

Looking Forward to the Future
by Richard Leacock

As the film community takes time out to celebrate the centenary of the works of the brothers Lumiere, it is only fitting that we ask what the future holds in store for the Documentary film. What follows is gleaned from my personal experience, as a documentary film maker beginning in 1935 with my first film, CANARY BANANAS a 15 min. 16mm. silent film, which I wrote, directed, photographed and edited, aged 14. Plus what I learned of the past from conversations with Robert Flaherty and from the experience of working as his cameraman on LOUISIANA STORY; fourteen months of filming. Nothing, that I have to say, comes from books by "theoreticians".

As early as 1920 the film industry had comfortably settled down to the highly profitable business of making story-films. It was not an essentially expensive enterprise. A cameraman, a small and relatively portable camera weighing about 20 pounds, a tripod, a few helpers and the requisite actors. Actors had never been in short supply, they were known to be shifty people of dubious moral standards who earned a hand to mouth living traveling from theater to theater. The problem faced by the producers at that time was to find a way to keep outsiders from horning in on this new industry. The solution was to identify pictures with "star" actors. To hold these actors under contract to a specific studio and sell the films using the name of the "star" as the come on. This, combined with advertising that boasted of high costs of stars and of "production values" created an artificial, but no less real, barrier to would be producers. No other industry boasts of its outrageous costs and pretty soon you had it, the "million dollar movie".

Flaherty was not a part of this game. He was an explorer for iron ore who wanted to share his vision of the life led by his friends the Eskimos. Seen through Flaherty's own eyes. Recorded on 35mm film which he developed, printed and edited himself, up there, in the arctic. A mad enterprise.

The film industry was not interested. They had moved on from the brothers Lumiere; the modern audience wanted drama, love, sex, thrills... so Flaherty went to the only people that had a commercial interest in the frozen north, the fur company in Paris, Revillon Freres, and made probably the first "commercial", NANOOK OF THE NORTH. How he managed to get Roxy, the cinema owner, to show it is another story, but he did and it became a modest success, an "exception to the rule" and remains to this day the masterpiece of the "documentary" genre.

As a result of this surprising popular interest, Flaherty was funded by Paramount's J. Lasky, to make "another Nanook" This time he went to Samoa and spent a couple of years there with his wife Frances, his three daughters, a nurse, and 15 tons of furniture and equipment, living with and admiring his hosts, filming, developing and printing the film in a cave, screening it at night for his collaborator actors. Two years of work to make MOANA.

Paramount didn't care for this superb film which never really made it and hasn't to this day. Perhaps Paramount felt more comfortable with the knowledge that *Nanook* was an exception.

With these two films Flaherty had invented a form; the silent documentary version of the sequence. Not to be confused with the routine sequences of the story film or the stylized sequences developed later by the Soviet film makers.

The first of Flaherty's great sequences is developed around the building of the igloo. Process, the way you build it, is only a small part of what you experience. There is the mother, her baby watching over her shoulder (bored). The son playing nearby. The mystery of the window. The shelter for the puppies. The use of close shots that frequently serve to conceal what is going on and thus generate visual tension so that nothing is obvious.

Later, in *Moana*, he made sequence after sequence, similar in spirit but never the same. Pea, the young boy, smoking a giant crab out of its lair under some rocks. You only find out what he is doing at the very end of the sequence. Setting the snare for game, but what game? Pea climbing the coconut tree where Flaherty, by the extraordinary and original use of long focal-length lenses, creates the impression of enormous height. These examples of the sequence are unique in the history of film making. Films made with Flaherty's own eye, his own camera, on film chosen by him (*Moana* was the first feature shot entirely on Panchromatic emulsion) developed and printed by local assistants trained by him. No crews, no producers looking over his shoulder, no production managers. He shot a lot of film (not by contemporary standards) and he took time, the two ingredients he considered essential to his art. For this he was generally scorned.

The end of the silent age was approaching. Theatrical, fiction films were more and more cluttered with titles telling you what people were saying. Even the Russians, who developed a sign language creating impressions by juxtaposing unrelated shots (a style revered by the intellectual film community, known by the mythic term "montage") were making films loaded with titles.

Synchronous sound arrived by the end of the twenties. At last the studios of Hollywood could do what they had always wanted to do; film plays. The equipment was cumbersome and delicate; the real world was full of extraneous noise, so, into the studio and create the world as you want it.

There had been rumblings of trouble in Hollywood. Some of the contracted stars upon which the whole system was built were getting uppity. Had become so rich and enshrined that they thought they could tell their creators a thing or two. Insurrection! The birth of another studio owned by stars, United Artists, which of course proceeded just as the other studios had. No real trouble but it made for a second look at the uppity ones and there resulted a plague of contracts canceled ostensibly because the "star" couldn't make it in the new "talkies".

Fiction film making entered the thirties with a technology that hasn't essentially changed to this day. Color was gradually introduced; screen ratios were changed in an effort to make showings on television more difficult; screens got bigger then screens got smaller; the crews got bigger, the machinery more cumbersome, the truck drivers more arrogant, the star's salaries more astronomical and as a result, today, the big studios have lost out to the monster stars and the wheeler-dealer conglomerates, banks and tycoons that now sit on a waning industry that caters only to the biggest worldwide audience, an audience so big that it is, almost by definition, mindless.

Not surprisingly, the story of the documentary film is radically different but ends up in about the same predicament.

The synchronous sound revolution that fulfilled the dreams of the studios, created an impossible situation for us. We couldn't possibly take that cumbersome, delicate equipment out on our travels, so we went right on making silent films and adding sound as voice-over narration and music. This approach allowed us to get away from films about how people lived, how they hunted, how they traveled and come to grips with social problems that were often far from visual. Films advocating change, such as *THE PLOW THAT BROKE THE PLAINS*, and *THE RIVER* directed by Parre Lorenz for the US Government during the depression are splendid examples of the new sound-documentary. With stirring symphonic Music composed by Virgil Thomson and a stentorian voice reading poetic lines: viz.

High winds and sun A country without rivers And with little rain	Farmer leaning on plow
Settler: Plow at your peril	Plowed field
Two hundred miles from water Two hundred miles from town	
But the land is new	Wheat plants
Many were disappointed The rains failed And the sun baked the light soil	Harvesting wheat Abandoned shack on Desert soil

and so forth.

In these films the sequence is no longer needed. The shots tend to be icons and in very little time these icons became clichés.

By the end of the thirties, documentary film makers were going out into the real world with tons of equipment, written scripts including "spontaneous" dialogue but more often it was the interview with the "real" person that was filmed. This concentration on the spoken word, whether it be dialogue or narration, eroded attention from the sequence. Film making became more and more a mechanical procedure conducted by technical

experts, professionals. There was a two way movement. The fiction film people moving back into the real world and the documentary people aping the techniques of the studio. An impasse.

It was not until the end of the fifties when, with the invention of the transistor and the resultant miniature tape recorders that a solution became possible. The ideal; to be able to record image and sound without interfering with the natural flow of events; to be able to observe with minimal impact on the story as it unfolds before you.

By 1960 we had developed this possibility and a group of us, working with Robert Drew, made a series of films that adhered to some new rules that we set for ourselves; the film making unit was never more than two people, a camera person who hand-held the camera, and a reporter, or journalist who carried a small tape-recorder. There were no cables connecting the camera and recorder, yet they were synchronous. We never interviewed our subjects; we never asked anyone to do anything for us; we never used lights; we behaved ourselves, dressed appropriately and had a respectful relationship with those that we were filming; we never paid anyone. In the early days of this project we did our own editing. There was a minimum of narration which was to convey essential information but not opinions.

The 1960's were still the early days of Television. There were other experiments in France and Canada. It was a wonderful period for us documentary film makers but the Television industry, world wide, had its own agenda and very little change took place. The new equipment made news coverage more sensational but The System needed masses of material and what we had done was too complicated. And after all, it is much better to interview people, it is cheaper and quicker and so it goes. The industry is not interested in great films. They make a film, show it once and go on to the next. It is like feeding a whale with cocktail canapés! To me, there is no real difference between the commercial channels and the educational and Arts Channels. They all have to serve audiences of millions to survive.

We solved a technical problem and it liberated us to the extent that we were able to show what was possible. However, the only people with enough money to pay for our films, weren't interested. At that time, in the early sixties they were very definitely not interested. Making films was becoming more and more expensive. Thirty thousand dollars an hour, \$100,000 an hour, \$200,000 an hour! While Hollywood was going fifty million dollars a film, \$100,000,000 a film and lately \$150,000,000 a film with \$50,000,000 going to the "star"!

Absurd! How can we escape from this madness?

Some ten year ago Video-8 appeared. Finally I was impressed by the video image. The quality, the mobility, the extraordinary sensitivity of this little machine, made for tourists and generally scorned by the professionals. I love it! I can shoot whenever I want, I don't have to go begging for money. I work and live with Valerie Lalonde, we video only what fascinates us, what we love. When it develops into something serious we can rent the latest digital editing equipment and if we work hard and well we can make whole films for a reasonable price, say \$4000 for an hour (out of pocket) or for

about one hundredth the cost of a 16mm film. But we still have the problem of how to show it. Cinemas are out of the question today and Television is not an answer. They want an audience of millions, we will be happy with thousands. You can distribute cassettes but it is a clumsy means.

On our most recent project we are shooting with the new Mini-Digital cameras. They are small and portable and amazingly sophisticated. Within a year or two we will have Mini-Digital editing decks that we can afford to own. Within the same period we will have the multi-layer Digital-Video-Disc, the DVD which will deliver up to four hours of high quality, full-screen-color-video and superb sound on a disc no bigger than a CD.

Films and TV shows have heretofore been made to be viewed at one sitting from start to finish, in order to satisfy theater and television schedules. Books were never written to be read at one sitting. Serious books were seldom written to be bought by millions of people. With this new equipment it is possible to make not just documentaries... fiction... whatever you want for very little money. What we will then need is a distribution system more like the book industry, a whole infrastructure that must and will be developed. Then we can make shows that are more than a stop-gap in an entertainment industry. Works that can combine written and motion-picture material in a complex manner that can be savored, thought about and enjoyed where the dreadful People that run Hollywood and Television will have no influence whatever.