

Part II. HOW THE WORLD WORKS: Documentary Inside the System and Out(1929-1941)

With seventy years of hindsight, we know that the Great Depression of the 1930's was a worldwide trauma. In 1930-31, however, that a depression existed was not a universally acknowledged truth. Though Americans saw evictions and unemployment lines in their streets, American newsreels showed them women dancing, people partying, and President Hoover's assurances that the economy would recover by the end of the year. While Hollywood began only slowly to incorporate the psychological shock of the Depression into its fictions, an equally powerful documentary impulse was beginning to surface elsewhere—in literature, photography, radio and film. A defiant urge to tell the truth about what they were actually seeing energized a whole new generation of filmmakers.

Armed with a Vertovian sense of their role in shaping society, non-fiction filmmakers turned to one of the form's perennial, but now newly-urgent, subjects: work and workers. The results were impressive; many of our strongest images of the industrial age still stem from documentaries of the 1930's.

The "worker" portrayed in films of this era varied considerably. Sometimes he (it was almost always "he") was a cog in the great industrial machine, sometimes a lone farmer; sometimes a fighter against injustice and oppression; sometimes a struggling soul who needed just a little help to make the most of his energy and skills. Variety in geography, ideology, the class of the filmmakers, and the politics of the moment all informed the different portrayals. The most important factor, though, lay in the answer to this question: Who was footing the bill for the production?

In this episode, we will explore three groups of Depression-era documentarians: in England, John Grierson's Empire Marketing Board Film Unit (later the General Post Office Film Unit); in America, the Worker's Film and Photo League, and the U. S. Film Service led by Pare Lorentz. Each found a different means of sponsorship for their projects, and turned out starkly contrasting—but enduring—films about work and workers. Each expressed a different truth about the workers' conditions portrayed.

The Workers Film and Photo League set out in 1930 to make films that would counteract the mainstream newsreels of the day. Quite consciously, they wanted to puncture the "official" version of the truth with their gritty, grainy reports on actual conditions. They thought "the government was the enemy," filmmaker Leo Seltzer tells us. They also wanted to correct worker's misperceptions of one another: "City workers thought farmers had food, farmers thought people in the city had jobs," according to Seltzer. "Truth is, neither had anything."



The League was partly sponsored by the Communist Workers International Relief, which had been distributing Soviet films in the U.S. since the '20's. Leo Hurwitz spoke of the influence such films had on them: "It wasn't the montage, it was that they had something of great importance to say. ... They made one believe the world could be changed." But while Worker's International Relief provided film stock and processing,



the Photo League filmmakers nonetheless struggled to pay for rent, travel, and equipment. They supported their work by selling still photos, raising donations from individuals, and hiring themselves out for paying jobs. But essentially, they were unemployed. Briefly homeless, Seltzer slept under a coat in the editing room. And to make ends meet, these filmmakers did without: no Moviola editing machine, no viewers, just hand-cranked rewinds and an antiquated splicer.

Despite (or energized by) difficult working conditions, in the early '30's they made several "Workers Newsreels" that captured now-precious images of the breadlines and Hoovervilles springing up around New York City. They went on to make short films about history in the making, from the 1932 Bonus March to protests against the Scottsboro trials. The films showed harrowing, violent images of police suppressing protest rallies with guns, clubs and tear gas. The filmmakers juxtaposed such public events with more intimate shots of the human suffering they saw all around them.

The Film and Photo League filmmakers were proud of their independence from commercial interests, feeling it was critical to making and showing the kinds of films they did. "The important thing," Hurwitz wrote, "was to do those things film is capable of, but commercial film didn't and *couldn't possibly do.*" Their newsreels often covered events shunned by Hearst's Metrotone News or the Paramount newsreels; indeed sometimes they incorporated footage originally shot for the commercial newsreels, but suppressed.

Following the model of Vertov's "Kino-train," the League's various chapters distributed their films through union halls, schools, and strike headquarters, at times with a hand-cranked projector and a sheet pinned between two trees. And, like Vertov, they hoped their films would be an instrument to motivate and mobilize the working classes towards action. The showings could be raucous, with viewers recognizing themselves on-screen, and others amazed to see what was happening outside their own area.

Shot, edited, and shown under such circumstances, League films were often crude. But the filmmakers suggested that "a certain crudeness of statement" was an integral part of their portrait of a strong, defiant working class—among which they counted themselves. People would ask daredevil cameraman Leo Seltzer how he got those shots of the cops beating the marchers. Did he have a telephoto lens? Seltzer would answer proudly, "No, I have black and blue marks on my hands from being beaten."

Across the Atlantic Ocean, a very different kind of worker's documentary was shaping up. England was also experiencing economic hardship; indeed, World War I started the

Empire on its long slide, and by the '20's the British Isles were already familiar with high unemployment and mass unrest. And certainly England was no stranger to working-class radicalism. The man who came to embody the British documentary movement, John Grierson, had been enmeshed in radical socialism and Fabianism as a youth. Influenced by Soviet film as well as Walter Lippmann's writing on the molding of mass opinion, Grierson believed, like the Film and Photo Leaguers, that the great potential of cinema lay in its ability to communicate to the working classes.

Like his American contemporaries, Grierson also prided himself on his independence from "Hollywood." Not only had he studied the studio system during a brief sojourn in America, but the term already represented the commercial film worldwide, especially in contrast to England's relatively weak industry. But Grierson didn't turn for support to the Communists, or any other independent group or party. Instead, he turned to his own government.

A shameless self-promoter and brilliant diplomat, Grierson convinced the government's Empire Marketing Board to create a film unit, with him at the helm. "And the great event in the history of documentary," he wrote later, "was that we didn't go to Hollywood for money ... We went to governments for money and thereby tied documentary, the use of realistic cinema, to purposes." For subsequent generations of documentary filmmakers, this entanglement with "purposes" represented either a plague or a blessing; either way, it has shadowed the medium ever since.

In the next several years, Grierson and his colleagues proceeded to make a series of documentaries about English workers. At one point his unit had 20 films in production. What distinguished the unit's films was their emphasis on working men—their hands and faces, their skills as well as their day to day rituals. If the Film and Photo League emulated some of Vertov's techniques, Grierson was influenced by Flaherty's depiction of the poetry and drama in ordinary lives. Unlike the Film & Photo League newsreels, the Grierson films rarely touched on government's abuse of power or the inequities of the class structure. Nor were they an outright call to action. Instead, films like *Drifters* and *Contact* portray noble, heroic workers—and their industrial tools—as crucial participants in the overall functioning of society. "Realist documentary," Grierson said, "has given itself the job of making poetry where no poet has gone before it."

The classic *Night Mail* is perhaps the most stirring of the resulting film poems. By then, Grierson's operation had moved from the EMB to the General Post Office, and this film—directed by "city symphony" veteran Alberto Cavalcanti, with narration written by W. H. Auden and a score by Benjamin Britten—had a mandate to show how the postal system and its employees tied Britons together. It succeeds brilliantly. Even today, it's hard not to cheer when the speeding train



miraculously swoops the mailbag from the track-side stanchion; or not to feel a lump in one's throat at the final line of narration, read by Grierson himself: "And none will hear the postman's knock/ Without a quickening of the heart,/ For who can bear to feel himself forgotten?" *Night Mail* offered a vision of the integrated industrial society, a vision that was inspiring to its contemporary audience, and is nostalgically persuasive in retrospect.

In keeping with their theme of industrial integration, and unlike the Film and Photo League's gritty reports, the Grierson films are models of film craft. Remember that Grierson is credited with coining the term "documentary" (in a review of Flaherty's *Moana*), which he defined as the "creative treatment of actuality." Though made on limited budgets—his first editing setup was in his bedroom—the films are definitely not crude. He and his British colleagues were constantly refining and expanding their approach, pioneering sound techniques, experimenting with different angles.

Some of their films also tested the limits of Grierson's poetic version of working-class life. The 1935 film *Housing Problems*, for example, innovated the direct on-camera interview, and was a rare instance of synch sound in early documentary. Although she



received only a minor credit, Ruby Grierson was the film's driving force; she had accused her older brother of "looking at the world as though he were in a goldfish bowl and declared that she was going to break it." But while *Housing Problems* gives slum dwellers a voice for the first time, the film's scenario nonetheless reflects its sponsorship—in this case, the gas industry. In the final triumphant scene, the beleaguered workers are given new, modern flats, and society once again becomes a well-functioning machine. As historian

Brian Winston points out, *Housing Problems* helped create the now-pervasive "problem moment" genre—in which social problems are depicted just as they are about to be solved. In contrast to the work of the Film and Photo League, the "problem film" by its nature does not serve as a call to action.

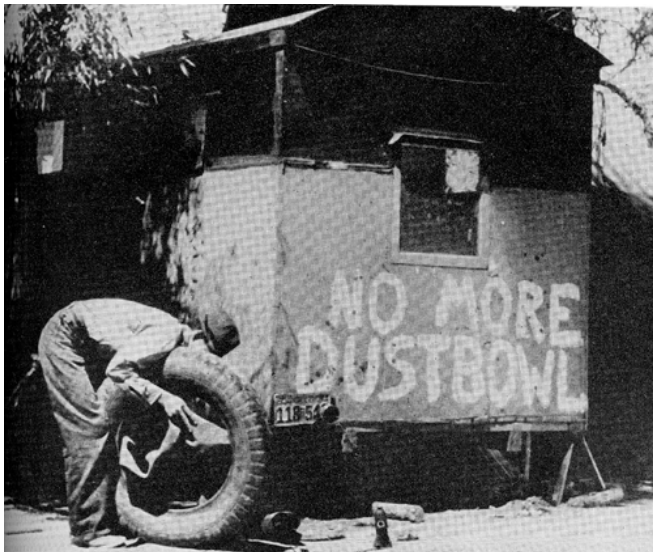
An institution-builder as much as a filmmaker, Grierson left a tremendous legacy. In Great Britain, he pushed documentaries into schools, libraries, and other existing institutions. He later traveled the world, seeding government-sponsored film units in several countries, and helped establish documentaries on the fledgling medium of TV. He instilled, for better and for worse, the popular conception of documentary: argument-driven, aimed at social and personal betterment, geared toward consensus and not controversy. And drawing support from the British establishment, he propagated an influential view of society that matched the film form he helped create.

Back in America, the social-betterment documentary was poised to hit the mainstream. Pare Lorentz, a former *Vanity Fair* critic, did not hold a principled objection to Hollywood. He had spent years pitching projects to the studios without success. Finally he turned to the government. Motion pictures had not been primary among the New Deal-sponsored arts; the medium's expense, a lingering prejudice that it was not art but commerce, and opposition by Hollywood to government interference had

combined to diminish film's role in the WPA Federal Arts Project. But in 1936, Lorentz received financing from the Resettlement Administration for his first film, *The Plow That Broke the Plains*.

The film was intended to address the upheaval of farms and farmers in the "dust bowl." The budget was small (only \$6,000), which clinched Lorentz's decision to shoot on location—no studio, no sets—with real people instead of actors. And it may have influenced his choice of collaborators: Hurwitz and Steiner, the moonlighting, cash-strapped cinematographers formerly of the Workers Film and Photo League.

It was a stormy collaboration. The League leaders, who actually drafted the first version of the documentary's script, constantly battled with Lorentz over the film's aesthetic and political direction. Though both wanted to illustrate significant environmental problems and social consequences, they ultimately had different agendas. Hurwitz et al. wanted to locate systemic causes in capitalist exploitation and agribusiness greed; Lorentz, who was scornful of the leftists' newsreel work, failed to see the connection *and* found it incompatible with his New Deal mandate. With no agreed-upon script, the filmmakers wrestled out the content and approach scene by scene as they traveled from Wyoming to Nebraska to Texas. Lorentz threw out their script revisions, and the Leaguers threatened to quit more than once.

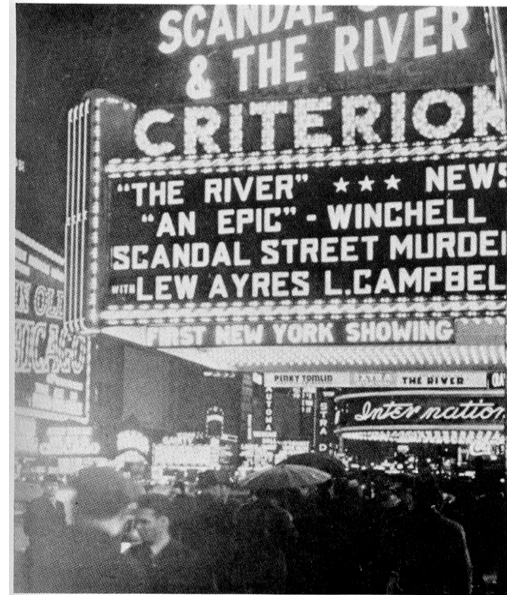


The resulting film was both a powerful indictment of the economic and social policies that left farmers vulnerable to drought-induced dust-storms, *and* an optimistic endorsement of Roosevelt-era reforms. In one way, the rift among the filmmakers had produced a thematic schizophrenia in the film. Ultimately, though, the Leaguers' social critiques ultimately helped strengthen the film's pro-government message. Lorentz was working for a liberal regime that, unlike Grierson's Tory backers, had a strong interest in showing just how necessary reform was. Thus, his films focused more on

the systemic problems of environmental degradation than did Grierson's smaller dramas of noble coal miners, fishermen, and letter carriers. Lorentz also presented a larger crisis in order to promote change and public responsibility as intrinsic parts of American progress.

When they reviewed the rough cut, Hurwitz and his colleagues remained disdainful of *The Plow's* point of view—but they were impressed by the filmmaking, and allured by its potential for wide distribution. They agreed to leave their credits in. And though spurned again by Hollywood distributors—who said government backing made the film propaganda, not documentary—Lorentz managed to book it into 3,000 theaters (of only 14,000 nationwide at the time). Carting the reels from city to city, with government press agents in tow, Lorentz generated his own publicity machine, causing local residents to request *Plow* at their local theaters. The film was a hit.

Lorentz's next film, *The River*, was again made for the Resettlement Administration, this time in association with the Tennessee Valley Authority. The budget was almost ten times that of his previous effort, and though he maintained the shooting and editing style they had helped establish, Lorentz did without his left-wing Film & Photo League collaborators. This time, after a personal endorsement by President Roosevelt, Paramount agreed to distribute the film. *The River* played in over 5,000 theaters nationwide to public and critical acclaim, and put a new kind of American documentary on the map globally. By this time, the American public was becoming more accustomed to 1930's documentary expression — from WPA photographs by Dorothea Lange to Life magazine photojournalism spreads.



Still, Hollywood remained antagonistic. Despite lobbying by King Vidor and a few others, *The River* was spurned by the Academy Awards. (The next year saw *The Grapes of Wrath*, clearly indebted to Lorentz's films, receive seven Oscar nominations and two trophies.) And not long after President Roosevelt established him as head of the first-ever U. S. Film Service, Lorentz was de-funded in a 1940 anti-New Deal Senate attack supported by the major studios. Lorentz soon fell from his place of prominence among documentarians.

Documentary financing remained a struggle everywhere. After he left the General Post Office in 1937, Grierson found himself casting about for new sponsors. Film and Photo League affiliates went on making documentaries, sometimes radical—as in Joris Ivens' *Spanish Earth*, made to support Spanish Republicans—and sometimes less so—as in Steiner and Van Dyke's *The City*, commissioned for the World's Fair.

Hurwitz, Strand, and some other Film and Photo Leaguers chose to stay independent. They formed their own company, Frontier Films, to realize the vision Hurwitz had glimpsed in his discarded script for *The Plow that Broke the Plains*—of a well-crafted but radical epic that could reach the mass audience. *Native Land*, narrated by Paul Robeson, would offer an alternative history of American civil liberties and progressive movements. But filming and editing dragged on for years, beset by meager financing.

At last, Hurwitz finished a theater-ready "release print" ... the day after Pearl Harbor. Everything had changed. Documentary—which the '30's had shown could serve many masters—was now drafted into military service.

Sample of films to excerpt in episode: *America Today* (WFPL); *Hands* (Steiner, Van Dyke); *Drifters* (Grierson); *Coal Face* (Cavalcanti); *Night Mail* (Wright, Watt); *Contact* (Rotha); *Housing Problems* (R. Grierson); *Industrial Britain* (Flaherty, Grierson); *The Land* (Flaherty); *The Plow That Broke the Plains*, *The River* (Lorentz); *Spanish Earth* (Ivens); *The City* (Steiner, Van Dyke); *The World Today* (WFPL); *March of Time* (Rochemont); *Unemployment Special 1931*, *Detroit Workers*, *Ford Massacre*, *Hunger*, \ *National Hunger March to Washington 1932*, *Bonus March 1932* (WFPL); *People of the Cumberland* (Frontier Films); *Native Land* (Frontier Films); *Land Without Bread* (Bunuel); *Borinage* (Ivens); *Enough to Eat* (Anstey)