

**Review of**  
***Documentary: a History of the Non-Fiction Film***  
**by Eric Barnouw**  
**(Oxford University Press, New York, 1974), 332 pages**

**Evan Wm. Cameron**

**Professor Emeritus**  
**Senior Scholar in Screenwriting**

**Graduate Programmes,**  
**Film & Video and Philosophy**

**York University**

[Published under the title 'Barnouw on Documentary' on  
pages 1 and 7 of the *University Film Studies Center*  
*Newsletter*, June, 1975, Vol. 5, No. 5. Infelicities of format  
and grammar have been amended.]

**Review of**  
***Documentary: a History of the Non-Fiction Film***  
**by Eric Barnouw**  
**(Oxford University Press, New York, 1974), 332 pages**

This is a well-constructed and, within limits, superb book. With surprising accuracy and ease, Eric Barnouw construes the history of the non-fiction as a sequence of five creative movements, each manifesting a distinct social tempo (musically identified) and encompassing in chronological order the work of filmmakers of distinct psychological types:

- I.       Glimpses of Wonder: *attacca subito*  
  
          Prophet (Lumiere, Edison, etc.)
- II.       Images at Work: *allegro con brio*  
  
          Explorer (early Flaherty)  
          Reporter (Vertov)  
          Painter (Ruttman, Ivens)
- III.      Sound and Fury: *sempre staccatto*  
  
          Advocate (Grierson, Riefenstahl, Lorentz)  
          Bugler (Jennings, Capra)  
          Prosecutor (Andrew and Annelie Thorndike)
- IV.      Clouded Lens: *poco ritardo*  
  
          Poet (Sucksdorff, Haanstra)  
          Chronicler (CNFB)  
          Promoter (the Shell Unit, Edward R. Morrow)
- V.       Sharp Focus: *crescendo poco a poco*  
  
          Observer (Leacock, Wiseman)  
          Catalyst (Rouch, Marker)  
          Guerrilla (Makavejev, the Vietnam documentaries)

Barnouw is concerned primarily with the filmmakers and their social environment, not with the design of their films. He more than compensates for his emphasis on substance, however, by refusing to speak of films he has not seen, choosing rather to discuss the 700 or so films he has seen (a startlingly original idea in what passes for contemporary film history).

The result is something of a victory for accuracy over comprehensiveness, a victory that, on the whole, I half-heartedly applaud. I remain sorry, however, that Barnouw, winner of the Bancroft Prize for a meticulous three-volume History of Broadcasting in the United States, did not choose to write a similarly comprehensive study of the documentary film. The task is unenviable, but if an adequate survey of the history of broadcasting in the United States required the writing of three volumes, surely the history of documentary film production throughout the world deserves equal effort.

Within its limits, however, what Barnouw has done has been done well. The thirty-page bibliography and index are valuable resource tools. And Barnouw writes with rare clarity and style. One enjoys the humour:

THE NEGRO SOLDIER was made to allay agitation over segregation in the armed forces . . . The film was widely praised for dignity and sincerity, but seemed unable to extricate itself from stereotypes. Ultimately condescending, unrelenting in religiosity, it ends with black soldiers marching off to war to the tune of 'Joshua fought the battle of Jericho'. (pages 161-162)

Most of all, one values the frequent moments of insight which illuminate entire vistas of experience:

Soviet cinema, in decline during the 1930's, began a renaissance during the war, with documentary leading the way. Its hold over audiences, in a land where virtually all families lost members in combat, was incalculable; documentaries and newsreels often seemed the only link with distant loved ones. For many years after the war, on May 3 of each year, a woman in Tashkent laid flowers at the screen of her local cinema. It was where she had had her last glimpse of a son. (page 152)

Indeed, I have found only two inaccuracies in the book. Speaking of NANOOK, Barnouw writes

Flaherty had apparently mastered – unlike previous documentarists – the 'grammar' of film as it had evolved in the fiction film. (page 39)

But we know that when Flaherty began to make his first sound film and was faced for the first time with the task of establishing a visual continuity without titles he discovered that he had no idea how to cut! He had been grouping his shots into sequences, avoiding disruptive cuts by inserting "especially felicitous" titles (Barnouw's phrase). Unlike Ford or Capra, for example, Flaherty understood nothing of the editing "machinery of the fiction film" (Barnouw's phrase) until the coming of sound forced him to understand it.

The second error is one of equivocation and is perhaps the fault of Barnouw's publisher, not the author. Speaking of some recovered Nazi war footage, Barnouw writes

In the home of an eastern front veteran, searchers found a sequence apparently filmed as a demonstration of resourcefulness. Troopers were shown leading a man and a boy, half starved, into a small blockhouse. The camera then showed the troopers arranging a hose from an automobile exhaust to a small aperture in the wall, and starting the motor". (page 173)

The description is accurate as it stands. But I too have seen the footage, and the vehicle shown is not simply an 'automobile' but clearly and crucially a Volkswagen! I understand the reluctance of publishers to remind us of the corporate names of fellow businesses that made the past what it is. I understand the politics of publishing. But in a book on the history of the non-fiction film, concerned with the cinematic transmission of truth, I can hardly sympathize with the obvious presence of the half-truth.

But my larger claim takes precedence: in the context of Barnouw's exposition, the inaccuracies noted above are exceptional. Indeed, in nearly ten years of film research and teaching, I have encountered no other brief history which is as meticulous in its substance and cautious in its assessments. (And I would be negligent if I did not commend Oxford University Press for the appearance of the book: the graphic design is excellent.)

In summary then, this is a valuable book for the serious student of film, non-encyclopedic in scope but accurate in scholarship and cohesive in conception. It will become, I think deservedly, the standard text in university courses on the history of the documentary film.