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NARRATIVES OF ACTUALITY IN EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY FILM AND LITERATURE

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As we are about to see, the inquiry about the present and its representation was one of the issues that concerned artists and writers at the beginning of the twentieth century from either side of the Atlantic in the English-speaking world. This article intends to examine films and texts depicting their present time. Thematically, they allude to central topics of the period, such as international commerce and war in a rapidly changing global scheme. The corpus selection aims to provide some variety regarding the different material each writer and filmmaker considered appropriate for a relevant depiction of the present depending on their dreams, intentions, and worldview.

Modernism, a movement in art and literature that during the first decades of the twentieth century exhibited experimentation with media, criticism towards the conventions of mimetic, visual, and literary representation, and the pre-eminence of subjective perception amongst its most

salient traits, has been thoroughly studied.¹ The re-evaluation of the theory on modernism since Douglas Mao and Rebecca Walkowitz's *Bad Modernisms* in 2006 eventually opened the way to examine texts by canonical figures that until then had not been studied in detail, as well as to focus on lines of enquiry that had previously been regarded as foreign to the movement. Hence, I propose to explore lesser known texts by well-known writers, Virginia Woolf and Djuna Barnes. Instead of focusing exclusively on text artifice and experimentation, these articles on current affairs allow the reader to witness instances in which said writers got involved with worldly matters.

In parallel with modernist experiments in literature and the arts, cinema underwent radical changes as a new form that, as well as in the case of the older sister arts, challenged its purpose, aesthetic, and identity.² In Britain, a distinctive film movement emerged calling, in the famous words of John Grierson, to the «creative treatment of actuality» («The Documentary Producer» 8). It was indeed Grierson who first used the term «documentary», as an adjective, to describe Robert Flaherty's 1926 film *Moana* in a review published by *The New York Sun*, on February 8, 1926. The «documentary value» Grierson observed in a film about foreign cultures was to be later put in practice in films about British society.

In the following decade, Grierson would develop his aesthetic theory in published articles and essays—not without contradictions.³ In «First Principles of Documentary», from 1932, he defined the genre as opposed to Hollywood productions as well as to films made from materials filmed on the spot. He also explained that «documentary can hope to achieve the ordinary virtues of an art (...) [if] we pass from plain (or fancy) descriptions of natural material, to arrangements, rearrangements, and creative shapings of it» (20). Thus,

¹ See, to name but a few, Rebecca Beasley. *Theorists of Modernist Poetry. T.S. Eliot, T.E. Hulme, Ezra Pound*. London: Routledge, 2007; Hugh Kenner. *The Pound Era*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1971; Michael Levenson. *Modernism*. New Haven: Yale UP, 2011; Douglas Mao y Rebecca Walkowitz, eds. *Bad Modernisms*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2006; Sanford Schwartz. *The Matrix of Modernism: Pound, Eliot, and Early Twentieth Century Thought*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1985.

² See, for example, Davis: «The nascent “documentary” cut its teeth against the fantasies and excess of Hollywood, the perceived aestheticism of some modernist and avant-garde films, and the politicized cinema of the Soviet Union.» (33) Also, McLane: «The documentary mode appeared, was invented in a sense, to meet new artistic and communication needs arising in the twentieth century.» (7)

³ See John Grierson, *Grierson on Documentary*. Ed. Forsyth Hardy. London: Faber, 1979. For analysis see Laura Marcus. «“The Creative Treatment of Actuality”: John Grierson, Documentary Cinema and “Fact” in the 1930s» in *Intermodernism: Literary Culture in Mid-Twentieth-Century Britain*. Ed. Kristin Bluemel. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2009. 189-207.

according to Grierson (21), the «natural material», or «stories taken from the raw», is as much a distinctive characteristic of documentary as its manipulation by the filmmaker. Moreover, said interpretation of reality «reflects» the maker's philosophy (22). Grierson believed that, even when there are various species of film that deal with raw material, only documentary is of the highest quality; further, documentary involved for him a social responsibility implicit in its poetry and prophecy (26). The sociological sense challenges the filmmaker to produce beauty while revealing matters of social injustice. As explained by Grierson:

realist documentary, with its streets and cities and slums and markets and exchanges and factories, has given itself the job of making poetry where no poet has gone before it, and where no ends, sufficient for the purposes of art, are easily observed. It requires not only taste but also inspiration, which is to say a very laborious, deep-seeing, deep sympathizing creative effort indeed. (25)

As shall be examined further a few lines below, the creative aspect was capital in their conception of documentary film. Ten years after Grierson's piece on *Moana*, Paul Rotha explained, in the form of the subtitle chosen for his book, that documentary was conceived as [the] «use of the film medium to interpret creatively and in social terms the life of the people as it exists in reality» (5). However, it might not be too daring to affirm that these filmmakers also had the concern of building an «actuality narrative» or a «narrative of the actual,» where everyday life, as experienced by contemporary ordinary men and women, was the main subject. I would like to propose that a similar approach can be observed in journalistic articles written by otherwise recognised fiction writers of the period.

Let us begin by examining an article Virginia Woolf published in December 1931 in the magazine *Good Housekeeping*.⁴ The piece deals with issues of global commerce and focuses on its consequences on the city of London and its people.

As hinted from the first line, a quote from Robert Bridges' poem «A Passer-By,» the article is rich in historical insight. The poem evokes sailboats and imaginary romantic scenes from the past, as the narrative in present tense places the reader gently on a boat. It is the beginning of her stroll along the Thames. Images from a greener past and a present marked by labour and filthy material conditions depict the city as the heart of an empire. Derelict warehouses, factories, and workmen's houses stand where there used to be lawn and terraces. A tree is so incongruous here that it seems from a previous

⁴ See Wood for analysis and description of Woolf's publications in *Good Housekeeping*.

civilisation; and yet, as in the narrator's memory, past and present, in this space, coexist.

Further down, an inn with swelling bow windows still wears a strange air of dissipation and pleasure making. In the middle years of the nineteenth century it was a favourite resort of pleasure makers, and figured in some of the most famous divorce cases of the time. Now pleasure has gone and labour has come; and it stands derelict like some beauty in her midnight finery looking out over mud flats and candle works, while malodorous mounds of earth, upon which trucks are perpetually tipping fresh heaps, have entirely consumed the fields where, a hundred years ago, lovers wandered and picked violets. (8)

The description continues from East to West in London's landscape; the heaps of garbage are followed by the Tower Bridge until we arrive at the docks. Here, there seems to be no place for human life but only for cranes, barrels, sacks, and crates. They are all

being picked up out of the hold and swung regularly on shore. Rhythmically, dexterously, with an order that has some aesthetic delight in it, barrel is laid by barrel, case by case, cask by cask, one behind another, one on top of another, one beside another in endless array down the aisles and arcades of the immense low-ceiled, entirely plain and unornamented warehouses. (10)

The lines in these passages of visual imagery are poetic and rhythmic, but also the narrator discovers «aesthetic delight» in the mechanic and calculated toil at the docks, and beauty is to be found in the proper value of each item unloaded there. However, description and analysis focus on a very practical matter, international commerce. We learn how the docks operate, that «whatever the ship has gathered from the plains, from the forests, from the pastures of the whole world is here lifted from its hold and set in its right place. (...) And not only is each package of this vast and varied merchandise picked up and set down accurately, but each is weighed and opened, sampled and recorded» (10-11). The paragraph continues thoroughly about the way every merchandise is evaluated, organised and distributed, to later explain how, in the end, are the citizens the ones who guide this global dance. Woolf writes,

It is we—our tastes, our fashions, our needs—that make the cranes dip and swing, that call the ships from the sea. Our body is their master. We demand shoes, furs, bags, stoves, oil, rice puddings, candles; and they are brought [to?] us. Trade watches us anxiously to see what new desires are beginning to grow in us, what new dislikes. (16)

Scholars have noticed the fact that the narrator identifies herself with the readers; in the quoted lines above, this is evident in the first-person plural, «we». Susan Squier has argued that such a technique was a way for Woolf to «avoid friction» with the middle-class magazine's audience (488-9). By contrast, Jeanette McVicker and Alice Wood considered readers of *Good Housekeeping* a proper audience for Woolf's social criticism in account of recent transformations that increased women's participation in political matters—for instance, due to a newly acquired right, the vote for women. It should additionally be noted that this empathy provides fertile ground for a more fluid communication between writer and readers. Indeed, there also seems to be a matter of didactic intention of the author to educate the reading public. This issue can be associated, in fact, with one of the principles of documentary film, as pursued by Grierson and Rotha: Woolf's text appears to be closer to the documentary method than to any literary genre. As much as Grierson, Rotha insisted upon the importance of showing social, economic, and political matters in film. He expressed disapproval of those movies that only presented the daily activity of a city, failing to denounce the injustice that also lived there (109). As opposed to those visually exciting films, such as Walter Ruttmann's *Berlin*, Woolf succeeds in presenting past and present of social and economic life in London, as much as their citizens' influence in global trade. In the following lines, I will examine two documentary films that can be associated with Woolf's article.

Shipyards (1935) and *Farewell Topsails* (1937) are not the best-known works of the British Documentary Movement. Nevertheless, they offer us a chance to compare how artists working in other media have treated and interpreted themes of local work and international commerce, and activities in England dictated by trade in different periods.

Shipyards, from 1935, was directed by Paul Rotha, one of the prominent figures of the movement. The film shows the building of a ship, from the beginning until its launch into the sea. It was sponsored by the shipbuilders Orient Shipping Company and Vickers Armstrong and produced by a private company, Gaumont-British Instructional. In *Documentary Diary*, Rotha described the company as one «which had some kind of an honest reputation and which would give [him] services without any control over the making of the film» (qtd in Chapman 78). Indeed, the director's creative freedom is evident in the film's aesthetic, which could be associated with modernism as much as with Russian constructivism. The sleek lines and planes that illustrate

the building of the ship bring to mind vorticism, but also American precisionism.⁵

The film begins with orchestral music during the opening titles, rhythmic deep drums, and high-pitched trumpets that predict the noises and movement involved in ship-building. By contrast, the first scenes are accompanied by milder music and birds chirping, while they show an open view to the horizon, a calm sea under a lightly clouded sky, and a big ship docked at a port. This opposition between hard and soft, nature and machine, paralleled in the disparity, for instance, between reflexive thoughts and hard metal clashes, is to be found throughout the film. As Rotha himself asserted in *Documentary Film*, here «sound is used creatively rather than reproductively» (79).⁶ The music stops and is replaced by off-camera commentary, which starts by linking the dock and the rows of houses on the screen with a specific town in the north of England. With no music, the commentary will continue offering facts and adding information to the images until the end of the film.

In ten months, from March to December, «job 697» becomes a finished vessel, the «Orion». The chronology is established through captions that indicate the month, while voice and image present the progress of the work. In quick cuts, the scenes alternate between long, medium, and close-up shots. Aerial views of men at work that look a little more than moving dots and lines in almost abstract, rhythmic compositions, are followed by close-up shots of hands handling a drill or the face of someone shouting directions at his crew. Metal sheets, bolts, wires, and wooden beams against the sky gradually take

⁵ Rotha's formalism is certainly evident in *Shipyard*, a film which could be viewed as a realisation of his distinctive ideas on cinema with regards to the pre-eminence of the visual element in it. As early as 1930, in *The Film Till Now. A Survey of World Cinema*, Rotha conceived of film as an eminent *visual* art. He writes: «the film is an independent form of expression, drawing inspiration with reservation from the other arts. Furthermore, it should be remarked that the attributes of the film are derived from the nature of the medium itself, and not from other matters of subject, story-interest, and propaganda. It should also be remembered that the film is essentially *visual* in its appeal; and that light and movement are the two elements employed in the creation of these visual images.» (88) Undoubtedly, Rotha's formalism and his attention to the specificity of the medium resonate with the most classic modernist viewpoints, which turns his association with Woolf and Barnes in this article not fully gratuitous.

⁶ Rotha has expounded his ideas on sound in *Documentary Film*: «the problem lay not in the collection of the raw material or in the actual job of manufacturing and recording sound, but in being permitted to use the microphone creatively and not reproductively. In all but a few cases, the studio story-picture had remained glued to the narrow and safe groove of direct synchronisation. Documentary demanded flexibility and post-synchronisation.» (163)

the form of a ship, while men appear tiny in one shot and big and strong in the next one, but clearly it is the hard work of the group what tames the elements.

Complementing the image, sound is divided in noises product of the labour, a commentary that provides the viewer with facts, and voices associated with individual men in the film. The commentary and the individual voices offer, in turn, a well-balanced counterpoint, which supplies general information as well as personal thoughts. Thus, the viewer learns that the shipyard is in Barrow-in-Furness, that between 50 to 60 thousand people lived there at the time, and that the main activity of the town at the time was building ships; further, he learns that the vessel the film shows taking form will be a liner destined to tropical voyages, where people will dance and have a good time. Casual chatting between the workmen contribute to incorporate a common perspective and humanise the workers; in contrast, technical vocabulary related to the tools and parts of the ship appears as a highly specialised speech that might have instructed the viewers from other occupations and parts of England.⁷ Social observations are linked with the image of one man; his soft voice indicates we are listening to his thoughts while he is working, reflecting about the future of the ship:

I wouldn't mind going on her myself. Queer to think that women will be walking about here just in silk dresses, and chaps in natty suits trying to keep cool. Don't suppose they'll think of the bloke that hit the blinkin' rivets.

These words are barely a fleeting remark; and yet, they align with Rotha's social interests and with the educational intentions of documentary film. They also highlight, by the end of the film, the class condition of the men the viewer has been watching tirelessly working until then, as well as call to mind the differences with those who will enjoy the material products of their hard labour. The commentary voice explains what is the workmen's gain when it asserts: «The town is well fed as long as the men are working in the shipyard», and «The life of the town is the work of the yard». It is, first and foremost, a collective profit. However, soon this community extends to London and from there to the world, since the propellers are made in the capital city, specifically in a factory that supplies parts for the «largest and fastest ships in the world». In this manner, *Shipyard* is not only about the building of a liner, but—in the magnificence of this ship that is made to cross the oceans of the world—it also intends to show how the common man is an essential part in

⁷ Cfr. «He cited the case of *Shipyard*, which had been shown only briefly and without publicity in a Newcastle cinema». (Chapman 83).

moder industry.⁸ Now, although this film presents the power of contemporary ship industry, the one I will address below attends to old forms that soon will only be the poets' concern.

Farewell Topsails (1937), an 8-minute-long film directed by Humphrey Jennings, offers a nostalgic approach to the way international maritime commerce was changing in the first decades of the 20th century.

The film opens with a sailor playing a musical piece with an accordion, a piece that he will keep playing until the end of the film. The voice-over narrates the story «of the last survivors of a great race of seamen» who had to withdraw from the waters and now work for the clay factory in Cornwall. Perhaps it is not casual that these quarries are not modern; actually, the factory's workers continue to use almost «primitive» equipment. The images of the pits are vast views of hills and the sky and the few men that appear might as well be the last survivors on the planet. The commentary continues with details about the kaolin extraction process and its transportation to Glasgow. This is the cue for the focus on the sailboats' past and present, as the accordion music changes for a slower tune. If the commentary has been descriptive for the first two minutes of the film, from now on, it shows a hint of regret. Close-up scenes of the sailors' saddened looks that alternate with shots of a boat sailing away to the horizon endorse the spoken words.

Like Virginia Woolf's article, the film by Jennings alludes to past and present, but here melancholy seems to dictate the subject. Even if the film was an exercise in the use of a colour process (Logan 70),⁹ it also presents a detailed explanation of part of the economic activity in the south of England at the time. The title sings to the topsails, but the heart of the film are the sailors that had to abandon the oceans. The other side of the technological developments celebrated by Rotha in *Shipyard* is that the old ways must be left behind and not everyone appears to be pleased with the change. Therefore, what in the piece by Woolf was a matter of landscape and reminiscence of pastoral life, Jennings here identifies in the experience of individual people. And when progress for Rotha seemed to be expansion, in the figure of the enormous ship that can cross the oceans and make the world look small, for the topsails means to gradually disappear. They used to navigate the Atlantic to the

⁸ This was an important factor in documentary film, as Rotha conceived it. He writes in *Documentary Film*: «the E.M.B. also represented the first attempt to portray the working-class of Britain as a human, vital factor in present-day existence, to throw on the screen the rough labour of the industrial worker, the skill of the trained craftsman and the toil of the agricultural labourer» (97).

⁹ «Dufaycolor, one of the various colour processes that were being developed in Britain throughout the 1930s.» (Jackson 11).

Azores; now they are applied only in national travels, through the coast and rivers of Britain.

Farewell Topsails' nostalgic mood opens the way for our last stop, an article written by Djuna Barnes in 1917. The piece, entitled «The Hem of Manhattan», is the chronicle of a yacht trip around the island.

Barnes is perhaps best known for her novel *Nightwood* (1936) and her years in bohemian Europe, but she started her writing career as a freelance journalist in New York. In big and small newspapers and magazines, she published stories, articles, and drawings for money. The articles were written in a variety of tones and styles. Perhaps their distinctive trait is a first-person singular narrative voice able to paint a landscape or atmosphere in one short sentence. «The Hem of Manhattan» offers a trip around the island, and, with all its share of daydreaming and subjectivity, presents a version of the world's transatlantic relations in a different time.

The account is the dark version of a holiday excursion. The main obstacle at first seems to be presented by the fact that the author lacks the advised distance with the subject. Because—the narrator imagines—Europe, for instance, would offer instead historical and literary scenes. Over there, an afternoon tea in Russia is worthy of a word picture, while in France Verlaine and Baudelaire wrote their poems; and there one can also visit Napoleon's tomb. In general, it may be said that according to the narrator even the most trivial things seem look interesting in a foreign land. Here, instead, all Barnes is faced with is «misery, poverty, death, old age, and insanity».

The trip could be compared with the one Woolf would take in London a little more than a decade later; it lasts a few hours and passes by the landmarks of the metropolis. There is as much garbage in New York as in London, but the gloom here seems to be inescapable. Where Woolf found an occasion to ponder over the world economy, Barnes is reminded of past personal experiences; at other times, the people in the boat catch her eye. Since this is a guided tour, there is a «megaphone man» who tells facts of the city and the buildings they encounter during the journey, although these are not recorded for posterity. In contrast to the documentary films, and even Woolf's article, Barnes' piece does not include these details. Instead of offering figures, the article states that the Woolworth Tower «stands so-many-and-so-many feet high». Fact and precision seem to be so trivial that the illustration that appeared with the article in the *Morning Telegraph* was not of the city, but the portrait of an unnamed man who said a phrase the text quotes in passing.

The disdain for the actuality detail, however, the focus on ostensibly trivial matters, the digressions, and even the tendency to fiction appear to underscore a more important fact. One of the attractions selected by the «megaphone man» is a transport steamer filled with «boys in khaki». Indeed, the article was published in July 1917, three months after the United States

entered World War I, and these «boys» seem to be headed to «defend democracy» in Europe. In this article, then, the merchandise is not clay, nor tourism, but human lives, which are treated as cheap and become pointless when «something goes amiss».

Djuna Barnes is well known for opposing the war. In 1915, she exhibited a group of anti-war paintings and drawings (Doughty 138). One of the paintings, *The Doughboy (man with bayonet)*, appeared in the cover of *Trend* magazine in October 1914. Another one, *The Bullet*, illustrated the pages of *Four Lights*, the bulletin of the Woman's Peace Party of New York City, in June 1917, only a month prior to the publication of «The Hem of Manhattan». In this context, the article, with its apparent shallow complaining, appears not only as a statement against the war, but also as a testimony of the darker side of life.

The articles and films mentioned in this paper present a global, historic look from a local standpoint. The world of international commerce was a central topic during the 1930s; it is depicted in film productions as well as in the non-fiction article by Virginia Woolf. The educational interest can be associated to the documentary method as proposed by the documentary movement in Britain. From this perspective, the world seems to be divided in those who build it and those who enjoy it, but everyone seems to earn some profit from it. If they paint past times as milder and simpler, technological developments also present advantages, and some social classes appear to have greater liberty to choose than the lower ones. Finally, Djuna Barnes' article offers a view from her present in 1917 that does not seem to be nicer at all. Barnes observes her home city, and the international conflict taint her vision. Criticism here is directed not to the economic arrangement of the world, but to the political decisions of a few «pompous gentlemen».

Even if Woolf and Barnes did not conform a group like the filmmakers of documentary, the films and texts addressed here seem to exhibit a similar preoccupation with the present and drastic change in history. Moreover, if a central issue is the responsibility of humankind in these developments, modernist artists and writers took the role of narrating and interpreting the age for themselves and others. These narratives of actuality might have appealed to a strictly contemporary audience, but also remain, forever, a testimony of their time.

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Filmography

Farewell Topsails. Dir. Humphrey Jennings. 1937. Colour.

Shipyard. Dir. Paul Rotha. 1935. Black and white.

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