**IB Film 1: Week 22.1**

**Documentary Film Pre 1939**

The Early Days

Documentary, or reality based film, is as old as the medium itself.

Pioneers like Eadweard Muybridge, the man who invented sequential photography, and Thomas Edison saw the potential of film for archival and educational purposes.

As we learned in earlier lessons however, Edison quickly turned his attention to the more profitable entertainment aspects of motion pictures and let people like the Lumiere Brothers in France demonstrate the power and value of 'documenting' the real world.

This divergence of content was partly the result of a divergence of technology.

Though the Edison and Lumiere cameras were similar in function, they were radically different in size and weight. In fact the Lumiere camera was a hundredth of the weight of Edison's.

The Lumiere camera also acted as its own printer and projector. This meant a Lumiere camera operator could literally go anywhere and film anything. While in New Jersey, anything Edison wanted to film had to be brought to his studio.

So, the Lumiere camera became the first real documentary camera. As more and more were built, the cameras and operators began traveling and documenting the world of the late 19th century. Documentary film was born.

For a time, documentary films outnumbered fiction films as popular entertainment.

This situation would not last, however, due to a number of factors. The most obvious reason was competition from fiction films.

By the turn of the century, it was becoming clear to producers that the money was in pure entertainment—adventures, romance, and comedy were all proving to be big sellers so money and time were invested in those genres.

Another problem was the co-opting of documentary by politicians and royalty who liked seeing themselves on camera and began to expect coverage of every single event.

This extended to military leaders as well, and there are many examples of staged or reenacted beach landings and speeches to the troops.

Early documentary reenactments, a dramatic element still commonly used in documentary film, even included a tabletop model version of San Francisco being shaken apart during the earthquake of 1906.

Audiences could see it was fake but loved it nonetheless.

### **Robert Flaherty**

### **Young Robert Flaherty was an outdoor type of guy.**

He grew up in mining camps in the northern United States and Canada, and later became a prospector working for the Canadian railroad line.

One of his bosses suggested he take a film camera along on his trek to Hudson Bay in Canada.

Flaherty became so fascinated by both the filming process and by the Inuit people he met and filmed, he almost completely forgot about prospecting.

He brought the footage home and began editing. This was his apprenticeship in documentary filmmaking.

He was not happy with the result, thinking it too much like a postcard film, so set out into the wilderness to start all over.

### **Sub-plot**

### **Flaherty almost died making that first film**

He was working on the nearly finished film when he dropped his cigarette onto a pile of negatives.

One of the components of early film stock was nitrate, an extremely flammable substance, and the negatives exploded in Flaherty's face.

This was not an uncommon occurrence for pioneer filmmakers.

### **Nanook of the North**

### **Nanook of the North took almost 10 years to complete and is an epic film**

Flaherty went back up north and filmed his landmark documentary Nanook of the North (1922).

This film was unprecedented in its scope and detail.

Flaherty had the full cooperation of the Inuit people and especially Nanook the hunter and main focus of the film.It features beautiful and dramatic depictions of Inuit life. It is a combination of actuality and reenactments that feel real and true. The film allowed audiences a window into a world most had never imagined existed, and it did it with eloquence, humor, and brilliant filmmaking.

At first, the film had trouble finding its audience.

It was turned down by a couple of major distribution companies until Pathe, a French film company with an office in the States, saw a print and agreed to release it.

The film was a huge success, and Nanook himself became a worldwide celebrity.

### **John Grierson**

### **One of Flaherty's friends was a Scot named John Grierson**

Grierson had become interested in the film medium while at university and developed a philosophy that held up documentary film as a method for educating and enlightening the common man.

Unlike Flaherty, Grierson thought documentary film should stick close to home and should be about the life around us.

Grierson's first film was Drifters, a government-sponsored documentary about herring fisherman.

It was well received by the British public.

Influenced by Eisenstein's Battleship Potemkin, Drifters made heroes out of everyday working people and showed the power of the well-crafted documentary to educate, entertain, and influence.

Grierson was very familiar with Battleship Potemkinas he sponsored it to be shown to a private group called The London Film Society.

The film was otherwise banned in Britain.

### **Working Class Brittain**

### **Developing documentarians**

By 1933, Grierson had over 30 employers, and he was cranking out films and training a new generation of documentarians.

Grierson wanted to show the dignity and purpose of the workingman, and he did it by both documenting and propagandising working class life in Britain.

Perhaps one of the most innovative Grierson films to come out of the time was Night Mail (1936).

Night Mail is a poetic visual work. Edited to the rhythm of the railroad track and to the words of poet W. H. Auden, Night Mail is stylish and fun.

By 1939, Grierson and his style of documentary had established a new way of looking at the everyday world.

As a result of Grierson's success, he was sent to Canada and there established the National Film Board of Canada.

## Early Documentaries - Revisitng the Lumiere Brothers

Watch the following selection of Lumiere Brothers films.

Note that the majority of these early efforts are filmed outside and involve real people doing real things.

These are some of the first documentaries ever made.

Watch This:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4nj0vEO4Q6s>