

DOCUMENTARY

The first film-makers to make what were in essence travelogues and called *documentaires* were the Lumière brothers in the 1890s. Thirty

years later the British film-maker and critic John Grierson reappraised the word to apply to Robert Flaherty's *Mwana* (1926). Grierson was the founder of the 1930s documentary group in Britain and was one of the theorists influential in determining the nature of documentary. According to Grierson, documentary should be an instrument of information, education and propaganda as well as a creative treatment of reality. In the late 1940s, the academism of Grierson's position was severely criticized by Lindsay Anderson and other founder members of *Free Cinema* Britain. According to these critics the use of the documentary as a means of social propaganda took away the aesthetic value of documentary film and, on an ideological level, normalized intellectual condescension and social elitism (see *naturalizing and ideology*). Although Grierson's position, with hindsight, does appear elitist, if we examine the climate of the times in the late 1920s, the reasons for that position do at least become clear. In the United Kingdom (as in the United States) after 1918 there began a progressive development in popular democracy. By 1928 both men and women in the United Kingdom had equal rights to vote. Grierson, who had worked in the United States during the period 1924-7, was struck by the intellectual concerns about mass democracy – such as lack of education among the electorate, making the ordinary voter uninformed when making choices – and was determined to do something about it. This feeling of the need to educate was held by other members of the British establishment who, like Grierson, saw cinema as an excellent means of education. So he worked between 1930 and 1939, first with the Empire Marketing Board and subsequently with the GPO, as producer of some forty-two documentaries on aspects of British life, institutions, governmental agencies and social problems – all with the intention of involving citizens in their society. *Coalface* (1935), about the miners and their labour, and *Night Mail* (1936), about the Post Office workers are exemplary films in this regard.

An alternative voice in documentary work emerged a little later, during the Second World War primarily, in the films of Humphrey Jennings. Jennings was a poet and a painter, interested in surrealism and Marxism, in literature and science. Unlike Grierson's liberal elitism, which focused on the dignity of labour but as divorced from the social context, Jennings's films focused on the everyday life and sounds of ordinary men and women (as in *Spare Time*, 1939). He was the first documentarist to go outside London into the northern parts of the UK and to make films about industrial workers. A great concern of his was the Industrial Revolution and its effects on Britain

and British people. Many of Jennings's films were made, appropriately, for the Mass Observation Unit – a unit set up by left-wing thinkers to observe ordinary people through registering accounts of their lives and feelings. Jennings's intimate observation of the ordinary also had a poetic, surreal quality to it, shown in the way he framed his images of industrial Britain and juxtaposed images of the ordinary with those out of the ordinary.

Although the tradition of recording other cultures dates back to the travelogues made by the Lumière brothers, it is really Robert Flaherty who was the first documentarist in that tradition. The first so-called documentary is his *Nanook of the North* (1922), about Eskimo life. Flaherty also directed a film for Grierson, *Industrial Britain* (1931-2) – surprisingly given Flaherty's romantic world-view. In the Soviet Union during the 1920s Dziga Vertov recorded Soviet progress in his documentaries made for Kino-Pravda 'Film-Truth'. Interestingly, in his work we can trace the possible heritage of the two British tendencies mentioned above. Vertov, like Grierson, saw documentary as an educative tool, but his style – an *avant-garde* formalism, achieved by *montage*, to the point of *deconstruction* – showed an aesthetic preoccupation with the image that we find in Jennings's work. During the 1930s the Soviet film-maker Medvedkin took the possibilities of documentary on to a new stage: he shot, developed and projected filmed documentation on the spot to workers as he travelled around the Soviet Union by train – this work became known as *cine-train*.

Owing to lack of financial resources following the Second World War, many aspiring film-makers in Europe had to turn to documentary work before they could go on to make feature films (Alain Resnais, Georges Franju and Agnès Varda in France and Ken Russell in the United Kingdom spring to mind). Although some of these directors, especially those mentioned, made important politicized documentaries they hardly constituted a movement. The next important development to occur was in the 1960s with the rise of the *cinéma-vérité* group in France and the direct cinema in the United States. Two new technological developments contributed to this documentary style – television and the lightweight camera. Television news had the appearance of live images. The lightweight camera made it possible to be unobtrusive and mobile and to catch really on film. Certain earlier documentary traditions also influenced their work: ordinary people testified to their experiences whether, for example, it was the everyday experience of Parisians in the summer of 1961 (Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin's *Chronique d'un été*, 1961), the French

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people's experience of the German Occupation (Marcel Ophüls, *Le Chagrin et la pitié*, 1970) or the miners' strike in the United States (Barbara Kopple's *Harlan County USA*, 1976).

In the liberal climate of the 1970s in Western society, many film-making collectives and independent film-makers made documentaries challenging the establishment. Feminist films were much in evidence and were about individual women's lives, motherhood, prostitution. Black women and women of colour also got their first foothold in the film-making process. Lesbian and gay film-makers found a voice through the documentary and dealt with their lifestyles as well as gay politics. During this period some of the major themes tackled were abortion (even in France, where it was then still illegal: see *Histoire d'A*, Charles Belmont and Marielle Issartel, 1973), sexual identity, racism and economic exploitation.

More recently since the 1980s, developments in video technology and, subsequently in the late 1990s, digital technology have led to the emergence of numerous collectives and workshops in Europe and the United States. It has also led to a further and a still greater democratization of the camera and to more voices from the margins finding a mode of expression. It has also led, particularly in the new millennium to the vocalization of dissent on the one hand and, on the other, to a proliferation of autobiographical texts. Changes in television broadcasting have also helped to raise the visibility of the documentary. With the advent of cable and satellite television there is a need for more programmes, including ones that target specific audiences.

see also: *cinéma-vérité*, **ethnographic film**

For further reading see Barsam, 1992, for a general history; Bruzzi, 2000; Grimshaw, 2002; Nichols, 1991 and 2001; Renov, 1993, for theory on the documentary; Lovell and Hillier, 1972 and Winston, 1995, for the British documentary.

Different types of film -> = different