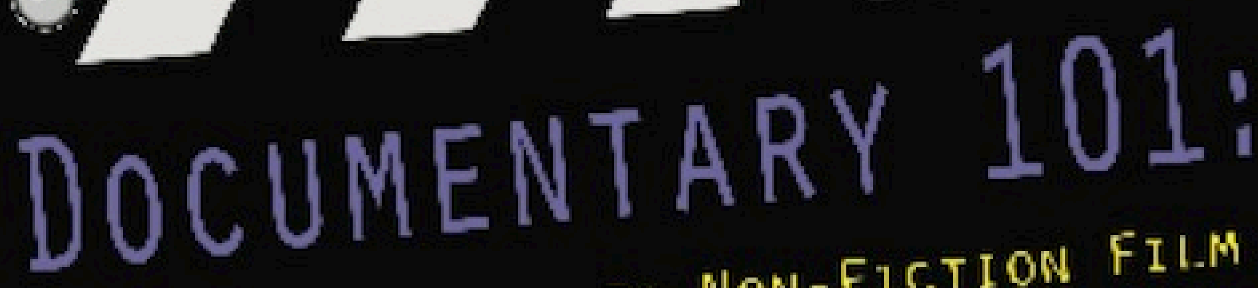


Documentary 101:

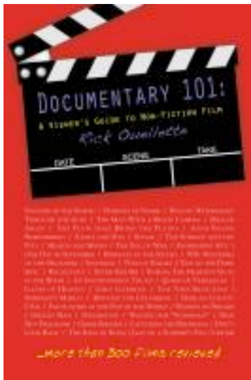
A Viewer's Guide to Non-Fiction Film

Rick Ouellette

DATE SCENE TAKE

Nanook of the North / Harvest of Shame / Haxan: Witchcraft Through the Ages / The Man With a Movie Camera / Man of Aran / The Plow that Broke the Plains / Anne Frank Remembered / Night and Fog / Shoah / The Sorrow and the Pity / Hearts and Minds / The Fog of War / Fahrenheit 9/11 / One Day in September / Berkeley in the Sixties / WR: Mysteries of the Organism / Salesman / Titicut Follies / Taxi to the Dark Side / Religulous / Super-Size Me / Enron: The Smartest Guys in the Room / An Inconvenient Truth / Queen of Versailles / Gates of Heaven / Grey Gardens / The Thin Blue Line / Sherman's March / Bowling for Columbine / Harlan County USA / Encounters at the End of the World / Burden of Dreams / Grizzly Man / Spellbound / Waiting for "Superman" / Mad Hot Ballroom / Gimme Shelter / Capturing the Friedmans / Don't Look Back / The King of Kong / Jazz on a Summer's Day / Crumb

...more than 300 films reviewed



In the 21st century, documentary films are more popular than ever, while carrying on a venerable artistic tradition that emphasizes humanism and social advocacy. DOCUMENTARY 101 is a first-ever anthology of this crucial cinematic field, covering the entire spectrum of non-fiction film with entries on over 300 titles from 1895 to 2012. There are 101 full-length reviews of documentaries chosen for their aesthetic prominence and/or historical significance, followed by briefer entries on related titles.

Documentary 101

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A Viewer's Guide to Non-Fiction Film

Rick Ouellette

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Introduction

The modern experience of documentary filmmaking can be traced back a century to the example of Robert Flaherty. In 1896, the twelve year-old Flaherty made his first trip into Canada with his father, a mining engineer based in Michigan. The elder Flaherty made several attempts to secure a formal education for his son but soon found that the boy was more enamored of the Canadian wilderness and the indigenous culture of the Eskimo people he met there. As a young man, Flaherty became an explorer and prospector in the same area and in 1913 his employer suggested he bring a movie camera on his next expedition. The appeal of filming the Inuit tribes—"as they saw themselves", in Flaherty's words—was the start of a life-changing experience for both himself and for the film world as well. Nine years later, Flaherty would complete the classic *Nanook of the North*, widely considered to be the first feature-length, narrative documentary film. He had spent the better part of five years trying to finance it. He shot thirty thousand feet of initial footage that was lost in a fire. After securing the sponsorship of the French furriers Revillon Freres in 1920, Flaherty returned to Canada, this time to the far northeast coast of Hudson Bay, to depict the lives of an Inuit population largely unspoiled by industrialized society.

In an age when the Hollywood film industry was starting to take form, where movies were mostly fictional and shot in the relative comfort of soundstages and backlots, this was an uncharted course in more ways than one. It took Flaherty two months to reach his destination, after which he lived with his subjects for sixteen more months in primitive conditions. He fashioned a storyline based around a tribal leader he called "Nanook" and the Inuit's continuous struggle for survival, which extended to the filmmaker during the shoot. He and several other tribesmen nearly starved during one hunting trip stymied by the unforgiving climate. Taking care of his equipment and developing the film was an adventure in itself in that frozen and little-known corner of the world. An equally chilly reception awaited him from several Hollywood concerns. Flaherty

eventually found an "indie" distributor willing to take a chance on this new kind of film, "elicited from life itself," as one writer said at the time. It was released in the summer of 1922, eventually earning great critical acclaim and as well as widespread box-office success. When Flaherty's "leading man" died a couple of years later, the news made the papers as far away as China.

The empathy and narrative drive that distinguished *Nanook of the North* proved to be the blueprint for many of the feature documentaries made in the ninety years since. Those that have followed their own muse to produce non-fiction films could easily identify with at least some elements of Flaherty's story: the deep dedication to a real-life subject, the struggle to raise production funds, the self-sacrificing work ethic, the indifference of film industry bigwigs, perhaps even the critics' praise. What is harder for most of these filmmakers to relate to is Flaherty's commercial good fortune. The documentary spent the rest of the 20th century as the poor sister of Hollywood's dream machine.

However, the rise of the independent film movement in the last few decades, both in the U.S. and internationally, has gone a long way to helping raise the profile of non-fiction films. An expanding film festival circuit, art-house cinema chains and outlets like cable TV's Independent Film Channel and HBO have created new opportunities for filmmakers with quirky, unpredictable and iconoclastic visions. Their work has gained traction with adventurous viewers seeking an alternative to the product being released by a Hollywood industry increasingly geared toward a bottom-line mentality. *Documentary 101* is the first book to anthologize feature documentaries over the last century into a user-friendly viewer's guide, featuring comprehensive reviews of 101 prominent non-fiction and capsule entries for over two hundred more.

Since the mid-1980s non-fiction features like *Roger & Me*, *Paradise Lost*, *The Thin Blue Line*, *Crumb*, *Buena Vista Social Club* and *When We Were Kings* have found ready audiences in larger cities and college towns as well as on home video. Many of these films expanded on the visual and narrative conventions of the traditional documentary form. The familiar structure of the "standard"

documentary (interview-footage-narration) was either dropped altogether or amended with stylized visuals, personalized agendas and a tendency towards fringe subject matter. No longer was the non-fiction category largely limited to historical, biographical or nature-oriented themes. One started to see works like *Gates of Heaven*, Errol Morris' poignant portrait of pet cemetery owners. This was a film notorious enough in its eccentricity to get the filmmaker a spot on the David Letterman show but also meaningful enough to have Roger Ebert profess it as one of the best ten films of all time. Since then there has been an even further expansion of the genre, sometimes with several new entries released on a given week. Many documentaries, even if not widely released in theatres, are more readily available than ever on the shelves of stores and libraries, as well as from rentals and online sources.

The unique power of the greatest documentaries lies at the intersection of actuality and artifice. But the word itself has left some to assume that non-fiction films are representations of objective reality and therefore open to the most exacting scrutiny, which tends to be unfair. (One only has to look at the two sides having it out in a criminal court case to see the many versions of "the whole truth and nothing but the truth"). Back in 1922, Robert Flaherty didn't really have to deal with this: the word "documentary" hadn't been invented yet and audiences could watch it on level terms with the average dramatic feature of the day. Decades later, Flaherty—a man long noted for his interest in aesthetic truth—was criticized by some film scholars for having the Inuits use their old harpoons in a walrus hunt (instead of the guns that replaced them) or constructing an igloo with one side open to film family scenes. But to most viewers, the core reality of his subject was never in doubt.

Documentary 101 examines over three hundred of the world's most notable documentaries and their background stories, offering a critcal consideration of each. From 1895's humble *Arrival of a Train,* the Lumiere Brothers' record of a locomotive pulling into a French rail station that was one of the first motion pictures shown to a paying audience, to *Earth*, a Disney nature film spanning the globe to capture stunning images using the latest digital technology, the

variety of films falling under the documentary name is extraordinary. Soon after *Nanook of the North*, there were other travel/ethnographic epics (Merian C. Cooper and Ernest B. Schoedsack made *Grass* and *Chang* in present day Iran and Thailand in the mid Twenties) and Russian and German innovators made the great "city symphony" films. American Pare Lorentz, in *The Plow that Broke the Plains,* produced one of the earliest advocacy docs by bringing attention to the economic and environmental degradation of the Great Depression, employing poetic narration and a bracing symphonic score to bring its stark message across.

World War II saw documentary filmmaking gain further prominence, both in the run-up to the war and in raw battlefield footage. These were almost always made with government backing and often using military film crews, so propaganda flourished. Leni Riefenstahl's Hitler-glorifying *The Triumph of the Will* may be the most notorious such film in history, as well as one of the more visually stunning. The Allies were quick to catch up once the war began. The stalwart, scenes-from-the-Blitz films of Humphrey Jennings were great morale boosters in Great Britain and in the U.S. the government recruited Hollywood players to perform a similar function. Some, like John Huston and William Wyler, took cameras into the thick of battle. The war's longest resonating event has been the Holocaust and the horrifying circumstances of the extermination of several million people at the hands of Nazi Germany has been the impetus of countless notable documentaries. From the eloquent, thirty-minute tone poem *Night and Fog* to *Shoah*, with its riveting succession of testimony from survivors, witnesses and perpetrators clocking in at nine hours, the variety and breadth of these films are a lasting endorsement to the poignancy and depth of the non-fiction form.

The post-war development of lighter cameras with synchronous sound meant more could be done with less equipment and fewer people. This led to a new wave of filmmakers freed up to do unobtrusive investigative work (such as Frederick Wiseman's controversial expose *Titicut Follies*) or to develop the cinema verite style: the inconspicuous filming of subjects as a real-life drama

unfolds, connecting the scenes in post-production to create its narrative form. Richard Leacock, D.A. Pennebaker, David and Albert Maysles, Barbara Kopple and others pioneered this discipline in America and though it has been modified over time remains the most recognized type of "authentic" documentary in viewers' perceptions. Their example has led to an opening of the floodgates for new filmmakers to produce documentaries on a limitless assortment of topics, from the adorable (and immensely popular) creatures in *March of the Penguins* to Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11*, a scathing attack on George W. Bush's administration that broke all box office records for documentaries upon it's much-ballyhooed release in the middle of the 2004 presidential election. But whether the aim is to re-discover a forgotten page of history, expose an injustice, champion society's underdogs, celebrate a peculiar aspect of pop culture, commemorate a notable life or take us on an adventure that would have otherwise been unavailable to us, the best documentary films are valuable contributions to a richly humanistic tradition in the arts. Viewers should find herein a treasure trove of films to discover or re-visit.

#1
The Lumière Brothers' Films
1895~1897—50 seconds each

In the late 19th century there were many companies and individuals trying to find the right formula for the practical development of motion pictures. Nowadays, many attribute this achievement to Louis and Auguste Lumiere, brothers who worked for their family's photo-supply manufacturing company in Lyon, France. Spurred on by their father Antoine Lumiere, who had seen Thomas Edison's Kinetoscope in 1894, they incorporated and expanded on the innovations of both Edison and Eadweard Muybridge, the early pioneer of photographic motion studies. What they came up with was the Cinematographe, the first viable combination of motion-picture camera and projector. Edison's invention required viewers to watch his clips in individual viewing booths, an idea that met with limited success. The film projector element of the Cinematographe enabled the brothers to take that one giant leap for mankind—screen the final product in a theatre for a paying audience. On December 28, 1895 the brothers staged an exhibition of their fifty-second "actualities" at the Salon Indien, a basement room of the Grand Café in Paris. The audience was thrilled, some to the point of fearing for their own safety, by the sight of a locomotive blasting into a station in the now-famous "Arrival of a Train".

There had been a few fitful attempts by others to screen motion pictures in this manner but the brothers' continued success (people were lining up around the block soon after their debut) had as much to do with their technique as with their knack for product development. The Lumiere's early work (most of it shot by Louis) covers an impressive variety of subjects with a great sense of formal beauty and an uncanny ability to fit all the prescribed action into their fifty-second time frame. The astute triangular composition of "Arrival of a Train" was an early example of the brothers' stylistic flair. Anything from a child feeding a cat to the aftermath of a huge

flood could be turned into a miniaturist gem with their unforced sensitivity and keen compositional instincts.

Three years after getting the patent on their Cinematographe, the brothers and their associates had filmed some one thousand short subjects. After 1897, it was these disciples that took up the torch and brought the relatively lightweight cameras around the globe. They introduced movies to far-flung locations while at the same time capturing priceless turn-of-the-century footage from places like Egypt, Ireland, Turkey, Indochina and Japan, with subjects ranging from military drills to opium smokers to French colonial women throwing coins to the natives. After their great success at the 1900 Paris Exposition, Louis and Auguste Lumiere exited the filmmaking world and returned to the family business, having so ably laid the groundwork for a century of cinema.

Lumiere & Company
Sarah Moon—1995—88 minutes

On the 100th anniversary of the Lumiere's groundbreaking invention, Sarah Moon interviewed forty filmmakers on the state of contemporary cinema and invited each of them to make a one-minute actuality using a refurbished Cinematographe. It's an intriguing idea well executed by the impressive international lineup of directors including Spike Lee, Wim Wenders and Fernando Trueba.

#2
Nanook of the North
Robert Flaherty—1922—79 minutes

Nanook of the North, widely recognized as the first significant feature documentary, was the long-evolving project of a deeply committed individual, a not uncommon scenario for many non-fiction filmmakers who would follow in his wake. Robert Flaherty was an American prospector and explorer already quite familiar with the Canadian wilderness when an employer suggested in 1913 that he bring a movie camera on his next trip. Flaherty was receptive to the idea. The son of a mining engineer based in Michigan, he had long been an admirer of the Eskimo people he first met while traveling with his father in northern Ontario at the turn of the century. After taking a crash course in motion picture photography at the Eastman Company headquarters in Rochester, New York, the first-time filmmaker headed north to Baffin Island, just below the Artic Circle. By early 1914, Flaherty was getting footage of igloo building, sledging, seal hunting and ritual dancing. But he was dissatisfied with his work, upset that he couldn't capture the essence of this little-seen culture that fascinated him. After all his negatives were lost in a fire he spent years trying to finance a second chance to make a film. With sponsorship from Revillon Freres secured in 1920 Flaherty traveled to a treeless tundra some 1300 miles north of Toronto, with the fur company's post as a setting-off point. Soon after, he found his leading man.

The man Flaherty named Nanook ("The Bear") was a prominent hunter for the Inuit tribes in the landmass to the east of uppermost Hudson Bay. He fashioned a "family" for Nanook and brought along on expeditions a handful of men known to him. They were all enthusiastic about the idea of the movie, which they called the "aggie" (big picture). Flaherty had traveled alone and soon they were his helpers and collaborators, helping to take care of the equipment and film—no mean feat in the frigid climate—and suggesting ideas. From the start of film, Flaherty's sympathies are clear: free of

civilized neuroses, these are "the most cheerful people in all the world", and the keen focus on daily survival skills affords them an inspirational aura. The affection Nanook and his screen wife show to the children and the children's affection towards their puppy shrinks the vast distance between the subject and viewers. But the survival "lifestyle" is rugged stuff and the bulk of *Nanook of the North* is made up of a series of memorable hunting scenes. The 300 members of this tribe scrape out a living on a frozen range the size of England. The specter of starvation is always close at hand and Flaherty does not forget the crucial nature of this struggle—he hardly could have because he was part of the same knife's edge existence during his sixteen months of filming.

Flaherty, born in 1884, had "one foot in an age of innocence" according to photographer Walker Evans, and *Nanook* depicts that age even if it did not exist anymore, even for the Inuits. For the celebrated walrus-hunting scene, the hunters gladly used harpoons for the sake of the "aggie", but their guns were not left at home. The five-minute sequence was the culmination of a full day's stalking of the herd, and the successful strike began a mortal struggle as five men pull on the line while the wounded walrus tries to pull them out to sea. Flaherty later wrote that at the point we see other walruses head back towards the shore in a threatening manner, the men were calling for a gun to finish the job but he pretended not to understand and kept cranking the camera. It was as if he were making a film of earlier generations of his subjects. Scenes of Nanook spearing salmon while skipping along ice floes, hunting a fox hidden under the snow or speed-building a temporary igloo (complete with ice window) could have taken place long before the invention of moving pictures, which seems to be the point. Even the brief scene at the trading post shows the building way off in the background and is played for laughs—a boy being prescribed castor oil, Nanook biting a phonograph record.

In modern times some critics and scholars have frowned on Flaherty's tendency to stage scenes or even for having Nanook build a larger-than-usual igloo so as to shoot interiors. Putting aside the fact that capturing spontaneous reality was difficult with the bulky

equipment of the day, Flaherty's subsequent career shows a director more enthralled by the spirit of truth than the letter of it. His planning and pre-visualization, the use of establishing shots and editing to create a compelling storyline helped make *Nanookof the North* a great commercial and critical success and laid the groundwork for hundreds of non-fiction feature films. "Long nights—the wail of the wind—short, bitter days, snow-smoking fields of sea and plain—the brass ball of sun a mockery in the sky," an intertitle like this may help to sell the story, but it's not poetic license. Nanook died two years after the film's release, finally succumbing to the unforgiving environment in which he had lived all his days. By that time his given name was well on its way to becoming a byword of Eskimo intrepidness and Flaherty's admirable empathy helped establish our contemporary appreciation of aboriginal cultures. Nanook, who contributed many of the ideas of this landmark "aggie", may have even sensed this himself. A viewer could be forgiven for thinking this while watching the final scene—Nanook sleeping contentedly in his igloo even while a furious windstorm rages outside.

South
Frank Hurley—1919—88 minutes

Photographer/filmmaker Frank Hurley was on the crew of the star-crossed *Endurance*, the expeditionary ship captained by Sir Ernest Shackleton that was trapped by pack ice and eventually sunk off the coast of Antarctica in 1914. His vivid documentation of this stirring tale of the survival and rescue of every crewmember was one of the earliest examples of a real-life crisis captures in moving images and served as source material for several contemporary docs about the celebrated Shackleton.

#3
Häxan: Witchcraft Through the Ages

Benjamin Christensen—1922—104 minutes

Haxan is a film that is long on notoriety but one never widely seen. A truncated version of this devilish silent-era docudrama did make the rounds in the freewheeling 1960s. It added narration by William Burroughs and a way-out avant-garde jazz score by violinist Jean-Luc Ponty. But the original film has become more widely available in the DVD age (the Sixties' version showed up as an extra in the Criterion Collection set) and Benjamin Christensen, its Danish-born director, has re-established his cult reputation from beyond the grave, appropriately enough. His films were popular with the Surrealist crowd in the 1920s and could be said to have influenced gothic-style horror movies right from his own era up to *The Exorcist* and beyond. The directors of *The Blair Witch Project* named their production company Haxan in tribute.

Christensen combined sub-titled theorizing and occasional straight reporting with lurid and lengthy dramatizations to make the case that people from time immemorial have blamed witchcraft for bad things they can't explain. The documentary format largely falls by the wayside after fifteen minutes (the term "documentary" hadn't even been coined in 1922) and the brawny Christensen appears as Lucifer in several visualizations of devil worship and satanic trickery. All in the interest of journalistic inquiry, of course, but a viewer can easily notice the subversive enthusiasm with which the director has taken on this role. Women are stolen from their husbands and led to Black Masses, fingers are pulled off a corpse and added to a witch's brew, nuns are clubbed to the floor and innocents are given up to the Inquisition. Film scholar Chris Fujiwara wrote, "At times, *Haxan* appears to be a literal depiction of the imaginings of Medieval Europe". Christensen allowed himself plenty of poetic license to make a cinematic record of those dark fantasies. His technique is remarkably advanced for the early Twenties and the special effects,

especially in the use of scale models and matte shots to create a debauched netherworld, lend the film a disturbing power.

With all its prurient re-enactments *Haxan* can be seen as an early example of the triumph of titillation over investigation, now a common practice of specialty cable TV channels. But Christensen is not without a serious agenda here. This is a work shot through with a deep mistrust of organized religion and contempt for misogynist legal systems—a quality that endeared him to the Surrealists and Dadaists just as much as his outré visuals did. Down the home stretch, Christensen tells a bitter tale of a young maiden who is thrown in the slammer after innocently touching a junior monk's wrist. Her fate is sealed after the church's traveling witchcraft judge cruelly tricks her into a confession. As he and his cohorts ride off to the next unsuspecting town, Christensen notes that it is believed that eight million people (mostly women) were burned as witches in the course of a few centuries. "Witchcraft spreads wherever these judges settle down," reads one title card.

#4
Grass: A Nation's Battle for Life

Merian C. Cooper, Ernest B. Schoedsack, and Marguerite Harrison—1925—71 minutes

Grass is an account of the amazing migration of a nomadic Persian tribe to reach a suitable grazing area for their half-million sheep, cattle and goats. Even in our own age, with cameras having now peeked into nearly every corner of the globe, *Grass* still holds a fresh sense of discovery. Over 50,000 herdsmen and their families, along with ten times that many animals, traverse a 2000-foot precipice, a half-mile wide raging river and a snow-covered 12,000 foot mountain that has to be shoveled out the whole way by the trail leaders. The whole affair was produced solely by the three people credited above.

If the names of Cooper and Schoedsack look familiar it's because that duo would go on to make *King Kong* eight years later. The idea of intrepid Westerners heading out to mysterious lands played a key role in both films. Cooper was a battle-tested World War I veteran determined to be an adventurer; Schoedsack had been a front-line photographer during the same conflict and Harrison was a journalist who ended up spying for the U.S. on the Bolsheviks after the Russian Revolution and spent three years in the notorious Lubyanka prison for her trouble. Instead of the fictional lost world of Skull Island in *Kong*, this trio's real-life quest involved traveling "across the barren infinity of Arabia" to find a "Forgotten People". This would be the Bakhtiari tribe, apparently little known even to their fellow denizens of what was then referred to as Asia Minor. The long camel ride takes them across deserts and snowy highlands as well; along the way they spend a night at an old-school caravanserai and visit a remote outpost for desert policemen. The attractive Harrison plays the part of reporter and good sport, partaking of local customs while her two colleagues stay behind the camera.

When they do catch up with the Bakhtiaris (in what is now southern Iran), we are briefly introduced to Hader, the chief, and a

confident nine year-old named Lufta, his son and heir. But overall there is little personal dimension to *Grass*, a drawback for modern sensibilities. In a 1965 interview, Cooper said he wanted to make a second film focusing on a single family from the tribe but his funding ran out. What he and his collaborators came away with was a film record of the unfathomable logistics of this twice-yearly mass migration. The most notable scene would be the perilous crossing of the wide and swift Karun River, involving a half-million people and animals either swimming or being loaded onto inflated goatskins. This event took six full days in real time. The excerpt captured by the filmmakers shows a procedure as filled with danger (we see several small animals overcome by the rapids) as it is with unearthly stoicism, and is one of the more astounding sequences from the silent-film era.

Chang
Merian C. Cooper and Ernest B. Schoedsack—1927—70 minutes

Cooper and Schoedsack followed up *Grass* with this film of a family living in an area of northern Siam (present-day Thailand) known for its man-eating tigers and a herd of free-ranging elephants. Although some action scenes were staged or reconstructed in the editing room for maximum effect (the famous climatic scene of an elephant herd leveling an entire "village" actually occurred on an unpopulated set), the rare idyllic glow of the domestic scenes have as much of a lasting cinematic and anthropological value.

Song of Ceylon
Basil Wright—1934—39 minutes

The photographically gifted director Basil Wright was hired by pioneering documentarian John Grierson and sent off to make this film about the tea trade under the sponsorship of England's Empire Marketing Board. But this is a lot more Ceylon than Salada in this lovely work set in what's now Sri Lanka—from the opening prayer ceremony set on a mountaintop making a 70-mile shadow at sunrise

to the spell-inducing drumming and traditional dancing that ends it, *Song Of Ceylon* (which was a box office hit upon release) appears like the early awakening of a multicultural sensibility and for good measure there's even a brief sequence on the tea industry.

#5
Berlin: Symphony of a Great City

Walter Ruttmann—1927—55 minutes

The Weimar period in Germany saw a great flowering of modernist art forms, not least when it came to the cinema. It was the time of such great Expressionist classics as *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* and Fritz Lang's *Metropolis.* But the era between the World Wars was also beset by recession and rationing, often making it difficult to finance the lavish productions typical of the age. Finding a way around these potential restrictions was Frankfurt-born Walter Ruttmann. Ruttmann, with a background in painting and architecture, had worked in film since the early 1920s. He was a cinematographer for Lang's *Siegfried* and contributed to the first feature-length animation, Lotte Reiniger's *The Adventures of Prince Achmed.* Foregoing the need for expensive sets, he used the busy streets of Berlin as his Expressionist canvas in a willful montage style inspired by the great Russian director Sergei Eisenstein. The result was an eye-popping and richly entertaining film that was on the leading edge of the city-symphony genre and can also be seen as a forerunner of such modern travelogue/special-effects extravaganzas as *Koyaanisqatsi.*

Like a symphony, this work is divided into sections and shows a day in the life of the fast-growing German capital. The original score by Edmund Meisel (who also wrote the music for Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin*) fits like a glove with Ruttmann's rhythmic editing. An image of a train approaching the metropolis from the countryside opens the film. The pre-dawn city streets are locked in an evocative stillness until people slowly filter down onto the sidewalks. Then the viewer is treated to an impressive sequence of behemoth factory machines starting up as the city is seen to be a sleeping giant about to awake. Berlin had ballooned from a city of one million at the turn of the century to one of four million souls by the mid-Twenties. Ruttmann captures both the greatness and the growing pains inherent in such quick expansion. Once the workday is in full

swing there is an intoxicating whirlwind of motion as horse-drawn carts do battle with trolleys, skittish pedestrians dodge cars on the Alexanderplatz and elevated railways slice through buildings.

But for all of Ruttmann's dedication to hyperactivity and two-fisted industrial might, intimate moments still come poking through, whether it be sweethearts meeting on a corner or a small girl trying to push her doll carriage up a flight of stairs. With a montage that uses overlapping edits to show an over-technologized city spinning out of control, the fourth section (out of five) culminates in an apparent suicide when a young woman jumps from a bridge. But this digression is brief and as night falls Berliners are shown in athletic activities or partaking of the many entertainments their town has to offer. As Meisel's music swells up for the occasion, an explosion of fireworks concludes Ruttmann's homage.

Although a film of avant-garde sensibilities, *Symphony of a Great City* proved to be a success with audiences of the time, especially when compared with the less viewer-friendly abstractions of Ruttmann's previous *Opus* series. In the next few years, Ruttmann would go on to make similar films of other German cities but unfortunately this rich cultural period would soon draw to a close with the rise of Adolph Hitler. Alas, Ruttmann was not to be on the side of the angels. He directed a couple of propaganda films for the Third Reich before dying in 1941.

#6
Man with a Movie Camera
Dziga Vertov—1929—68 minutes

Russian director Dziga Vertov, along with fellow countryman Sergei Eisenstein, did much to pioneer the development of film montage and subjective editing. His was a cerebral brand of filmmaking, encompassing as it did patriotic movies for the young Soviet Union as well as the methodology of elevating the “life-facts” of photographic observation into a wider realm using stylistic flourishes. *Man with a Movie Camera* shares some similarities with Ruttmann’s *Berlin*: *Symphony of a Great City* but instead of a musical motif, Vertov cleverly uses the actual making of the movie as its own framing device. It opens with people filing into a theater and closes with the same patrons settling into their seats to watch the film we have just seen being made.

Man with a Movie Camera has a similar opening to *Berlin* and may suffer in comparison. In the dawning-of-day sequence, instead of Ruttmann’s haunting images of deserted streets slowly populating we get static shots of typewriters and car wheels at rest. The day-in-the-life that follows (filmed in several Russian cities) seems less grand than its predecessor but the technique is decidedly showier. Frenzied jump cuts, subliminal dissolves, overlapping images and split screens are here in all their glory and employed with the utmost confidence. The sight of a passing train melding into a woman suddenly waking up is unexpectedly erotic and the standard 1920s spectacle of the runaway tram car is watched by a startled, screen-filling eye.

One of the more endearing aspects of the film is the recurring appearance of the erstwhile cameraman of its title. He is Mikhail Kaufman, Vertov’s brother and collaborator and a noted photographer/filmmaker in his own right. In scenes filmed by assistants, Mikhail is shown riding alongside a car full of mocking young women, hauling his equipment down a mineshaft or setting it up beside a volcanic steel foundry. These segments can nowadays be

seen as a window onto the working methods of Vertov and his colleagues in the Kino-Pravda (film-truth) movement. They shot newsreels using the "prose of life" as their inspiration, rejecting what was seen as the "bourgeois melodrama" of the old stagebound conventions. This was a patriotic realism, reflecting pride in the newly formed USSR. Yet it also reflected an unshakeable belief that the enhanced kino-eye could create a heightened understanding of the world. "We cannot improve our eyes, but we can always improve the camera," Vertov once said. This line of thinking led to a continual impulse to conjure up technical wizardry to achieve goals, even if the goal was merely to be witty. Two of the more quirky bits in *The Man with the Movie Camera* involve a camera rising out of a giant glass of beer and a tripod and camera arriving on the scene and setting themselves up.

Vertov's work of this time enjoyed a good measure of popularity, though there were complaints of its self-consciousness and the dizzying pace of its editing. In a preview of warnings that became commonplace after the advent of MTV, critic Mordaunt Hall—the *New York Times* first full-time movie reviewer—said that Vertov "does not take into consideration the fact that the human eye fixes for a certain space of time that which holds the attention." Vertov's stature was eventually undermined by Josef Stalin's iron-fisted rule. Vertov may have been a committed Marxist but Stalin was an even more committed dictator and the director did not fare well when film projects started to fall under the auspices of rigid planning committees. His considerable talents and boundless creative drive were not so much crushed as gradually marginalized. Vertov would go on to make other films (most notably *Three Songs of Lenin*) but this is the one he was destined to be remembered for, more so for its affirmative spirit of filmmaking than for what it says about the society that is its subject.

The City Symphony movement

Berlin and *Man With a Movie Camera* are two of the better-known examples of a whole genre that was popular in the Twenties

and Thirties. The "city symphony" films may seem innocuous at first glance, but their makers often colored them with socio-political viewpoints. That certainly would be the case with Jean Vigo's *A Propos de Nice* (*On the Subject of Nice*, 1930) where impressive aerial views and casual shooting of the posh resort's yachting, tennis and car racing competitions yield to a more critical eye. The future *Zero for Conduct* director wheeled his partner, Boris Kaufman (third of the filmmaking Kaufman brothers, along with Mikhail and Dziga Vertov), down the boardwalk in one of the many available wheelchairs, their concealed camera capturing the decadent elite brushing past peddlers. In one telling sequence, they created a toy-sized set showing a train disgorging some suitcase-toting dolls that are then swept off a gaming table by an uncaring croupier's rake. Alberto Cavalcanti's *Rien Que Les Heures* (*Only the Hours*, 1926) also emphasized the close proximity between the down-and-out and the well-to-do in his day in the life of Paris. But the Brazilian-born Cavalcanti imbues his profile with humor and stylistic gestures similar to what Vertov would be doing to a greater degree a few years after. Subjective montages and witty superimpositions abound, one memorable example of the latter shows a gentleman tucking into his luncheon steak only to see it transform into a slaughterhouse scene. Some of the cinematic symphonies have no issue to raise other than their own beauty. Joris Ivens' *Rain* (*Regen*, 1929) is an eloquent study of the effects of a passing shower on the Amsterdam cityscape, an exceptional succession of poetically-observed images. Ivens may have been inspired by another masterpiece in miniature, 1921's *Manhatta* by Paul Strand and Charles Sheeler, a ten-minute portrait of New York's "million-footed" metropolis, shot from an impressive array of lofty angles just prior to the era when the Chrysler and Empire State buildings would take the town to even dizzier heights. The short length of the city symphonies (most are under 45 minutes) make them accessible thru DVD compilations and YouTube, liberating them from the academic film programs which had been pretty much their sole refuge for decades.

#7
Man of Aran

Robert Flaherty—1934—77 minutes

Robert Flaherty had considerable difficulty duplicating the great achievement of *Nanook of the North*. In the afterglow of his initial success he was given a blank check by Paramount Pictures to make a follow-up, ending up in the South Pacific to document the vanishing tribal traditions of Samoan islanders. The result was *Moana*, a film as technically impressive as its predecessor but lacking its dramatic struggle. This was, after all, a warm place where food fell from the trees. *Moana* flopped at the box office. Flaherty's subsequent project on Native Americans was never completed and his collaboration with German director F.W. Murnau on the fiction film *Tabu* was cut short over creative differences. It would not be until 1934, twelve years after *Nanook*, that Flaherty would recapture his formula for success with *Man of Aran*. It is a film filled with rugged beauty and authentic admiration for the stalwart people of the Aran Islands off the west coast of Ireland. As in *Nanook*, he went beyond recording the ways of people whose lives are closely intertwined with the natural world; he also convinced them to collaborate with him in conjuring up a nearly pre-industrial lost age, making for a unique film experience.

With this setting the drama is nearly built in. The Arans are not just any old group of islands. Instead it is a place where "the peculiar shelving of the coastline piles up into one of the most gigantic seas in the world". Repeated images showing the crushing weight of these waves as they relentlessly pound craggy 300-foot high cliffs sets the tone early. The islands are treeless and virtually without soil; seaweed is carried up from the shore and used in the farming of potatoes. Into this stark environment Flaherty quickly inserts the "family" he formed from three unrelated residents. After a brief idyllic scene where the son (Mikeleen "Michael" Dillane) extracts a small crab from a tidal pool and stows it away in his cap, viewers are treated to an episode where the *Man* of the title (Colman "Tiger" King) and his stand-in wife (Maggie Dirrane) go to retrieve a fishing

net that has slipped out of their boat along the shore, helped by a few others. To make the situation even more desperate than it already was, Flaherty edited in close-up views of the surging sea with his footage of the drenched people struggling to pull the equally soaked-through net out of the water, and nearly getting swallowed up in the foam for their trouble.

Initially, Flaherty had mixed results gaining the islanders' cooperation. Some doubted that his surname was for real; variations of Flaherty were common thereabouts. Many also had ingrained suspicions about outsiders that lingered from the Great Famine some eighty years before. While some involved were relatively cosmopolitan (Dirrane had worked in Dublin for several years) others held to old notions and resentments from the days when Protestants gave free soup to Catholics who promised to convert. This held up the paid participation of Dillane, the curly-haired and fresh-faced youngster that the director insisted on casting despite his mother's initial reluctance. Eventually, Flaherty recruited enough residents to make the production possible and was assisted at times by members of the famed EMB Film Unit, although the film was financed as a "real-life drama" by the Gaumont British studio. The islanders knew film and came to understand that the end result would be to show the outside world what stuff they were made of. Much of the filming was on the far western shore where the waves have had all the Atlantic Ocean to build themselves up before being dashed onto vertiginous cliffs. In one beautifully shot scene, Michael climbs partway down a craggy bluff and spies a basking shark lolling just below the water's surface. The practice of hunting these whale-like creatures with harpoons died out a half-century earlier but, like in *Nanook*, Flaherty's enthusiastic persuasion won the day. The director's research on basking sharks approached Mellvillean levels and soon the men, especially his closest Irish collaborator Pat Mullen, were brushing up on the subject themselves and getting new harpoons forged. This scene, shot in Flaherty's second and last summer there, became the centerpiece of the film. In one of the more vivid scenes he would ever film, Tiger King and Mullen lead the crew as they work their way through the surf in their modest curraghs

then meticulously track down and harpoon the beast. In a lyrically-paced duet of mortal struggle, the men's skillful handling of the boat and harpooning gear is contrasted with the shark relentlessly slapping the boat with its tail and, having already been stuck twice, almost towing them into the open sea.

Although Flaherty did not pretend that he was making anything more than a "picture" that used real islanders, *Man of Aran* can seem disingenuous in spots, like when the purpose of the hunt is said to be to gain "shark oil for their lamps". Electricity had been available on the Aran Islands for some time. Contemporary critics pointed out that, in the midst of the Great Depression, the director ignored the poverty and absentee-landlord system that existed on the island. (The evolving conception of what a documentary should be has kept these complaints afloat.) The headstrong Flaherty felt entitled to his own agenda and there may be a built-in rebuke in one of the title cards that open the film: "In this desperate environment the Man of Aran, because his independence is the most precious privilege he can win from life, fights for his existence, bare though it may be." This sentiment could just as easily apply to a New Yorker waiting in a bread line circa 1934. It was in April of that year that *Man of Aran* had its gala premiere in London with many islanders in attendance, their homespun ways proving a big hit with Fleet Street reporters. Later in '34 it won top prize at the second Venice Film Festival and Flaherty would go on to take the film on a successful American tour, accompanied by its three leading characters.

The Drifters
John Grierson—1929—49 minutes

Scottish-born John Grierson was the founder of the British Documentary Film Movement and one of the greatest proponents the medium ever had. He is most known for single-handedly selling Britain's Empire Marketing Board on his the idea of making "promotional" films for the governmental agency—a gambit that would eventually yield some of the century's most influential non-fiction filmmaking. The first was this gritty and gripping film about

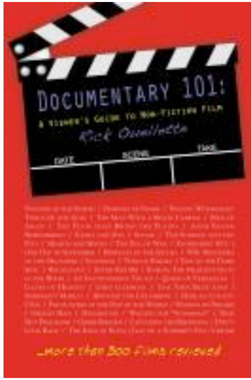
herring fisherman plying their trade in the roiling North Sea, which Grierson saw as a chance to extol the working classes, whom he believed had all but been ignored in popular culture.

Industrial Britain
Directed by Robert Flaherty—1933—21 minutes

After the success of *The Drifters,* Grierson assumed the leadership of a group of young, left-leaning protégés that would turn out docs like the highly-regarded *Night Mail* and *Coal Face*. Yet early on the EMB Film Unit needed a little "star power" to help raise its profile and Robert Flaherty was brought in to direct a short film. As producer, Grierson likely had the idea for *Industrial Britain* but Flaherty does manage to affix his own stamp to Grierson's pre-addressed envelope, acknowledging the might of modern machines but using graceful visuals and a Beethoven soundtrack to remind viewers that industry started with weavers and windmills and that its successful perpetuation depends on the "personal skills of so many first-rate English workers".

It's All True (Based on An Unfinished Film by Orson Welles)
Richard Wilson, Myron Meisel and Bill Krohn—1993—86 minutes

It's All True was to be a grandiose three-part documentary on Brazil directed in 1942 by Orson Welles as his contribution to America's wartime Good Neighbor Policy. The difficult and ambitious genius behind *Citizen Kane* had big plans but his already rocky relationship with RKO studios caused the expensive project to be scrapped, unseen until this project presented a "completed" segment (a moving story about a then-famous protest by disenfranchised fishermen) as well as snippets of the other two parts and contemporary interviews with film scholars and people who worked on the project.



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