

Part of the problem in dealing with Blasetti is that, whatever his deeply held beliefs may have been, he is forever linked with Benito Mussolini and the Fascist regime. He never even came close to the glorification of fascism that Leni Riefenstahl achieved in *Triumph of the Will* (1935), but many of his views on Italian society seemed to coincide with those of Il Duce. It can be argued, however, that there are veiled criticisms of the regime between the lines (frames) of several of his 1930s films. *The Old Guard* (1934), for instance, recounts Mussolini's 1922 March on Rome, which led to his ascent to power. The film was criticized by the Fascists as being insufficiently enthusiastic, and ultimately I think Blasetti was too sophisticated to be a true believer in Il Duce.

In 1952, Blasetti appeared as a cynical movie director named Blasetti in Visconti's *Bellissima*, portraying himself as a purveyor of "amusement of idiots." His half-century-long career was too influential and successful for either Blasetti or Visconti to really believe that, but an enigmatic quality is still associated with this director who thrived and became a dominant figure in cinema under a totalitarian regime. Blasetti was perhaps the canniest Don Quixote of them all, appearing in photos like the genially obese proprietor of a spaghetti joint while still exercising his intelligence and talent wherever and whenever he could. Ted Perry, former Director of the Department of Film at MoMA, has made the point that Blasetti's contributions went well beyond his own films. He was an influential theorist and founder of the school that was to become the Centro Sperimentale, Rome's noted film archive. So, we owe him not just for the gift of his own films, but also for the preservation of so much of early Italian cinema – even the films he vehemently attacked as a young critic.

Documentary Develops

Robert Flaherty and John Grierson

Although Robert Flaherty is credited with being the father of the documentary, there had been "actuality" films since the very beginning of cinema. The Lumière brothers sent film crews around the world to bring audiences the wonders of the planet long before jets made it possible to travel to exotic or remote locales. The great photographer of Native Americans, Edward Curtis, released his only motion picture, *In the Land of the*

War Canoes (In the Land of the Headhunters: A Drama of Primitive Life on the Shores of the North Pacific) in 1914. Flaherty had previously tried and failed to capture the lives of the Baffin Island Eskimos, and was inspired by Curtis's film to try again. The resulting work was *Nanook of the North* (1922). Although both men shared a romantic desire to preserve native cultures on film before the incursion of "civilization," I think Flaherty was more adept at co-opting the zeitgeist of Hollywood. Such a judgment would be anathema to the Flaherty cult that flourished for a long time, but it's indisputable that Flaherty's pure, authentic vision was tempered by an irrepressible artistry that caused him to shape and manipulate his material while remaining true to his basic principles. *Nanook* made a lot of money and was critically acclaimed, as was his later South Seas film, *Moana* (1926).

After his falling out with F. W. Murnau over *Tabu* in 1931, Flaherty made a few short films in Britain. *Man of Aran* (1934) was his first sound feature, and while it fits his established anthropological pattern, it tends toward greater narrative coherence. The poetry is supplied by the enormity of the natural forces with which the Aran islanders must contend, and by the fathomless, unforgiving beauty of the shark-infested sea. The film was criticized by his friend John Grierson, among others, for ignoring the contemporary reality of the Depression and the economic exploitation of the islanders. Grierson wrote: "I imagine they shine as bravely in pursuit of Irish landlords as in the pursuit of Irish sharks." In Flaherty's (and auteurism's) defense, historian Jack Ellis said: "In some respects his films are as much about him... as about the people he was filming."

After one more frustrating attempt to participate in the commercial film industry with Zoltan Korda's *Elephant Boy* (1937), Flaherty returned to documentaries. His *The Land* (1942), produced by the U.S. government, dealt with contemporary social issues he had previously avoided, and was cited by the critic Stuart Byron as the greatest documentary ever made. Flaherty's final feature, *Louisiana Story* (1948), is beautifully photographed but its message about the harmlessness of oil drilling has been somewhat undermined by, among other disasters, the BP spill in the Gulf of Mexico. The film was produced by Standard Oil of New Jersey.

John Grierson (1898-1972) was a disciple of Flaherty's, and was critical of his mentor's detachment from the real world. Grierson's films, such as *The Drifters* (1929), *Granton Trawler* (1934), *Song of Ceylon* (1934), and *Night Mail* (1936), were authentic but generally didn't

aspire to poetry. They were mostly directed by others, and Grierson was usually listed as the supervising producer. Grierson was the central figure in the establishment of the National Film Board of Canada during the Second World War, and he not only invented the term “documentary” but also developed a coherent theory of its meaning. Because he was involved in so many films seen by so many people, Grierson was in many ways a more influential figure than Flaherty. We are in his debt every time we turn on our television to watch a nonfiction program or tune in to one of the numerous cable channels that specialize in the genre. He was an able teacher, if not an artist.

King Vidor and Pare Lorentz Confront the Great Depression

1934–1937

When I wrote about *Our Daily Bread* (1934) in 1972 as part MoMA's massive King Vidor retrospective, I described the film as naïve, simplistic, and awkward, but nonetheless extremely lovely in its innocence. I stand by this assessment. Intended as a sequel to Vidor's silent masterpiece *The Crowd* (1928), its message is not so much a plea for agrarian communism as it is for humanity. The film has much in common with the work of Vidor's acknowledged master, D. W. Griffith, and had he remained active, one could easily imagine Griffith making a film similar to *Our Daily Bread* at some point during the 1930s.

John and Mary Sims, having failed in the city like millions of other victims of the Great Depression, are given the opportunity to start a new life by returning to the soil. They are joined on the farm by a group of people who probably lived just around the corner from the set Richard Day designed for Vidor's adaptation of Elmer Rice's *Street Scene* (1931). (In fact, John Qualen reprises his role in *Street Scene* in *Our Daily Bread*, and would revive it again in many brilliant performances for John Ford, who would soon be Vidor's rival for Griffith's mantle.) There are echoes of other Vidor films in *Our Daily Bread*: A scene in which farmers go into the cornfield singing “You're in the Army Now” gestures to *The Big Parade* (1925), and John's abortive flight with a seductress, delightfully played by Barbara Pepper, recalls Zeke's weakness in *Hallelujah* (1929).

With his wide-open face, very American charm, and “Vidorian” hat, star Tom Keene looks just too much

like Vidor for the resemblance to be dismissed as coincidental. Keene's freewheeling performance, however, is one of the film's problems. He is a bit too toothy, loud, and ingratiating for sound. His character has not changed much since *The Crowd* (he still has “big ideas”), but Vidor could get away with things in his silent films that are just too grating and abrasive in a talkie, and the problem is accentuated by Karen Morley's subtle performance and Alfred Newman's beautifully lilting score.

The climactic ditch-digging sequence, however derivative of Soviet films it might be, remains one of the greatest of all experiments in cinematic rhythm. Vidor dusted off the metronome he used previously in *Three Wise Fools* (1923) and *The Big Parade*, and enhanced the power of his cadenced cutting and action through the creative use of sound effects and music. The result, from the first pick breaking ground to the moment where Vidor appears on screen and shouts, “O. K. to go,” is arguably the most exciting final reel in any American movie since Griffith's *Intolerance* (1916).

It is a measure of the ardor that Vidor felt for *Our Daily Bread* that he managed to make it outside the studio system and in spite of American cinema's traditional aversion to controversial subjects. The film sprang from the director's deeply held conviction that it needed to be made, and became a passionate obsession. This is, after all, what art – and certainly the best of Vidor's films – is all about.

Pare Lorentz (1905–1992) was for a short time a pivotal figure in documentary films, largely through his association with President Franklin D. Roosevelt. Like an American John Grierson, but on a smaller scale, he made two classic propaganda films for the U.S. government: *The Plow That Broke the Plains* (1936) and *The River* (1937), which one critic has suggested may be “the finest American documentary to date.” He also directed a longer but less focused film about a Chicago maternity center, *The Fight for Life* (1940). His agency produced Joris Ivens's *Power and the Land* (1940) and Robert Flaherty's *The Land* (1942), and Lorentz's efforts led to the extensive use of film by the government during World War II. (His *The Nuremberg Trials*, which was released in 1946, sadly, was never quite finished).

Lorentz was friendly with King Vidor, who acted somewhat as his mentor. Vidor brought Lorentz to Britain in 1938 as an adviser, and through the intervention of Iris Barry (first curator of MoMA's Film Library, as the Department of Film was then known), a special screening of *The River* was arranged for Grierson, Flaherty, and