

**Book review by Johanna Kern in the Fall 1999 edition of "Kinema – A Journal for Film and Audiovisual Media"**

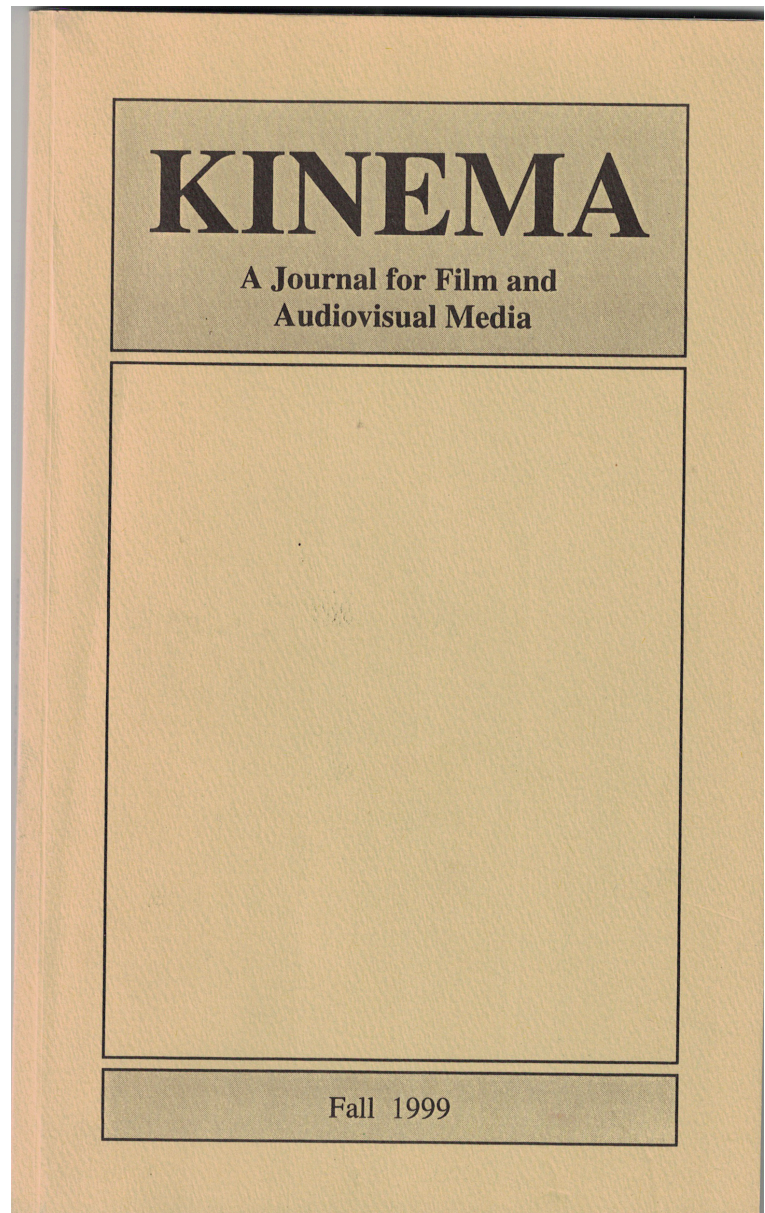
*KINEMA* 89

**2. Documenting the Documentary: Close Readings of Documentary Film and Video.** Barry Keith Grant and Jeannette Sloniowski (ed.) Wayne State University Press, 1998. USD 27.50. ISBN: 0814326390

Twenty seven essays, written by twenty seven scholars, have been compiled in this volume in chronological order according to the date the films they analyze were made. The works discussed here include examples of national movements and documentary styles from mainstream to avant-garde, beginning with the first commercially released feature length documentary, *Nanook of the North* (1922), through to contemporary independent productions.

Each essay, in its distinctive way, represents a different approach and, as Bill Nichols says in the forward, they "provoke reflection and invite generalization in ways that easily lead beyond the immediate topic of study. In this way, like the work of a good anthropologist, these essays help us discover what documentarists and their viewers have in common, not measured by vague abstractions like "religious belief" or "costume", "tragic event" or "personal crises", but in terms of concrete textual strategies and forms in relation to the lived experience of subjects and audience alike".

*Documenting the Documentary* stands out as a valuable supplement to the theoretical and conceptual contemporary writings on documentary. However, the absence of an analysis of the first existing documentaries, the short films made during the early years of the cinema (roughly between 1895-1922), makes



it impossible for this volume to be a complete and absolutely satisfying film course text book documenting the documentary.

The evolution of the cinema as a whole, and naturally of the documentary film with all its styles, is undoubtedly and deeply rooted in those first striking experiments of the inventors, the fathers of the cinema. The film, and especially the subsequent documentary film, cannot be comprehended and analysed without an understanding of how the whole phenomena of the cinema sprang out within a particular historical, economical, social and political context.

Those early films, and their impact on both educating spectators in perception and appreciation of the cinema as well as the course that filmmaking has taken because of the early experiments, need to be introduced to properly set the grounds for analysis. Some scholars could argue that the borders between fiction and actuality in those early films were somewhat *blurry* and that the documentary film with its styles was not really defined until later years. However, one should remember that the word *documentary* had existed in the cinema vocabulary even before the first feature documentary was made.

Many of the early production companies that sprang up around the world, inspired by the success of Lumiere brothers, some of them founded by former peep-show operators, started with non-fiction items – calling them *documentaries*, *topicals*, *interest films*, *actualities*, *educationals*, *expedition films* and *travel films* (which after 1907 were called *travelogues*). The non-fiction films were *actuality* items and did

not use actors. Their makers rejected the theatre as a model for motion pictures.

Some documentaries involved deliberate performance for the camera to better represent and *document* the people and events. Even though some scholars might point out that such practices take away the purity from the documentary form, one could argue here to what extend, if at all, the cinema is able to objectively represent reality. The camera in the filmmaker's hand does filter and interpret the reality the very moment it frames an object. The final product, the completed film, can be perceived as the outcome, the definition, or significance, that the filmmaker has assigned, consciously or not, to the particular fraction of reality he/she focussed on while filming.

However, a still photograph of a family posing and smiling towards the camera at a birthday party remains a document of the moment at that birthday party, when they all said *cheese*. The people are real, the still photograph represents reality and nobody questions its documentary value. There will be no difference in the *actuality* of the document if such *family moments* were filmed by a professional filmmaker. The family would wave and smile and say *cheese* on the screen. The situation and the people still will be real, and the scene will be a document of the birthday party.

In *Documenting the Documentary* the essays by Barry Keith Grant, William Rothman and Jeffery Ruoff address the similarities and differences between fiction and documentary. William Rothman's essay on Robert Flaherty's *Nanook of the*

*North* is the opening essay in this volume.

The first feature length documentary, *Nanook of the North*, 1922, marks the rebirth of documentary film after its decline which began around 1907. *Nanook of the North* was made by Robert J. Flaherty, and it was a product of twenty years of exploring, living with Eskimos, and almost a decade of film activity. Hailed by almost all critics, after its premiere in New York, the film was a box-office success, and its fame spread rapidly throughout the world. *Nanook* and his creator, Flaherty, have been criticized on various grounds by some scholars.

William Rothman argues in his essay that "Flaherty distorts the real way of life of Nanook's family in order to tell a story about a man's heroic efforts to keep his family alive in a harsh natural environment", while underplaying "the encroachments of the modern world". He says that Flaherty's film does not contribute to a "body of scientific knowledge of human cultures". This criticism, however, without the historical context and understanding of Flaherty's intention, misrepresents the film's relationship to ethnographic film.

Flaherty, as he entered the Eskimo world, knew that he was one of the intruders, and he saw the deterioration at work but he also had glimpses of what seemed an earlier nobility. The explorer deliberately banished the intruder from the world he portrayed, and the film was made with the full collaboration of Eskimos who supported Flaherty's purpose. Flaherty wrote: "I am not going to make films about what the white

man has made of primitive peoples...

What I want to show is the former majesty and character of these people, while it is still possible – before the white man has destroyed not only their character, but the people as well. The urge that I had to make *Nanook* came from the way I felt about these people, my admiration for them; I wanted to tell others about them." Rothman focuses on three scenes from *Nanook* and argues that "*Nanook* seems poised between documentary and fiction" speaking of the relationship between the camera and the protagonist and the strategies used by the filmmaker in order to tell the story.

Although the essay addresses the very important question, stated by many film theorists – whether documentaries are more truthful than other films – the essay's central subject, the film *Nanook of the North*, has not been presented in a comprehensive and fully analytical manner. Also in questioning the film's contribution to bringing real life to the screen one thing has been forgotten: documentaries about *The Beatles* in which the musicians smile, make faces to the camera and tell their own story in their own way remain documentaries about *The Beatles* (who smile, make faces to the camera and tell their own story). A documentary about an Eskimo man who "has a relationship to the camera" and is telling his own story still remains a documentary about that man.

Other ethnographic documentaries are discussed in this volume by William Guynn (on *Song of Ceylon*, made in 1934), Joanne Hershfield (on *Que Viva Mexico!*, 1932), Diane

Scheinman (on *Les maitres fous*, 1954) and Catherine Russell (on *I Do Not Know What It Is I Am Like*, 1986).

The importance of performance in a documentary film has been addressed by Jeanne Hall and Carl Plantiga in their essays on *Don't Look Back* (1967), featuring Bob Dylan, and *This Is Spinal Tap* (1984), a parody of the rockumentary. Both Thomas Waugh (on *The Spanish Earth*, 1937) and Charlie Keil (on *Plow That Broke the Plains*, 1936, and *The City*, 1939) give an insightful and thorough analysis of politically motivated documentaries, signifying that fiction film techniques were applied in the making of those films.

In his essay on *Triumph of the Will* (1935) Frank P. Tamasulo examines the film's political content, its mystification of the Führer and its impact on the German society as well as the psychological context in which it was made (the 1930s German mass fascination with fascist ideology).

The reflections of attitudes that compose the rationale in *Listen to Britain* (1942) have been pointed out in Jim Leach's analysis of the film. His essay focuses on the relationship of poetry and propaganda within the documentary mode. Leach states that the film "documents a historical moment in which the claims of poetry and propaganda come together in the evolving myth of the 'people's war', and this unstable partnership signals a challenge to the nation and to the documentary form".

Other documentaries with overt political agendas are analysed in the essays by Robert Stam, Scott Mac-

Donald, Matthew Bernstein, Lucy Fisher and Joan Nicks. The essays address a variety of topics from "the politically engaged sensibility of *Third Cinema*, through the analysis of the merging of economics and art as the conditions of production, to the ways in which the directors presented personal stories in the context of political and social issues.

Julia Lesage's essay on *Finding Christa* (1991) depicts the story of Camille Billop as representing the marginalised people (the politics of black family life and the culturally imposed concept of motherhood). Sheila Petty's in her examination of *Tongues United* (1989) sees the personal story and struggle of the gay black filmmaker in a broader context reflecting the struggle against both the white heterosexual society and the African-American, often homophobic, community.

The avant-garde, the experimental films and filmmakers who put a significant mark on the documentary film within the traditions of avant-garde cinema are discussed by several scholars. In their essays Seth Feldman, Scott MacDonald, Jeanette Sloniowski, Vivian Sobchack, Catherine Russell and Bart Testa "push the boundaries of documentary and offer a series of test cases". Seth Feldman, in his essay on Dziga Vertov's *The Man with a Movie Camera* (1929), argues that Vertov "insisted on the ideological link between the cinema" and the ideals, the goals of the Soviet revolution. Feldman places the film within the movements of futurism and constructivism and speaks of Vertov's contribution to Soviet film theory.

Futurism, from its beginning in

Italy and France, in 1909, was *sweeping* through Europe conquering all the arts and emphasising dynamism and revolution. The futurist often used unconventional ways as means of expression. Dziga Vertov saw the traditional fiction film as “opium for the people” and believed that the task of the Soviet cinema was to document and reflect Soviet actuality.

His film *The Man with a Movie Camera* is an essay on film truth, filled with ironies, an avant-garde deliberately suppressing illusion. On one level it presents a kaleidoscope of daily life (*Life Caught Unawares*) and at the same time it presents Vertov’s commitment to the abilities of the cinema as an observer (*Cinema Eye*). The brilliance of *The Man with a Movie Camera* cannot be denied. However, its ambiguity still puzzles spectators: what did Vertov actually demonstrate? Did he emphasize the importance of a reporter as a documentarist or was he arguing that a documentary cannot be trusted?

In his essay on *The Man with a Movie Camera* Seth Feldman gives a truly thorough and informative presentation of Vertov’s philosophy, creativity and his contribution to the cinema and the film theory. Feldman sees Vertov editing footage of the civil war as the “prototype of the net surfer downloading bits and pieces of fragmented information”, and he argues that Vertov “could well be thought of as a pioneer in the building of a system in which millions of people reconstruct those fragments, building personalized multimedia websites...” He concludes that if Vertov were “alive today he would be pleased to see that the Cinema

Eye has never been more potent – or busier”.

The essay by Sandy Flitterman-Lewis is an analysis of *Night and Fog* (1955), one of the earliest documentaries about the Holocaust. He sees the film as a “celebratory hymn, a *Te Deum*, for within the horror of the concentration camps it is still possible, even if only tenuously, to see, along with Resnais and Cayrol, the fundamental beauty of humanity”.

Joan Nicks, in her analysis of *Daisy: The Story of a Facelift* (1982), focuses on the process of “the documentary of persona” that “entails risk, based on the filmmaker’s interventions, which can as easily fail as succeed”. While Nicks considers “the physical authenticity of being”, Caryl Flinn, in the essay on *Paris Is Burning* (1990), challenges the traditional notions of gender and racial identity.

In the remaining essay of this collection, Linda William’s analysis of *The Thin Blue Line* (1987) the “reverberations and repetitions” in contemporary documentaries get addressed. William argues that the *Truth* is never guaranteed and defines documentary filmmaking as a “set of strategies” used to present some chosen contingent truths.

The essays compiled in *Documenting the Documentary* present a wide range of both theory and criticism and discuss a variety of issues which the recently, and again very popular, form of filmmaking brings to attention of audiences and theorists. The analysed films have already become documentary classics and these essays should be required reading for scholars. However, for

those who are beginning to learn about the history of documentary film, its impact on the audiences, its role in the cinema, as well as the role of the documentary filmmaker in the relation to the arts, politics, economics or social awareness, additional readings will be necessary.

**Johanna Kern**

---