
The Documentary Tradition

By Deane Williams

Selected, Arranged and Introduced by Lewis Jacobs

W.W. Norton and Co. 1979.

I'm a bit of a traditionalist, particularly when it comes to documentary film, a field I've been researching for about 25 years now. This is not to say that I'm a conservative but that I learnt quite early on to pay respect to tradition. I learnt, in the main part from my PhD supervisor Bill Routt, to temper my enthusiasms for the latest and the cutting edge with precedents and qualifications, reminding myself that any given film, or movement, can be understood in relation to the tradition to which it belonged.

In the late 1980s it was with much reassurance that I also came across Lewis Jacobs's classic anthology *The Documentary Tradition*, the title of which dovetailed neatly with my interest in documentary, the arcane and lineages in the sub-genre. Speaking of lineages, Jacobs himself emerged from the left cultural networks of the 1930s, founding the Hollywood located journal *Experimental Cinema* and later joining New York's Film and Photo League. *The Documentary Tradition* sits alongside Jacobs' other books such as *Introduction to the Art of the Movies* (1960) and *The Rise of the American Film* (1968) but it is *The Emergence of Film Art* (1969) that was, for me, the companion piece to *The Documentary Tradition*. *The Emergence of Film Art* brings together a large number of articles from some of the best critics to every write on film; Jacobs, Seymour Stern, Dwight Macdonald, Sergei Eisenstein, Alberto Cavalcanti, Peter Cowie, Andrew Sarris, Pauline Kael, Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, Colin Young, Jonas Mekas and many more.

Similarly, *The Documentary Tradition* draws on Jacobs' international left networks to bring together critics such as Richard Griffith, Siegfried Kracauer, Herman G. Weinberg, Harry Alan Potamkin, Parker Tyler, Manny Farber, Peter Biskind, Gary Crowds and Walter Rosenblum as well as filmmakers such as John Grierson, Joris Ivens, Boris Kaufman, Sidney Meyers, Robert Gardner and Satyajit Ray. These writers represent their respective traditions, from Soviet cinema, the British Documentary Movement and Humphrey Jennings, to Sidney Meyers' *The Quiet One* (1948), Jacques Cousteau and Louis Malle's *The Silent World* (1956), Chris Marker and Pierre L'homme's *Le Joli Mai* (1963), Cinema Verite, Marcel Ophuls' *The Sorrow and the Pity* (1969) and women's and political

documentary.

The book follows a chronological order divided into epochs such as 1922-1930, 1930-1940 and so on, including recommended films from these periods. 1940-1950, one of my favourites, includes Jennings' *Fires Were Started* (1943), Robert Flaherty's *Louisiana Story* (1948), Henwar Rodakiewicz's *People to People* (1944), Henri Cartier Bresson and Richard Banks' *Le Retour* (1946), Willard Van Dyke's *Valley Town* (1940) and John Huston's *The Battle of San Pietro* (1945).

In retrospect, I am particularly fond of Jacobs' *The Documentary Tradition* because I was able to interview two of the volume's contributors, Ken Coldicutt and Cecile Starr- two seemingly different scholars and filmmakers brought together here. Coldicutt was the leader of the Melbourne based Realist film Unit, a communist party aligned group making films in the post-World War Two period. Coldicutt's "Turksib—Building a Railroad" is a sophisticated reading of Victor Turin's film in relation to Pudovkin's writing as well as Grierson's criticisms of the film. Cecile Starr's contribution in the 1950-1960 section, is entitled "Through the Psychiatric Looking Glass" and is taken from a 1951 edition of New York's *Saturday Review of Literature*. Starr reviews Irving Jacoby and Alexander Hammid's *Angry Boy* (1950), Helen Levitt, Ben Maddow and Sidney Meyers' *Steps of Age* (1950) and Stanley Jackson's *Feelings of Depression* (1950).

I still use certain writings from *The Documentary Tradition* in my Documentary and Realism in Film and Television subject at Monash University, such as Jacobs own section introduction "Documentary Becomes Engaged and Vérité", Robert Flaherty on "Filming Real People" or Arthur Schlesinger Jr. on "The Fiction of Fact— The Fact of Fiction". Importantly, the way that Jacobs' book insists on contextualizing each film (each piece of writing within its era, respecting its place in the history of documentary including the critical work that supports any cultural formation and network) goes to the heart of what I appreciate about the documentary milieu, making the collection an important touchstone for my own work.