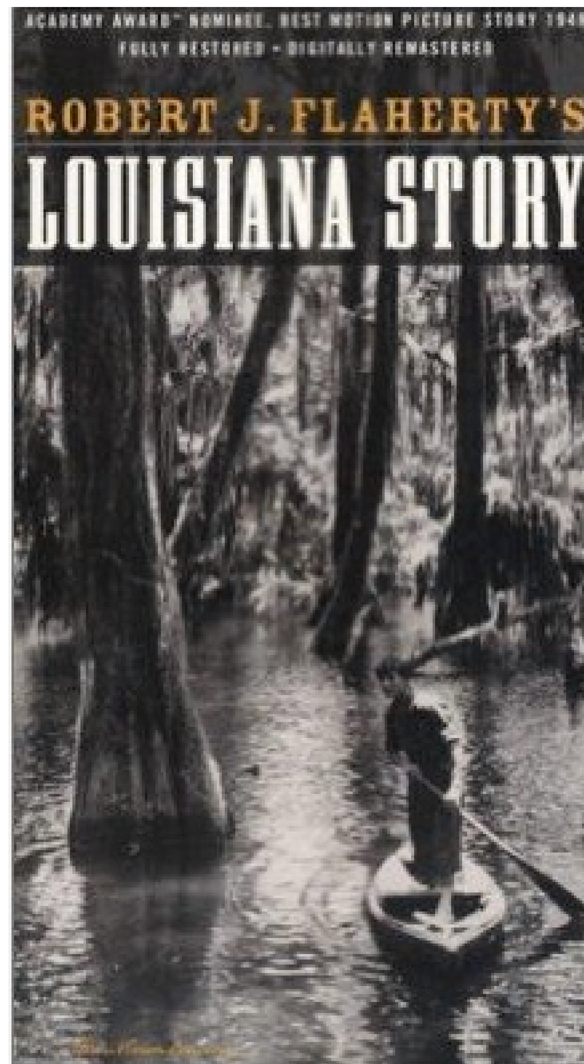
Louisiana Story: Defining the Definition of the Documentary

by Doug Gritzmacher

Robert Flaherty made a career out of blurring the lines between fiction and documentary filmmaking. This was no more so the case than with his last film, made in 1948, called *Louisiana Story*. In describing how he set about creating the film, Flaherty said: "For our hero, we dreamed up a half-wild Cajun boy of the woods and the bayous. To personalize the theme of the impact of industry, we developed the character of an oil driller who would become a friend of the boy … . Then came the business of casting." (Griffith, 149.)

Hero? Casting? These are terms usually associated with a fiction film, but *Louisiana Story* is regarded as a documentary. In fact, in the more than half century since its original release, *Louisiana Story* has come to be regarded as one of the most important documentaries in film history. This is because Flaherty's fictional approach to *Louisiana Story* not only raises the question of what a documentary is, but also answers it. An examination of the conditions and filmmaking practices of the time in which Flaherty made *Louisiana Story* will show that *Louisiana Story* is in fact a documentary and that the definition of documentary film is not a matter of fact, but a matter of historical context.



In 1946, Standard Oil of New Jersey asked Flaherty to make a film that would portray their business in a positive light (Barnouw, 216). Sponsorship of films by corporations seeking to enhance their company image was common in the post-WWII era (Barnouw, 216). Shell, for example, sponsored films that showcased activities using their product, such as auto racing (Barnouw, 213), with the idea being that films would excite viewers about the activity being shown enough that viewers would become interested in doing those activities themselves, leading to a need for more of the companies product and therefore more sales for the company.

But when Standard Oil asked Flaherty to make a film, they wanted to utilize film's power not to inspire consumption of their product, but to enhance the image of the nature of their business. To sustain the company, Standard Oil had a perpetual need for new areas to drill for oil. Since many of these areas where in sensitive environmental locations, they wanted to portray the act of drilling for oil to be innocuous to the environment and an important and admirable activity.

In a letter to Flaherty, Standard Oil stated that they wanted a film that would "present the story of oil with dignity and epic sweep it deserves." (Louisiana Story DVD.) They sought no credit, but insisted upon "an absorbing human story" that would stand on

Robert Flaherty and editor Helen van Dongen

its own as entertainment worthy of being shown in movie theaters (Louisiana Story DVD).

Standard Oil's selection of Flaherty to make the film at first seems like an odd choice. In his previous films, Flaherty's theme was the struggle of native cultures to survive under harsh environmental conditions in the premodern era. Flaherty thought the introduction of modern industrial society had decimated many of these practices, so he recreated an era gone by to capture the romanticism of primitive, or pre-modern era, daily life (van Dongen, 227).

In *Nanook of the North*, his first documentary, Flaherty chronicled the daily life of an Eskimo and his Inuit family. Flaherty wanted to document Inuit cultural practices that had mostly been abandoned since their confrontation with the white man. So Flaherty recreated these practices, such as making his subjects wear clothing they no longer wore and hunt with spears instead of the guns they were then using (Hill). The practices of Polynesian natives received similar treatment in his next film, *Moana*. In this film, Flaherty reconstructed customs of cooking, hunting and others not practiced since the Polynesians had made contact with Western cultures (imdb.com). In *Man of Aran*, Flaherty resurrected the custom of shark hunting among the people of the Aryan Islands in Ireland (Williams).

In each of these films, Flaherty had given his subjects a lyrical and poetic treatment. In an interview shortly before her death, Flaherty's wife Francis described Flaherty's approach to filmmaking in terms of Haiku poets who, Francis said, "put their poems together exactly the way a filmmaker puts together his shots in his film." (Louisiana Story DVD.)

Indeed, if Flaherty is most praised for anything, it was his ability to create lyrical and poetic sequences. He trained his camera on his subjects and held his shots for long periods of time. This forces the viewer to examine the subject or act being photographed, which the viewer, if using their own eyes rather than the camera's, may not look at for so long a time or even notice altogether. For example, in *Nanook* there is a long take of Nanook creating a skylight in his igloo. Because of the camera's focus, the viewer may be provoked to reexamine and see the act as something other than just an Eskimo putting in a skylight. They may begin to see the grace with which Nanook works, or the way the snow can be cut and shaped. The act becomes poetic because it has taken on a meaning beyond its literal sense and contributes to the creation of exotic, romantic and nostalgic world.

Standard Oil ostensibly sought out Flaherty because they wanted the same lyrical treatment for the oil business. But the message Standard Oil wanted to convey would mark a departure of ideology for Flaherty. In his previous films, Flaherty's intent was to

capture the exotic romanticism of primitive cultures that he believed to be ruined by the introduction of modern society. Standard Oil needed a film showing just the opposite, that industry and exotic ways of life and pristine environments were compatible. If he were to make the film, Flaherty would be required to confront the enemy he had created yet eschewed his whole career. He would need to decide what happens when his recreated pre-modern romantic world catches up to the future and the era of mechanization.

Flaherty and his wife took their search for a pristine environmental location to the southern United States and found it in the bayous of Louisiana. The location was perfect because not only was the bayou reminiscent of the untouched, exotic lands Flaherty explored in his previous films, but also because an oil derrick was being relocated nearby (Williams).

The film opens with a slow fade up of the swamp. Slow, sparse edits link lingering shots of alligators, leaves and water ripples. Into this world comes a small boat paddled by a country-looking boy who is dwarfed by his surroundings. He wears an expression of awe and fascination on his face. “Our surroundings are undisturbed by the hum-drum of civilisation [sic] and the editing is kept in harmony with these surroundings,” wrote Helen van Dongen, *Louisiana Story*’s editor and co-producer, in describing her approach to editing the film. “In the continuity which we follow in the film we are emotionally prepared to appreciate the qualities of the forest,” she continued. “The preceding details, their mysterious qualities and beauty, have awakened our curiosity and induce us to follow the boy eagerly and participate in his discoveries.” (Millar and Reisz, 140.)

This scene and the scenes immediately following it are classic Flaherty; the environment is represented as being untouched and pristine and the boy and his family live as people lived before the advent of modern society. It is nothing more than *Louisiana Story’s* version of the exotic, primitive world Flaherty created in his previous films.

The stage has thus been set for the boy’s confrontation with the oil derrick, which, after the film’s introduction, might be expected

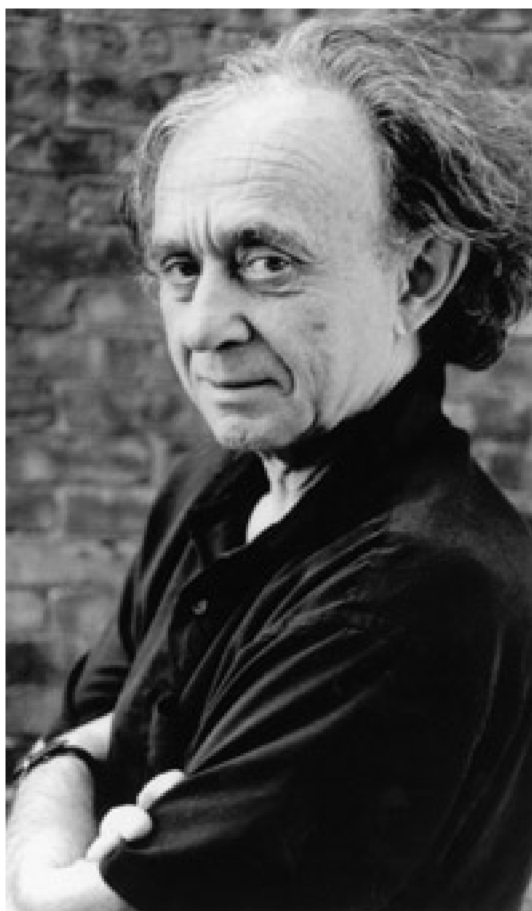
Pioneering documentary cinematographer Richard Leacock

to be shocking and horrifying. Instead, the oil derrick is given the same lyrical treatment as the swamp. Van Dongen wrote that Flaherty wanted to show oil drilling as awe-inspiring, exciting, admirable and magical (Millar and Reisz, 151).

Flaherty and van Dongen achieve this by maintaining the lingering shots and slow pace initiated at the start of the film. But instead of showing the beauty of intrigue of alligators, moss and swamps, they show the beauty and intrigue of the machines on the oil derrick and its workers. Through the lingering shots and slow pacing of workers operating the machines, viewers feel awe and admiration for the oilmen's work. When the boy—whom Flaherty modeled after himself as a young boy growing up in Canada—first discovers the derrick and paddles up to it, the workers are unthreatening as they try to make friendly conversation with him. Later, the boy is invited onto the derrick where he watches the workers with a sense of excitement as they wrestle with the machines. At another time the boy is shown fishing off of the derrick—Flaherty's symbolic way of showing nature and industry in harmony.

This harmony climaxes at the end when the boy helps the oilmen strike oil by dropping the ingredient he uses to catch fish into the drilling hole. Once they've gotten their oil, the oilmen and the derrick depart, leaving the bayou in the same condition as how they found it.

Louisiana Story has been described as a fiction film with real people (Corliss, 238). While all



"Titticut Follies" director Frederick Wiseman

the characters were real people who for the most part lived and did what they were shown doing in the film, they were all cast as characters in a story created by Flaherty. The boy's confrontation with the derrick and his interaction with the oil workers is pure fiction. This was in keeping with his previous work, in which "facts were interpreted and adapted by him and molded into elements of a world created by him." (van Dongen, 213.) In *Nanook*, he used real Eskimos to appear in scenes he created, such as a scene in which Nanook and his friends set out to spear a whale, a practice not performed in their culture for several years. For this Flaherty was "accused of finding only what he was looking for." (Corliss, 231.)

But Flaherty defended his choice to create a world that didn't exist in *Nanook* by saying he wished to capture characteristics of native cultures before modern society wiped them out (van Dongen, 227). Whatever means he needed to employ to do that, including staged scenes, he felt justified in doing.

Flaherty's cause is helped in that staged scenes and recreations were the norm for the times. Newsreels regularly used reenactments, including the March of Dimes series in which actors were used to recreate scenes of official ceremonies (Plantinga, 36). Even John Grierson, a contemporary of Flaherty's and of equal stature and who chided Flaherty for focusing on the past rather than the present, oversaw many British documentaries in the 1930s and 1940s that used staged scenes

(Plantinga, 36).

Justification for staged scenes and reenactments grew partly out of Grierson's belief that documentary filmmaking was an art form (Winston, 26). Grierson was inspired by 19th century realist painters, who, in the words of 19th century French philosopher Pierre Proudhon, thought that "to reproduce realities once again is nothing: one must make people think; one must touch them, illuminate their consciousness" (Winston, 28). Grierson had a similar conception of documentaries. He said that the "documentary idea demands no more than that the affairs of our times shall be brought to the screen in a fashion which strikes the imagination and makes observation a little richer than it was." (Winston, 28.)

Grierson thought that a theme and a vision were as important to documentary filmmaking as painting because of the need to insure a common pattern of thought among viewers (Plantinga, 27). If the documentary were only instructional, he reasoned, then viewers would leave with different thoughts (Plantinga, 27).

Grierson and Flaherty were the preeminent documentary filmmakers of their time immediately before and during the release of *Louisiana Story.* Flaherty's *Nanook* is often credited as the first feature documentary film and Grierson has been credited with coining the term "documentary" and lending Flaherty his title as "The Father of Documentary." So it stands to reason that whatever their thoughts on what defined a documentary film shaped for their era what was and was not acceptable for documentary films.

John Grierson

Ironically, the person who would have a large part in redefining Flaherty and Grierson's terms for the future of documentaries was Flaherty's cinematographer for *Louisiana Story*, Richard Leacock.

While working as a cameraman on *Louisiana Story*, Leacock learned the value of observation by watching Flaherty stop for an entire day to film such things as spider webs (Barnouw, 236). The act of simply watching became the foundation for the filmmaking style of the direct cinema movement begun in the 1960s. With advances in lighter and more mobile filmmaking technology, filmmakers were able to follow their subjects around and through continuous observation of their daily lives (Barnouw, 235). Direct cinema filmmakers disapproved of the use of reenactments and staged scenes. Frederick Wiseman, whose film *Titticut Follies* is an often written about film of the era, said, "The whole effort in documentary is to capture certain aspects of reality and not manipulate." (Plantiga, 37.)

But Robert Drew, one of his Wiseman's contemporaries and whose film *Primary* was shot by Leacock and is often credited as the first direct cinema film, suggests that direct cinema filmmakers operated under the same motivation as Flaherty and Grierson.

Documentaries, Drew once said, offer the "ability to look in on people's lives and see a certain kind of truth that could only be gotten from personal experience." (Cinema Verite: Defining the Moment.) This sounds suspiciously similar to Grierson, who once described documentaries "as a search for a larger truth," (Rosteck) and Francis Flaherty, who described her husband's approach to filmmaking as "looking for moment of truth which the camera alone would capture." (Louisiana Story DVD.)

The idea that the documentary is vehicle for the search for truth has been around since the time of Dziga Vertov, who, while working on Russian newsreels in the 1910s, thought it was the camera's job to find truth, as only the camera could see it. "I am the cinema-eye—I am a mechanical eye," he once wrote. "My mission is the creation of a new perception of the world." (Barnouw, 58.) Vertov went on to suggest that

whatever truth the camera finds will always, in the final film, be a construction of the filmmaker. It "is not enough to show bits of truth on the screen," he wrote. "These forms must be thematically organized so that the whole is also a truth." (Barnouw, 58.)

No one could lend more credibility to Vertov's claim than Wiseman. Although he claimed documentaries should not manipulate, a close examination of his films reveals that he clearly did. *Titticut*, for example, chronicles life inside a mental asylum. There are several disturbing scenes, all involving patients struggling to free themselves of the control of doctors who see them as abnormal. But through clever editing and shot selection, it is the doctors who come across as abnormal, suggesting that normality is a matter of subjectivity and that conformity is dangerous. This is Wiseman's truth, which is no less subjective than Flaherty's message in *Louisiana Story* that environment and machine are compatible. Both filmmakers were manipulating, just with a different technique—Flaherty with staged action;Wiseman with shot selection and edits.

So Flaherty was hardly the last or even the first filmmaker to blur the line between fiction and nonfiction film, even if he is the filmmaker most known for doing so. Documentaries by nature are, as Grierson put it, stuck somewhere "between art and journalism." (Rosteck).

Louisiana Story may not be a documentary in the terms set by direct cinema or contemporary filmmakers, but it deserves to be a credited as a documentary as much as those from any other era. Whether it's the documentaries created by Vertov, Flaherty or filmmakers of the direct cinema era, the result is always the same; documentaries are, like the fiction film, "rhetorical constructs, fashioned and manipulated and structured represtentations." (Plantinga, 32.) The only constant in the definition of a documentary is the motivation—the search for truth as constructed by the filmmaker. Everything else, including, most importantly, its style, is dependent upon filmmaking expectations, technology and philosophies of the filmmaker's respective times.

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