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THE DOCUMENTARY FILM IN WAR WAR II

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The Second World War now lies half a century behind us in time. The victorious ending of the Cold War completed the 'unfinished business' aspects of the Second World War, as a war against the challenge of totalitarianism whether of the right or of the left, as well as has now put an historical epoch between us and World War II. In every sense now, therefore, the Second World War is history. So is the Documentary film. As a genre, the Documentary has indeed survived, and became, in an adapted form, a staple of television viewing. But as a cinematic experience it has vanished. A generation will have grown up by now who might never have seen a Documentary *film*, though they will have seen many television documentaries. And, sadly, the people, who have made the Documentary films of world war two as well as the people who have seen them, have by now also almost all passed away. The time for studying the Documentary film as a contemporary phenomenon by the application of the methodologies of social science and contemporary history, interviews, surveys and the like has also gone. In any case it has been done, often and sometimes indeed very well, during its own historical lifetime¹. 1992 is a good time therefore for a fresh look at the Documentary film in the Second World War -in the perspective of history.

What, therefore, was the significance of the Second World War in the history of the Documentary film; and what was the significance of the Documentary film in the history of the Second World War?

By the summer of 1939 the Documentary film movement -as a genre and as an approach to being a film-maker (as Richard Dyer MacCann had once so perceptively put it)- was faltering. In Britain, government support, whether direct or indirect, which was its life-blood, was ebbing away. John Grierson himself, so much the directing genius and guru whose personality held the movement alive had been forced out altogether. Grierson had put a persuasive case to government in the 1920's for employing it as part of the publicity and propaganda efforts which as a result of the lessons of the First World War came to be seen as a necessary part of the armoury of government in the period of ideological challenges which followed the First World War. After ten years of trial-level support, arguably not enough to prove the case, the Documentary was seen as having failed, or at best to be able to make but a marginal contribution to the propaganda needs of government, because it failed to penetrate into the cinemas and reach the mass audience. Failure to find the audience to which to project the message was beginning to be apparent by the mid-1930's and only Grierson's skills at massaging the viewing figures and wriggling round instructions had kept it going. By 1937 however the Treasury had finally caught up with him. The GPO Film Unit was cut down and was on the way to being converted into a small-scale instructional and publicity film section as well as deprived of Grierson's leadership who was left no alternative but resignation.

Support from large private companies and corporations which had taken up the Documentary in the early thirties along with government was also, with one exception, Shell, ebbing away. Part of the reason for the withdrawing of support from the Documentary was that the Documentarists were not personally in tune either with selling the Establishment or capitalism, and their sponsors learnt to expect to get for their money films which they would have preferred to remain unmade, as in the celebrated case of Paul Rotha's expensive and beautiful documentary of *The Times* which the management refused even privately to be shown for over twenty years. In any case as with government, the failure of the Documentary to get into the cinemas and reach the great audiences made it an uneconomical form of persuasion or advertising. They were beginning to look to other methods for corporate image making. By the summer of 1939 the writing was well and truly on the wall for the Documentary in Britain.

In the USA, the Legislature finally caught up with the Executive in 1938 and stopped dead Roosevelt's attempts to set up the United States Film Service. Congress, backed by the supreme court, was not prepared to allow money to be spent on the making of documentaries, whether directly by the administration or indirectly by New Deal agencies, which, in the nature of the Documentary idea, were bound to make propaganda for Roosevelt's New Deal. Government support, essential for the documentary film, thus fell away, ironically at almost the very moment when Pare Lorenz won recognition for the American documentary at the Venice Film Festival. By the summer of 1939, the

documentary, except as a marginalised, almost underground, vehicle for leftish movements was staring extinction in the face in the USA.

In Germany too, perhaps surprisingly in view of the special potential of the documentary for projecting charismatic totalitarianism proven so triumphantly by Leni Riefenstahl, it was on the decline. Goebbels was not much impressed by the documentary approach for selling the regime and its ideas to the masses. He saw that, unlike the fiction film and the newsreel, the documentary was essentially an elite and not a mass-persuasion vehicle, except in exceptional circumstances, and it was the masses in which power lay as far as Nazism was concerned. There was, of course, always to be a place in the all-encompassing scheme of Nazi totalitarianism for producing instructional and training films, school-films and *kultur* films laden with appropriate messages and a proportion at least quasi documentary in format, but by 1938 there were no projects of the scale of *Triumph of the Will* and *Olympiad* on the stocks. Leni Riefenstahl was herself moving back into feature films, and of her own volition.

In Russia too the documentary film was in the doldrums by 1938. Partly, this was due to the general decline of the cinema in artistic terms and partly to the atrophying of creative propaganda work under the combined weight of the purges and of the replacement of ideological motivation with coercion and a slavish personality cult. It was, as in Germany, the production of light-weight entertainment films and musicals with suitable messages which came to be favoured. Of course in the all-encompassing propaganda scheme of Soviet totalitarianism there was also always going to be a place for the large scale production of quasi-factual, instructional and educational films and the Soviet government was subsidising left-wing documentarists world wide. But in Russia itself the great documentary development by Vertov and others of the 1920's had run into the sand and by 1938 no great future for it was to be seen.

In other countries which have, to a lesser extent or on a smaller scale, taken up the documentary, the impetus was also fading away. The *Cinema Engage* of France of the period of the Popular Front was dying by 1939; the Dutch documentary school of Joris Ivens and others was stagnating at best, and in Japan by 1939 the tightening autocracy effectively strangled Prokino which had offered such great promise for the development of the documentary in Japan.

By the end of the 1930's there were also internal factors of decline at work. It was not only starved of money and of audience but was also beginning to be starved of talent and especially and crucially of *cinematic* talent. Film makers with great cinematic talent, production capabilities and experience, such as Riefenstahl, Cavalcanti, and several of the Russians who had brought truly cinematic qualities to the documentary were gone, were going or at least beginning to think about going back to the feature film, leaving only the preachers and the propagandists who had nowhere to go. That vital marriage of skills and talents on which its further development depended was breaking up. Nor was there a continuing influx of new talent in the closing years of the decade.

Only in the peripheries where the Documentary was being exported to, such as the countries and colonies of the British commonwealth and empire was there growth or at least a prospect of it still at the end of the 1930's. Grierson himself realised this. After his failure to set up a viable independent production centre for documentary films after he had been manouvered out of the GPO Film Unit, he departed at the end of 1938 on a round trip of these areas to sell the idea, with some succes. Even this was however only the usual sort of secondary growth, the colonial after-glow phenomena. In its homelands, in all the countries where it had been developing with such high hopes in the opening years of the decade, the documentary movement had stalled and was facing decline by the end of the 1930's.

The outbreak of war in September 1939 therefore came as a life-saver in every way. War of any kind opens the purse strings of government for every kind of activity which can plausibly be seen as helping the war effort, and for much else besides which would appear as implausible if examined in a less agitated frame of mind. Every form of publicity which claims to be able to boost morale; motivate soldiers; instruct recruits; discourage consumer spending and encourage the lending of money for the war effort; which might attract the support of other nations and people or undermine the morale of the enemy, in fact any kind of publicity provided it can be controlled, comes to be hugely boosted, supported and financed by the perceived needs of winning the war. In *this* particular war, a war seen by both sides as one for the triumph or death of the central ideology on which their nations were built, an almighty clash of totally incompatible ideologies fought inside the countries as well as on the battlefields, propaganda came to be seen as much more central than in any previous war. In the Second World War anyone who could claim some experience of, or to possess some recipe for, persuasion was assured of an almost blank cheque. Although for us the expansion of the documentary film during the Second World War is the central concern, we must remember to see this in the context of the equally vast scale on which other genres, other media and the skills and techniques, formats and personnel of advertising, of journalism, of broadcasting as well as those of psychology and the social sciences were also financed and employed during the Second World War.

It was only for the documentarists however that the Second World War came at a crucial time and had such a crucial significance. In the prewar period, both the strength and the weakness of the Documentary was that it was an unambiguously and openly propagandist medium and genre. To look on the cinema as a pulpit and to use it as a propagandist, in Grierson's famous phrase, was the essence of the Documentary as a genre. It was the possibilities which this appeared to hold out for politicians in power which had been its attraction. It was also however its major source of weakness in the USA, in Britain and in other countries with liberal democratic forms of government. The engagement of government in domestic propaganda was felt by many politicians, especially when out of power, as well as constitutionalists, legislators, lawyers and

many others to be incompatible with a liberal democratic and pluralist system, a skewing of the Jeffersonian free market place of ideas for the public to choose from. The use of the cinema by the government for propaganda purposes, with its huge audience and with the peculiarly high persuasive power it was believed at the time to possess, was felt to be particularly doubtful, and for many unacceptable. Cinema owners also strongly objected to converting their premises into a pulpit from which to preach at or harangue their customers, and especially for the government to use them for propaganda of whatever kind. Converting their favourite leisure-place, their dream palaces, into one where they were preached at and where they had views rammed down their throats they may not have agreed with or did not want to think about, was also objected by the cinemagoers who firmly held to the view that they paid to be entertained and not for to be propagandised. In the liberal democratic countries in general, and crucially in the USA and only slightly less so in Britain, this widespread unease about the constitutional propriety of government propaganda in general and about the intrusion of it into cinema programmes in particular had limited the financial support provided by governments to well below the level where the propaganda effectiveness of the genre itself could be fairly tested. It also prevented the documentary from being seen by a sufficiently large proportion of the public with sufficient regularity to acquire a taste for it, or even to be able to test its acceptability by the public. If it was to survive it desperately needed a chance: enough money to produce documentaries of a high cinematic and technical quality and to be able to show them for at least a reasonable period of time to the great audience.

The war, and especially this ideological war, overrode all the objections which by 1939 led to the documentary being suffocated in the liberal democratic parts of the warring world. The war delivered to the documentarists all the resources which they had lacked for making documentary films as professionally and technically polished as they needed to be to prove their claims and effectiveness. This included not only financial resources, those 'more or less unlimited sums of money' as Sir Stafford Cripps, the later Labour Chancellor of the Exchequer, put it and the technical resources, the studios and their high quality technical staff which were made over to the production of documentary in England, as well as in the United States. Above all, it delivered to the documentary the talents of first class film-makers who had no desire otherwise to work in the genre; people like Frank Capra, who had never before chosen to make a documentary film or 'even be near anyone that's made one', and who, like Capra (after receiving a stinging riposte to these protestations when being informed by General Marshall that his war service was to be to make documentaries to the effect that everyone else was having to do things they had never done before and to suffer things they never had to suffer before) replied: 'I'm sorry, sir. I'll make you the best darn documentary films ever made'. Animation by Walt Disney, scores by Dimitry Tiomkin or Alfred Newman, scripts, direction, editing by the likes of Walter Huston and Anatole Litvak in the USA; the

Boulting brothers, Ian Dalrymple, the voices and talents of the English classical theatre, like Lawrence Olivier in Britain were all now placed at the service of the documentarists.

Not only were money, technical resources and towering talents conscripted into the documentary, but so was the audience. Cinemas, by the powers conferred on governments as much as by the sense of patriotic duty in wartime, were obliged to include documentaries in their programmes. Governments sent mobile projection units into factories and far distant rural communities alike, and millions of soldiers were simply marched in front of screens to see documentaries and other forms of film propaganda and instruction. This did not mean that the audiences either in the cinemas or in the multiplicity of special projection theatres, altogether lost their objections to being preached at and propagandised even in the heightened awareness of wartime: they grumbled, as did the cinema-owners, and sometimes tried their best to slip away when the documentaries were shown, so much so that at times and in some places measures like locking the doors had to be employed. Nevertheless, the documentary film was provided with the size and composition of the audience and with the regularity of exposure to the documentary with which to prove itself in the liberal democratic political systems of the English speaking world.

On the totalitarian side of the conflict -including the Soviet Union which confusingly though most fortunately found itself obliged to throw its weight in on the side of the liberal democracies and to make a Devil's alliance with Britain which happened to be led by a politician formerly distinguished by the extreme virulence of his anti-soviet and anti-communist rhetoric and the USA which distinguished itself by banning and persecuting its own Communist Party never mind Jefferson or the Constitution- the waning documentary film also received a massive shot in the arm. In Germany, despite Goebbels' continuing indifference for the medium as such, the potential of 'the creative treatment of actuality' for biased and emotionalised reportage made it ideally suited both for reporting the progress of the war and to underpin with apparent facts before the very eyes of the viewers two of the central doctrines of Nazism. These were the concept of war as a redeeming and elevating and natural element of human existence, and racism, the notion of the genetic superiority of some races over others. The early years of the war, when both of these seemed to be working, thus led to a great revival of the documentary in Germany. Productions such as **Feuertaufe**, **Feldzug in Polen**, **Sieg in Westen** recaptured, or almost recaptured, the heights reached in the Riefenstahl films, through making available to the genre the same, or almost the same, scale of funding and transfer of talents. Doubtless, had the war continued to go the same way, the big, set-piece, triumphalist documentary transmuting actuality into art would have flourished again in Germany and secured a lasting place in the thousand year Reich. As it was, the documentary in Germany after 1942 came to be merged with the newsreel and developed an impressive branch of the reportage/documentary serial

of its own, but the projection of large ideological themes through art of the film went back to the fiction film, and especially the historical epic.

In Russia, the principal reason for the decline of the documentary in the years immediately before the war had been the yawning gap between actuality however massaged and what the regime wanted to see and show. As Khrushchev had told us, after 1936 Stalin had ceased to tour the country and in fact hardly set foot outside the Kremlin and his dachas. He kept in touch, in a manner of speaking, with what was going on in the vast Union (and to some extent in the world outside too) by an almost compulsive watching of films in his own private theatre, an experience inflicted on his inner circle too. Woe betide the film-maker who showed what he did not want to see, and increasingly that meant practically any aspect of the reality of life in the Soviet Union, of the working of soviet government, industry, or the armed forces, and equally so of events as they actually happened. To present the harvest in the Kuban brought in by collective farms as Stalin would like it to have happened in the frothy medium of the musical was one thing. Trying to do it in any species of film within hailing distance of the genre of the documentary was another and near impossible task. This was all the sadder because the roots of the documentary went deeper into the culture of Russia than anywhere else in the world. Russian prose literature right from the 19th century, alike in the novel, the short story and the drama, had developed as its hallmark a kind of documentary realism. This was so in terms of characterisation, built on patient, minute observation, a central tenet of the Flaherty/Griersonian documentary; in the choice of subjects, of ordinary people grappling with extraordinary or ordinary problems, and in the assumption of the need for a social purpose beyond the artistic. From Gogol and Tolstoy to Maxim Gorky and onto the tragic generation of writers reaching their productive age after the revolution, the documentary realist tradition was central. It was also liked and accepted by a broad band of the Russian public. Russia was therefore far more the natural home of the documentary film, both as the creative treatment of actuality with a social purpose and as the innocent eye, than any western country, where this approach was one but certainly not the dominant strand in the culture: a point which Grierson fully realised.

The war therefore brought a special release for the documentary in Russia. Here was, first, an actuality which was allowed to be presented, with many restrictions and falsifications at one level to be sure, but at least as it really was at other levels. Second, the vast scale of the Russian lands on which the campaigns rolled back and forth, the vast scale and variety of the industrial and agricultural hinterland which supplied the huge armies, the appalling scale of civilian suffering, and the extra losses inflicted and extra fortitude and heroism required of soldiers and civilians alike by the failures of the regime and generalship, was just the kind of actuality for the treatment of which Russian literary, cultural and cinematic traditions had prepared Russian film-makers. Unlike in the West, there was no clear line dividing the documentary approach

from other approaches to film-making but rather a continuum, a shading from actuality through the creative treatment of actuality to the realist fiction film and the epic, all within the documentary realism mainstream tradition of Russian literature. Nor was there the sharp dividing line between journalism and literature-as-art which was a special tradition of the English speaking people. In fact, journalism as understood in thousands of newspaper offices all over the English speaking world had not developed at all in Russia. The Russian newspaper had always tended to be more of a literary magazine rather than what British or American journalists would have called a 'real newspaper'.

The result of all these factors -and the good fortune that Stalin had not killed off quite so effectively by 1941 the front rank of Soviet film-makers as of the military- was an extraordinary flowering of the documentary in the Grierson/Flaherty definitions in Russia during the Second World War. Without in any way denigrating the superb achievements of Western documentary films, nowhere else was there such a consistent transmutation of actuality into art, of reportage into poetry, of such a consistent ability to capture and convey the drama in the everyday. It infused Russian documentaries also because it came from the depths rather than was imposed on it from above at the editing stage. Of course, the traditions and training of the cinema of Eisenstein ensured superb editing, montage rather than just competent and skilful 'editing' as was the norm in the West, and the overflowing musical bent of Russia, together with its particular traditions towards programme music, ensured superb scoring, as good as in the West though not better. But it was the capacity of Russian camera-men - hundreds of them and mostly nameless although properly trained within a formal tradition unlike their Western colleagues - to somehow retain even amongst the most appalling circumstances and the routine drudgery of the combat camera-man a sense for visual communication which was unique. The eye for a shot of something beautiful amidst the debris of war which counterpoints and brings freshly home the horror and devastation all around it; the eye for the classic documentary cut-away of a single individual doing something apparently mundane and irrelevant which yet brings home a large and poignant truth, and the capacity for meticulous lighting and composition within the frames as if there were no bullets whistling past the camera, it was these qualities which put the Russian documentaries of the Second World War into a class of their own. Little wonder that when they first began to appear in the West from 1942 they set the film-world on fire. Oscars for foreign films are as often as not a gesture, but there was nothing gesture like in the Oscar awarded to the first of them to arrive, **The Defeat of the Germans Before Moscow**. In fact it was not the best example as yet of what the Russian documentary was capable of, for the dislocation of the film industry in the headlong retreat prevented that, but when **Stalingrad** arrived it caused, as Erik Barnouw in an atypical purple phrase put it 'global astonishment', and provided a much needed challenge.

Nor had the special power of the Russian documentary of the Second World War deriving from the imbedded capacity to transmute actuality into art and thus raise communications to a higher level, faded once the war was over. In the Thames Television series on the Second World War, which unlike many of its competitors paid an intelligent and informed attention to the filmic quality of footage used for telling the tale, the programmes on the war in Russia stood out and they left some of the most persistent images in the mind of the viewer.

The first significance of the Second World War in the history of the documentary film thus was that it provided it with the resources, the talent and the audience of which it had been starved and for the lack of each of which it was on the point of suffocation and thus allowed it to come to efflorescence.

Documentaries of the original Grierson/Flaherty definition, summed up by Rotha as operating «in the quiet light of humanism» rather than in the glare of searchlights, continued to be made on a vastly greater scale and with much greater professionalism too. The wartime products of this, the characteristic mode of the British documentarists, had lost, or almost lost, that indefinable aroma of the home movie and the student project picture which clung to them before the war, even to the best of them. There was also a general toning down, indeed in some a loss, of that school-masterish tone so resented by the audience. The well intentioned tediousness so characteristic of the run of pre-war British documentaries - which made audiences creep towards the exit if they had a chance, and from which even students today determined to admire them admit to suffer - was also much reduced. There was thus a considerable development in the original formula documentary and a greater level of audience acceptance. The war also gave a chance to develop further the experiments already begun by Harry Watt and Cavalcanti of the the enacted documentary or drama-documentary. This formula was proven in **Western Approaches** and some others - it was also proven however to have a limited if useful scope only.

Of greater significance for the history of the documentary as a whole was the second opportunity which the war had provided and which represented a new development altogether. This was the great expansion and extension of the genre, its definition and function, which came with what has variously been called the news-documentary, or the documentary reportage film, that is the production of regular series of quasi-documentary treatments of topical news events, foreshadowed to some extent but some extent only by Louis de Rochemont's **March of Time**.

The development of regular, monthly, fortnightly, or even weekly series, such as **The World in Action**, **This Is America**, **Warwork News**, **Canada Carries On** and many others, either for showing in the cinemas or in the great number of mobile or temporary projection theatres, represented a turn in a new direction as well as a conceptual widening of the term documentary. The real pioneer was, once again, Grierson whose **World in Action** and **Canada Carries On** series proved in practice the

viability of its two core ideas: on the production side, that documentaries can be produced on the studio-type, assembly line basis and on the audience side that the general cinemagoing public can be made to accept a documentary approach *provided* it also offered topicality defined in terms of news-values rather than in terms of concerns or issues, moved at a faster and journalistic pace and appeared on a regular basis. It suited Grierson's book to claim the **March of Time** as its ancestor, but it is enough to look at half a dozen issues of **The March of Time** and **The World in Action** from the same period during the war to see that the differences were greater than the similarities and also went deeper. It would be more accurate to describe it as a cross between the documentary and the newsreel. Whereas the **March of Time** sought to cinematise, dramatise, or if you like jazz-up, an *issue*, by treating it with the conventions of the contemporary fiction film, these news-documentaries sought to provide a greater length and depth treatment of one or more news-stories. As film was necessarily behind the news which broke by radio first and behind the newspapers too the formula was that of 'stories in the news' or 'the news behind the news' long employed by both the periodical press and the newsreels. They provided more background and wider interpretation than the newsreels, but still essentially held the audience's interest through the same well tested formulae of: 'the news behind the news' and 'stories in the news'.

What made the creation of these series possible were those two characteristics of the Second World War which marked it apart from all previous wars: the vast scale on which it was fought over three continents which meant a very large number of fronts, and that it was essentially a war of movement without a positional warfare stage in almost any of its many theatres. It was not a war characterised by 'all quiet on the western front' communiqués but by the relentlessness of actions, when not on land then in the air or on the sea. There was therefore a surfeit of news more than enough to fill several layers of presentational formats. There came into being therefore a time-sequence of news presentation which led to a functional specialisation: first on the radio within hours, next in the daily press, then in the twice-weekly newsreel, then in the Sunday press and then in the fortnightly or monthly news-documentary film and the news magazine, such as **Picture Post** or **Time-Life**. The characteristic second war world war media sequence of: what is happening; what has happened; how it happened; what else was also happening while it happened and what was happening behind it established itself as an expectation of the audience and it came to be transferred during the Cold War period into the now standard media sequence. Within this sequence there was, now, a particular slot for the documentary, or at least for the serial news-documentary.

The serial news-documentary, arising so specifically from the Second World War and which established it in perpetuity as part of the mainstream of the television branch of mass-media, however also represented a major conceptual step in the history of the documentary. The significance of this step is undoubted but the nature of its

impact is more debatable. By introducing topicality, tying in newsvalues and news-following, it also brought the documentary into bed with journalism. The founders of the documentary came from education and the arts: came from a teaching background like Pare Lorentz and Grierson, or were painters like Rotha, poets and aesthetes like Jennings and Basil Wright some with strong political passions like Joris Ivens and some without like Flaherty. The breed of the journalist however was conspicuous by its absence. The world of journalism, exemplified in the screen version by the newsreels, and the documentary were distinct and discrete, indeed overtly and ritually hostile. For the documentarists 'newsreel' was the ultimate pejorative and for the newsreel men the 'documentary boys' the epitome of the dilettante. The influx of journalists and of the concepts and concerns as well as attitudes of journalism which was the inevitable concomitant of the serial news-documentary raised still unresolved questions about how far the two could ever be united or even amalgamated. As Arthur Barron, one of the principal figures of the news-documentary in the post-war period, in looking back on its development since the Second World War in 1968, noted that in reality the reportage/news-values tradition of journalism had taken over from what was the distinctive and indeed contrary essence of the documentary idea. Indeed, the facility with which newsreel studios took to the production of these serial news-documentaries, such as RKO's *This Is America*, and the facility with which they also turned their hands to the production of the set piece campaign documentaries underlies the conceptual leap-frog involved. *World in Action* alone could maintain a unique amalgam like mayonnaise of the documentary and plain screen journalism, doubtless because anything Grierson did never fitted into any category anyway.

For the history of the documentary the significance of the serial news-documentary made possible by the Second World War however can scarcely be overestimated. It provided at last a format which secured its three most vital needs at the time: access to the general audience, the great audience only to be found in the cinema, despite brave words to the contrary about there being as many cinema seats out side the cinema as inside it; production continuity and the regular exposure of the audience to 'documentary'. The serial format gave the producers of the documentary a framework of continuity in which to build up teams, accumulate skills and production routines and techniques. Equally importantly it brought the audience into a regular contact with the documentary, so it could become accustomed to it and accept it as a standard part of the cinema programme, a *normal* part of the cinema-going experience rather than the odd one out. But above all and in the long term by far the most important was that the serial news-documentary established at last a place for the documentary in the *mass-media/mass-audience* structure, in the sequence from spot news to follow-up. It identified a particular slot in that structure with the term 'the documentary' and thus went into television when that medium took over the place of the cinema as the audio-visual mass medium. The translation of the serial-documentary to the small-screen/audience-in-

the-home was done by Ed Murrow in the *See It Now* series, and apart from detail improvements as new technologies became available, he also set the format and its place in the television structure for good.

The significance of the serial news documentary in particular and of the Second World War in general in the history of the documentary may be summed by the contrast in the position of the documentary on the eve and after the second world war: between a small, beleaguered group of dedicated individuals on the fringe desperately seeking few thousand dollars to complete a particular documentary, such as Pare Lorentz in the United States and a few precariously established production units in Britain facing an attrition of sponsorship, with their audience largely confined to members of cinema societies and the like, and the fact that a decade after the Second World War all the major television systems were producing serial news-documentaries as a standard part of programming, on a scale and with a regularity which would have been unimaginable in 1939. Through the 1950s and 1960s CBS alone had a regular budget of around \$100,000 *per programme* for its weekly series, variously titled **CBS Reports**, **CBS News Hour** and its successors, and which had a regular mass-audience. Altogether, it brought the documentary, albeit in a watered down form, from the fringe into the mainstream and made being in 'Documentary' as regular and mainstream occupation as being in News or Drama.

What, then, can be said to have been significance of the documentary film in the history of the Second World War, looking at it in the perspective of fifty-years on and with the records having been available now for a significant period of time? There is nothing in the British records, and I am not aware of anything in that most valuable and scholarly collection of American records brought out principally by David Culbert, which would suggest that the war would not have been won, or even that it would have taken a week longer to win, if the cinematic experience of the people had remained confined to the newsreels, feature films and the products of advertising film agencies as it had been before the war, and was to be again after it. General Marshall was absolutely right that the millions of young Americans drafted from the length and breadth of their huge, peaceful and self-contained country had but the vaguest ideas about the specific reasons why they were now to be fighting and what exactly were the principles for which they were fighting. He was also absolutely right that Capra could make for him films which could greatly help in filling this void in their heads. But to say that without those superb, indeed 'the best darned documentaries ever made' at least in English, they would not have fought, or not fought with the same courage and bloody minded determination in a war which started by someone sinking their fleet riding peacefully at anchor on a quiet Sunday morning, is to altogether part company with reality. They were not that kind of people. Neither in their own nation formed on their side of the Atlantic, nor in their roots on the other side of the Atlantic amongst the branches of what was one of the most successful warrior cultures ever developed. Their

cousins in Europe also all fought when attacked that way and despite far worse odds, so long as they could take one with them. Like the pilots of the 33 Fokkers G-JAs, the total number of modern fighter aircraft possessed by neutral Holland when the vast German military machine descended on it without declaration of war, which took off and off again until every single one got shot down, and done so without having the benefit of an exhortatory speech let alone moral boosting documentaries. There is no evidence that all the money and effort expended on the documentary made any difference either to avoiding defeat in the opening phase or to hastening victory in the final phase.

On the other hand, enormous as the sums and staff and technical resources expended on the Documentary film during the Second World War were in comparison with what had been available to it before, it was but an infinitesimal item of expenditure in the balance sheet of the war, even in the balance sheet of the wartime cinema. If in Britain the government had accepted the recommendations of the Parliamentary Select Committee which had looked into film production needs in the summer of 1940 and shut down documentary production altogether as an inessential luxury, it is doubtful if the money saved would have made any difference to Britain going bankrupt financially, or that the enrollment of all the people involved in documentary production directly and indirectly in some branch of war activity, made any difference to the outcome of a single battle. If it did not help to win the war nor was it a drain on the war effort either. The deployment of the *cinema* for war purposes, the mobilisation of the medium of film and of cinema-going as an essential social habit of the age, as A.J.P. Taylor put, was of considerable importance in the kind of war which it was - but as between the newsreels and the feature films and the direct screen-messages produced by advertising agencies, now selling war bonds or saving water or aluminium instead of ice-cream, cars or insurance, the Documentary was strictly icing on the cake. In terms of the outcome of the war, it was as Harold Wilson later put it no more than 'a nice little artistic flash in the pan'.

It is however a different story when we consider the significance of the documentary not for the *outcome* but for the *history* of the Second World War. The Gulf War was possibly the first high tech war as far as softening up the Iraqis from the air was concerned, but most likely it was the last example of the kind of warfare which had started in the American Civil War and moved into its final form on the steppes of Russia: a war of conscript millions, of infantry, of thousands of tanks and tens of thousands of artillery, whether flying artillery or ground based. In a generation it will be as remote and incomprehensible as the squares and cavalry charges, marches and countermarches in the age of Napoleon. The same applies to naval warfare; of vast fleets of hundreds of armoured ships carrying tens of thousands of men and scores of aircraft carriers and submarines seeking each other in the still blind distances of the oceans.

The same applies, even more perhaps, to understanding the social and political organisation and ethos of an age which conscripted the larger half of the population and centrally directed the whole economy for six years on end in order to train and equip tens of millions of soldiers, sailors and airmen and to manufacture the enormous quantities of materiel consumed by them. It was the last 'total war', and it will have been part, perhaps seen as the culmination, of a phase in the history of the world, and age which in as little as twenty-five years from now, will be as remote and incomprehensible as the age of Rome and Carthage. To understand, and to teach understanding of, that war, that society and age, to sense the experience and outlook of its people, film in general, and especially the newsreels and the Documentary Film of the Second World War will provide a uniquely valuable historical resource. All the money, time, imagination and endless hours of unremitting work for six feverish years which went into the production of the thousands of documentary films created as a by product of total war may not have made any difference to the outcome, in part or in whole. But it has created a unique historical tool for understanding, in totally unprecedented depth and detail, how that war was fought, organised, experienced: how it was lost and won.

One might perhaps ask however, as the Second World War itself is now fading into the past proper and the larger historical perspective on it is emerging, whether this uniquely wonderful source for studying the Second World War will in fact be all that much used? Students today are already beginning to say that, «Well, if 'we' had lost that would have had cataclysmic consequences and led to vast changes - but 'we' won didn't we? Need we really know more than that about the Second World War?» It may well be that the final historical perspective on the Second World War will turn out to be the same as the perspective on the Punic Wars, or on the wars against the Islamic onslaught in the age Charlemagne and again in the sixteenth centuries: that it was one of those great historical non-events which is of abiding interest only to specialists looked upon by the generality with amused tolerance: a war which did not change the course of history merely prevented the changing of the course of history.

It may be therefore that the transmission of the documentary for the television age will emerge as its most positive result. Perhaps, if our successors in schools and universities can tell their students that at least they owe it 'the documentary', that standard part of their viewing-life, they might find that old war which only *prevented* the onset of a 'new dark age rendered the more sinister by the lights of perverted science' as one its leaders had put it, a bit more relevant and interesting!

NOTES AND REFERENCES:

- (1) The principal accounts of the Documentary with the perspective of its contemporaries are: Paul ROTH, *Documentary Film*. New York: Hastings House, 1952; Paul ROTH, *Documentary Diary*. London: Secker and Warburg, 1973; Basil WRIGHT, *The Long View*.

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For particular views and special aspects referred to in the text see also, **The Factual Film** (An Arts Enquiry Report) London: Oxford University Press, 1946; Roger MANWELL, **Films and the Second World War**. London: J.M. Dent, 1974; Jay LEYDA, **Kino: A History of the Russian and Soviet Film**. London: Allen and Unwin, 1960; D.S. HULL, **Film in the Third Reich**. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971; Erwin LEISER, **Nazi Cinema**. New York: Macmillan, 1974; Sergei DROBATSCHENKO, **Der Sowjetische Dokumentarfilm im Grossen Vaterlandischen Krieg**. Berlin: St. F. A., 1967. Sergei DROBATSCHENKO, «Soviet Documentary Film, 1917-1940», in Nicholas PRONAY & Derek W. SPRING (eds.) **Propaganda, Politics and Film, 1918-1945**. London: Macmillan, 1982; A. KRITSCHESKI, **Dowshenko und der Frontkameramann**. Berlin: St. F. A., 1967; Frank CAPRA, **The Name Above the Title**, New York: W.H. Allen, 1972.

For some of the new information and perspectives concerning the history of the Documentary in general and of John Grierson's role and career in particular, see I. C. JARVIE & Nicholas PRONAY (eds.) «John Grierson: A Critical Retrospective», *Special Issue, Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, Vol 9, No .3, (1989), and references cited there.