF TELEVISION

At the end of World War II, audiences for American newsreels, estimated at some 200 million worldwide, were at their peak. But in the United States and Britain, the film industry itself was about to enter a period of steep decline. In 1945, U.S. Census figures showed that 85 million Americans went to the movies each week. By 1960 the number had dropped to 40 million. By 1980 it had dropped again to under 20 million. British surveys gave comparable figures as approximately 32 million in 1945, under 10 million in 1960, and 1 million in 1980. Television is usually blamed for this decline and the new medium probably contributed to it. But more significant were demographic changes to America's poorer inner cities. The demolition of the old neighborhood movie theaters ended a way of life. The cinema newsreels disappeared with them: *March of Time* and *This is America* in 1951, *Pathé News*, owned by Warner Brothers, in 1956, *Paramount*

News in 1957, *Fox-Movietone News* in 1963, MGM-Hearst *News of the Day* and *Universal News* in 1967 (Barnouw, 1993).

Regular television services began in Britain in 1936 and in the United States in 1939 but were suspended during the war. When they resumed after the war, the medium grew rapidly, soon establishing itself as the most popular leisure activity for most Americans.

Television transformed the documentary landscape. Broadcasting networks provided the finance and the distribution outlets, two obstacles that all documentary filmmakers had difficulty surmounting. Holding the airwaves as trustees for the public the networks offered documentaries as a public service.

Television also transformed the public's perception of reality. "The medium itself insists on the actual," Grierson had written of the cinema. Television, however, brought the actual world live directly into the home. The studio became a setting for live broadcasts on all kinds of information-based subjects while outside broadcast cameras turned public events into dramatic spectacles that could be watched in more detail at home than in the crowd at the event itself. Announcers, news readers and commentators spoke directly out at the audience from the television screen, updating the lecturer model of public address.

The psychological effect of the new medium challenged cinematic representations of the actual world. Current affairs redefined the documentary arena with subjects that bore on public concerns and the human condition. This television genre habituated viewers of documentaries to close-ups of human faces speaking on camera, a style that was derided by some filmmakers as "talking heads" and "sound bites," but which has remained the medium's most common audio-visual form.

A. News Related Documentaries

The networks' commitment to public service determined the news-related content of early television documentaries. The lead came from radio and print journalists with the program *See It Now*, featuring the distinguished broadcaster, Edward R. Murrow, and jointly produced by Murrow and Fred Friendly. *See It Now* was a studio-based program, with Murrow speaking live to the audience and introducing live or film material in the course of his half hour time slot. In the opening broadcast on November 18, 1951 Murrow switched between live cameras in New York and San Francisco, the first use of the two-way coast to coast link. It was a display of television's technological progress. *See It Now*, announced a voice over opening shots of the studio control room, was: "a document for television based on the week's news and told in the voices and faces that made the news. ... A public service of the CBS Television Network." *See It Now* ran through the middle of 1958 and is best known for a broadcast in March 1954 that questioned the motives and methods of Senator McCarthy's anticommunist campaign.

In 1959 CBS followed *See It Now* with *CBS Reports*, a one-hour news based documentary that appeared every two weeks each season for 4 years and then every month for the next 20 years. *NBC White Paper*, which ran less frequently, began in 1960 and *NBC Reports* in 1972, while ABC, a relative newcomer to the network business, introduced the monthly *ABC Close-Up* in 1973. CBS' *60 Minutes*, the brainchild of Don Hewitt, was first broadcast in September 1968.

B. Historical and Compilation Documentaries

Another specialty of the first television documentaries were films compiled from other films. Some attempts at this kind of documentary had been made before World War II; newsreels and *March of Time* had often drawn upon their own archives. World War II films made extensive use of newsreels and other people's material. For the 1952/53 season NBC produced the 26-episode *Victory at Sea*, a series that grew out of NBC's acquisition of the US Navy's film archive. It was marked by a strong narrative line and specially composed music. The series was still selling as a boxed VHS set fifty years later. In the 1956/57 season CBS followed suit with the 26-part *Air Power*. NBC's *Project XX* (1954-70) and CBS's *Twentieth Century* (1957-66) were extensions of the compilation form.

These programs developed new ways of presenting documentary material. Old photographs, of which millions existed in public and private hands, were reshot with cameras that could pick out detail and move across the image. *City of Gold* (1957) brought Dawson City during the Yukon gold rush to life through scores of long forgotten glass-plate negatives. It was a production of the National Film Board of Canada. Two of NBC's *Project XX* titles were inspired by it: *The Real West* (1961) and *End of the Trail* (1965). The former was narrated by Gary Cooper and the latter by Walter Brennan, examples of network television's ability to harness Hollywood stars to documentary projects.

On camera contributions from eyewitnesses and authorities woven into newsreels, photographs and other graphic material established historical documentaries as a regular feature on television. In 1974-1975 the 26-part *The World At War*, narrated by Lawrence Olivier and produced by the British commercial channel Thames Television, set a new standard for prestige documentary series of this kind.

The independent filmmaker Connie Field's *The Life and Times of Rosie the Riveter* (1980) represents an offshoot of this form with the potential to subvert it. The film records the experiences of five women, three black and two white, who were recruited for industrial work in World War II and pressured to give up their jobs when the war was over. Official U.S. propaganda footage and music of the time form a telling counterpoint to the women's personal testimonies. *The Atomic Cafe* (1982) is entirely made up from government civil defense and other official films, revealing to a later generation the absurdity of the "duck and cover" campaign proclaimed earlier by Bert the Turtle.

C. Television Documentary Output

In sheer quantity the number of documentaries shown on television in the first decades of the television era casts all the films of the silent era into the shade. In *Special Edition: A Guide to Network Television Documentary Series and Special News Reports, 1955-1979*, Daniel Einstein lists 7,000 individual program titles and 120 series on the three American commercial networks for the years between 1955 and 1979; and in *The Expanding Vista: American Television in the Kennedy Years* Mary Ann Watson calculates that in the 1961-1962 season, the three networks produced 254 hours of

documentaries between them, enough for a one hour film every weekday in the year.

Servicing this flow of documentaries required an enormous increase in professional talent to work as writers, directors, producers and researchers. Some came from the film industry, many more from radio and print journalism, but all had to learn what worked best in television. One outstanding documentary maker, Al Wasserman, may serve as an example of the range of subjects and dedication displayed by those working in this form. Wasserman began as a writer of educational scripts after World War II, entering television in 1953. His first major film credit was for *First Steps* (1947), the United Nations' first film, which won an Academy Award. Over a period of 40 years he was responsible as writer, director, or producer, or a combination of the three, for over 120 documentaries. Some were short items for *60 Minutes*, where he worked from 1975 to 1985, some were films for the networks of thirty minutes or longer, and some were freelance work. His last broadcast was an item for the short-lived NBC magazine show *1986*. Among Wasserman's credits are many of the best known television documentaries from this period: *Out of Darkness* (CBS, 1956), a study of mental illness, television's first 90 minute documentary, which was narrated by Orson Welles and is still regarded as one of the finest documentaries on this subject; *Biography of a Cancer* (1960), one of the first *CBS Reports*; *U-2 Affair* (1960), which inaugurated the *NBC White Paper* series, with Irving Gitlin as Executive Producer and Chet Huntley in the role initiated by Murrow of on-camera authority-figure; *Sit-In* (1960), *Angola: Journey To A War* (1961), *The Battle of Newburgh* (1962), *Adam Clayton Powell* (1964) - all *NBC White Papers*. For NBC's *Dupont Show of the Week* Wasserman produced *High Wire: The Great Wallendas* (1964), about circus performers, and *Flight Deck* (1964), about the flight deck crew of the aircraft carrier *Franklin D. Roosevelt* on a training voyage across the Atlantic to join the Sixth Fleet in the Mediterranean. *Flight Deck,* was Wasserman's first documentary in color.

D. David Wolper

In the 1950s the networks refused on principle to take documentaries that were not made by their own producers, citing their public responsibilities. David Wolper is generally credited with successfully breaching this policy. One of his first documentary productions, *Biography* (1962-64), a series of 65 shows hosted by Mike Wallace and made up of newsreel and other archive material, was syndicated to individual television stations across the country. Its success launched Wallace's career on CBS. Wolper then proposed programs about Hollywood, which he sold to NBC on the grounds that their subject matter was entertainment. Wolper productions soon found their place on all three networks, among them: *The Making of The President: 1960* (1963), *The Legend of Marilyn Monroe* (1964), and *The Unfinished Journey of Robert F. Kennedy* (1970), on ABC; *D-Day* (1962) on *NBC's Dupont Show of the Week*; and between 1965 and 1975 a number of National Geographic Society Specials on CBS.

Wolper's show-business enterprise resulted in an impressive output of nonfiction productions. He was not committed to the news-based form of documentary, though his first foray into documentary work followed his acquisition of Paramount's newsreel archive after the studio stopped its production. He was ready to experiment with dramatized material for documentary subjects and he was the first to recognize the

potential in the underwater photography of Jacques-Ives Cousteau, which he successfully brought to the networks in the *Undersea World of Jacques Cousteau* on ABC in the 1967-1968 season. (ABC then continued the series with Cousteau's company until 1976.) Wolper also formed an alliance with *Time* to produce eight *March of Time* specials in 1965-1966, which were successfully syndicated.

Both the Cousteau and the *Time* productions linked the past with the future. The Johnsons had shown how films about nature, produced and marketed with theatrical flair, could win a popular audience. When Martin Johnson was killed in an air crash in 1937, Osa kept working. A television series was made out of their material, which ran in syndication in the 1950s. Wolper continued this tradition. At the end of the 20 century, natural history documentaries were as popular as ever.

E. Cinéma-Vérité

With the film industry in a panic at the decline in audiences, movie distributors were less ready than ever to embrace documentary films. Experimental and avant-garde filmmakers still had to rely on art houses, festivals, and word of mouth to show their work. Filmmakers not employed in network television were out in the cold. Their opportunity came with new lightweight cameras and portable sound gear, which became available in the late 1950s. The new equipment favored mobility and shooting action without having to set it up in advance, a godsend to all documentary producers. Some filmmakers used its greater flexibility, in shooting and editing, to create a new kind of documentary, *cinéma-vérité*. The term was coined by French directors in homage to an early Soviet propagandist, Dziga Vertov, who had proposed the production of a kind of film, which he called *kinopravda*, literally film-truth. In using this term, Vertov intended a film version of the party newspaper, *Pravda*. A film, in other words, that was informed by the correct Marxist-Leninist interpretation of life.

Its pedigree notwithstanding, *cinéma-vérité* appeared to be more direct in its rendering of actuality than conventional documentaries. Robert Drew at Time Inc. with Richard Leacock initiated experiments in the form. Others joined the movement and ABC briefly showed an interest in it. But few of the group's films were shown on television. They are remembered as vivid documents of a particular time: *Primary* (1960) by Drew and Leacock, an impression of the Humphrey-Kennedy Wisconsin primary; *Don't Look Back* (1966) by Donn Pennebaker, Bob Dylan playing to the crowds and to the camera in England; *Salesman* (1969) and *Gimme Shelter* (1970) by Albert and David Maysles, the first a portrait of four bible salesmen, the second scenes from the celebrated 1969 American tour of the Rolling Stones that ended with disaster at the Altamont concert in California.

One of the best known of all *cinéma-vérité* films was not able to be shown in public until many years after it was made, Fred Wiseman's *Titicut Follies* (1967). He shot the film at the State Prison for the Criminally Insane at Bridgewater, Massachusetts, but the Commonwealth's lawyers prevented its release to safeguard inmates' privacy. Wiseman continued with an uncompromising commitment to the *cinéma-vérité* form. *High School* was next. By the year 2000, he had made 30 films of this kind. Several run for three hours and more, one, *Near Death*, lasts just short of six hours.

VI. DEREGULATION: THE 1980s AND 1990s

Television had come of age in the 1960s, establishing the medium as the driving force in American cultural life, the medium of all the media. But in the 1980s the structure of the television industry itself underwent a radical change, the result of deregulatory measures initiated by the Reagan Administration. Change in ownership rules, encouragement of cable and satellite channels, the emergence of Fox as a fourth broadcast network, brought an end to a television world dominated by the three networks of ABC, CBS, and NBC.

Deregulation redrew the documentary landscape. Cable expanded rapidly, reaching close to 80% of American homes by the year 2000. By then, the three major networks, which in 1980 attracted 90% of the prime time audience, and now were joined by Fox, saw their share cut by half. Audiences could choose between scores of channels. On many of these channels, documentaries were basic program fare. Even channels whose specialty lay elsewhere, like MTV and HBO, included occasional documentaries in their schedules to help build a network image, in HBO's case perhaps to offset the channel's late night offering of nonfiction erotica.

The flood of documentaries produced by the three networks in the 1960s dwindled in the last two decades of the century to a trickle. *CBS Reports* dropped to an average of three a year, NBC's *News Reports* and *White Paper* ended in 1984 and 1988 respectively, and ABC's *Close-Up* also ended in 1988. In their place the networks concentrated on documentary-style news magazines, of which CBS' *60 Minutes* was the long established leader. In 1978 *60 Minutes* became one of the top-rated shows on television. ABC's *20/20* went on the air in 1978, joined by *Prime Time Live* in 1989; CBS' *48 Hours* began in 1988, followed by *60 Minutes II* in 1999. NBC's *Dateline* premiered in 1992. Special news reports covered major events at greater length.

Changing technology also contributed to this new documentary environment. In the mid-1970s video camcorders began to be used professionally on some news and sports programs. By 1980 they had replaced film cameras everywhere in news gathering operations. Portable video cameras were more flexible than film cameras and cheaper to use. They could be adapted to the size of a pinhole and concealed in a room or a pair of eyeglasses. VHS made it easier for social and political activists to distribute their own videos. Teachers, disadvantaged groups, minorities–all who felt excluded from main stream media–could now shoot their own nonfiction productions.

A. PBS

The growth of the Public Broadcasting Service contributed to the withdrawal of the commercial networks from the hour-long (or occasionally three-hour long) documentary form. PBS came into being following the creation by Act of Congress of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting in 1967. Its mostly middle-class audience was a fraction of the networks' in size, but as the networks' share of the total audience diminished toward the end of the century, the audience for documentaries on PBS remained viable. Many of Wiseman's films were shown on PBS, as were BBC products: *Civilisation* (1970), featuring the British art historian Kenneth Clark talking directly to - lecturing at - the camera, *Life on Earth* (1979), with David Attenborough, and *Cosmos* (1980) with Carl Sagan. The compilation form, begun and then abandoned by the networks, was

perpetuated on PBS with *Eyes on the Prize* (1980) by Henry Hampton, *Vietnam: A Television History* (1983), and the on-going series *The American Experience*. *The Civil War* (1990) by Ken Burns, a careful historical reconstruction based primarily on still photographs, was broadcast on five consecutive nights to record PBS audiences.

Boston's PBS station, WGBH, became a major center of documentary production, many of them co-productions with the BBC. Funded largely by grants and corporations, PBS established *Nova* and *Frontline*, like *The American Experience*, as umbrella titles that covered wide differences in form and subject matter. *Nova's Miracle of Life* (1983) showed how human conception takes place with micro cameras recording the sperm's journey to the egg. It was widely distributed in schools for biology classes in human reproduction. *Lost on Everest* (1999), a *Nova* - BBC coproduction, recorded an expedition that retraced Mallory's and Irvine's last climb on Everest in 1924. The team found Mallory's body some 1000 feet below the summit in the position death overtook him as he fought to arrest his fall. The documentary made full use of Captain Noel's historic film of that expedition, thus linking two distinct eras of the documentary.

Frontline's subject matter and form have likewise varied greatly, for example, from *Ruanda, The Face of Evil* (1999), an indictment of the Clinton Administration's policy in Africa, to *From Jesus to Christ* (1998), a two part survey of current theological scholarship on the beginnings of Christianity.

In the *POV* series, begun in 1988, PBS provided a showcase for independent producers, whose documentaries often expressed personal interests (hence the title, short hand for "point of view"). Errol Morris' *Gates of Heaven* was in its inaugural series. Two examples from *POV* illustrate the increasing role of women in documentary work, as well as the diversity of its subject matter: *Who Killed Vincent Chin?* (1988) a study by two young Asian American women, Christine Choy and Renee Tajima, of the murder in Detroit of a Chinese American, Vincent Chin, after a bar-room brawl with a white auto worker; and *Rabbit in the Moon* (1999) by Emiko Omori, a Japanese American filmmaker, who looked back on the history of her family and other Japanese Americans interned after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941.

B. Cable and Other Networks

Cable also offered new outlets for independent producers as well as for established units, like Time-Life's and National Geographic's. Regular documentary fare on channels specializing in nonfiction subject matter for modest-sized core audiences has tended to be formulaic, establishing the company's "brand image," and likely to be frequently repeated. The Arts and Entertainment channel led the field with *Biography*, which picked up where Wolper left off, *Investigative Reports*, and *American Justice*. Bill Kurtis is an example of a producer who took advantage of this development. After a career as a news reporter for CBS, Kurtis formed his own production company in Chicago in 1988. In the late 1990s a Kurtis documentary was likely to be seen on A&E at least once a week.

The Turner Broadcasting System likewise invested in long-form documentaries to complement its 24-hours news service, CNN. In the 90-minutes *Dying to Tell the Story* (1998), a young woman, Amy Eldon, seeks to understand why photographers and videographers risk their lives to cover the world's wars and tumults. Her search was prompted by the death in Somalia in 1993 of her brother, Dan Eldon, a 22-year-old

Reuters photographer. Ted Turner took a personal interest in investing $12 million in the 24-part *Cold War* (1998-1999), a joint production with the BBC and with the same executive producer, Jeremy Isaacs, who had been responsible for *The World At War* in 1974. The series was criticized by some for its neutral approach, but is widely used in schools and colleges.

C. Style and Subject Matter

Network documentaries in the 1960s and 1970s were criticized for their institutional appearance. In the 1980s and 1990s documentary makers appeared with an individual style, which differed greatly from the traditional form. Jon Alpert, based at Downtown Community Television Center in New York's Chinatown, is known for work that exposed the abuses of American capitalism at home and abroad, some of which was taken by the networks. He is videographer and reporter in one, speaking as he shoots. His voice, recorded live with the pictures, becomes a real time commentary, jarring to some who find it overbearing, but welcomed by others for its spontaneity and openness. In *One Year in a Life of Crime* (1989), Alpert tracked the escapades of three young talkative shoplifters on the streets of Newark, New Jersey. Ten years later, in *A Life of Crime Two* (1998), which was shown on HBO, he returned to his subjects to see what had become of them. The film ends with a hopelessly drugged Rob, one of his original three subjects, collapsing, a total wreck, in the gutter.

Errol Morris' approach has been more cinematic, if also more stylized. He is best known for *The Thin Blue Line* (1988), a film about two young men in a Dallas jail and whether the right one was found guilty of a policeman's murder. Morris shot multiple versions of the murder scene, illustrating different accounts offered by participants in the drama whose role is not explicitly identified.

The trademark style of the British documentary maker, Nick Broomfield, is to include the difficulties he encounters as he pursues his subject. Broomfield holds the microphone when shooting and the camera shows him negotiating for interviews and other material as filming progresses. Viewers become party to what goes on in making the documentary and often to seedy characters and unpleasant talk. Three documentaries released on VHS are typical of this approach: *Aileen Wuornos, Portrait of a Serial Killer* (1992), *Heidi Fleiss, Hollywood Madam* (1995), and *Kurt and Courtney* (1997).

Too great an emphasis on style risks overwhelming subject matter, but some subject matter can also place too great a burden on conventional documentary form. In *Shoah* (1995), Claude Lanzmann spent hours conversing about the holocaust with survivors, train drivers, technical workers, bystanders - anyone connected with the death camps - to create a 9½-hour audio-visual book of remembrance with no archive footage, but only present day landscapes and city scenes. Marcel Ophüls' *The Sorrow and the Pity* (1969), about French collaboration with the Germans during World War II, and *Hotel Terminus* (1988), about the life and times of the Gestapo chief of Lyons, Klaus Barbie, likewise deployed lengthy interviews. But Ophüls used archive footage and humor in unexpected ways and his editing was more subtle. Abstract ideas like evil, torture, loyalty, courage and fate are made palpable through the faces and speech of his subjects. Both films run 4½ hours. (The French state-controlled television service banned *Sorrow and the Pity* when it was completed in 1969. It was then shown outside France. In 1971 it

was screened in a movie theater in Paris where it ran for more than 18 months to record audiences. In all some 700,000 French people saw it before it was finally broadcast on French television in 1981. It then had an audience of 15 million.)

The network documentaries of the 1960s and 1970s were driven by a sense of public responsibility that seemed justified by the national and international events of those decades - the Cold War, civil rights, the Vietnam war, Watergate and the impeachment of President Nixon, American embassy hostages in Iran. An air of serious purpose determined the choice of subject matter as well as the manner of its presentation.

The passing of the Cold War, however, and the end of network dominance of documentary production proved liberating in both form and content to many documentary makers. At 30 minutes, *Yum, Yum, Yum!* (1990), by Les Blank, offered a joyous look at cajun cooking. *Hands on a Hard Body* (1998), by S.R. Bindler, shot in 1995 when he was in his mid-twenties, followed 24 contestants for more than 70 hours in the hope of winning a Nissan truck by being the last to remain on their feet with a hand on the truck's body. *Unzipped* (1995), by Douglas Keeve, is a portrait of a New York fashion designer, Isaac Mizrahi. Shot *cinéma-vérité* style, the film is as anarchic in its composition as its subject, no doubt reflecting the fast-moving world of fashion. In the late summer of 2000, *Hopkins 24/7* on ABC and *American High* on Fox, both tried a new documentary approach - the former, of the day-to-day work of a leading American hospital, the latter of the day-to-day life of students at a high school in Chicago. Neither subject was new to the documentary, but both attempted to win new audiences to their subjects by adopting what critics have called the "docu-soap" form. The four part BBC-A&E series *Crusades* (1995) tapped Terry Jones of *Monty Python* fame in the traditional role of on-camera lecturer-talent, resulting in some entertaining high jinks; *Cane Toads: An Unnatural History* (1988) by the Australian Mark Lewis brought humor into a documentary about a species of toad that was rashly imported into Australia in the 1930s and now threatens to overrun the country. Lewis followed this with *Rat* in 1997, using a rat wrangler to provide extras in the contest between man and rodent for living space in New York City.

ln the last two decades of the 20th century, then, documentaries have appeared in such a variety of forms and covering such widely different subject matter as to make it difficult to assess the value of the genre itself or the meaning of the term used to describe it. Any list of titles leaves out too many that deserve mention, let alone the hundreds of short documentaries that are regularly produced for major television events, for example, during network broadcasts of the Olympics.

VII. **Conclusion: Art and Facts**

This survey has not touched on films and videos that push the boundaries of nonfiction art, such as Georges Franju's *Le Sang des Bêtes* (*Blood of the Beasts*) (1949), Chris Marker's *Sans Soleil* (1982) and *Le Tombeau D'Alexandre* (*The Last Bolshevik*) (1993), Jay Rosenblatt's *Human Remains* (1998), Bill Viola's *I Do Not Know What It Is I Am Like* (1986), or Juan Downey's *J. S. Bach* (1986). Works like these defy easy categorization and perhaps should be considered as a separate genre.

There has been much theorizing but no general agreement about what is a documentary. For most makers of documentaries the form excludes attack and how-to

videos as well as propaganda and industrial films paid for by their sponsors. But these boundaries are not altogether fixed. *Nanook of the North*, Flaherty's first film, was financed by a French fur company hoping to enlarge its business; his last, *Louisiana Story* (1948), by the Standard Oil Company hoping to create a good image about its oil drillings. General Motors has paid millions of dollars to sponsor many of PBS's prestige documentaries and the company has been allowed to run 15-second commercials on the network in support of its sponsorship. Documentaries may be nonfiction works, but not all nonfiction works are documentaries.

From its origins in the Enlightenment, the documentary project has used art to record facts; and by recording, to illuminate; and by illuminating, to bring before a wider public. In each period of its history the documentary has fulfilled an artistic and a social function, both giving pleasure and informing, seeking truth in both the aesthetic and the material realms. The pull between art and facts is the dynamic process that lies at the center of documentary production. Balancing the claims of each and honesty in motive are what differentiate documentaries from other nonfiction products.

By the end of the twentieth century video technology itself was undergoing further change with the development of the Internet and the industry's acceptance of a digital future. The implications for documentary makers of this development are uncertain. Some see potential in the way documentary material - text, sound, interviews, still and moving images - can be supplied in interactive, non-linear form, with Web sites supporting in greater quantity and more detail what is edited into a film or video documentary. But for others, the documentary's integrity as a work of art will always remain the primary challenge of the form.

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